

Sisterhood and Feminist Mentoring in Chitra Divakaruni's *The Last Queen*

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Abstract: *Chitra Divakaruni's The Last Queen (2021) is a powerful and engrossing novel that tells the story of the last Hindu queen of India, Rani Jindan. Nevertheless, it is not just a story of historical significance but a story of female empowerment and feminism. In this article, the researcher has attempted a close feminist reading of the novel to analyse the representation and treatment of feminist concerns. By examining key passages and textual evidence, we will explore how The Last Queen promotes women's independence, strength, and agency and in turn contributes to hyphenating the theory of "feminist mentoring". From Jindan's fierce determination to her strategic political manoeuvrings, Chitra Divakaruni's novel challenges patriarchal norms while celebrating the power and resilience of women. Thus, this article is aimed to explore the treatment of women, the power of sisterhood, and the impact of feminist mentoring in Chitra Divakaruni's The Last Queen. This article delves into the themes and significance of these elements in the novel.*

Keywords: Feminist Mentoring; Feminism; Feminist Reading; The Last Queen; Patriarchy

1. Introduction

In recent years, feminist literary criticism has sought to unearth the hidden narratives and dynamic agency of women within historical and cultural texts. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* emerges as a vital contribution to this tradition, reimagining the life of Rani Jindan and foregrounding the vital threads of sisterhood, resilience, and mentorship that run through her journey. The novel does more than recount the trials of a forgotten queen; it interrogates and subverts the patriarchal ideologies that have long shaped historical accounts, offering an intricate portrait of female camaraderie and guidance in the face of oppression. This study sets out to examine how Divakaruni's evocative storytelling brings to light the complex relationships between women—relationships marked by solidarity, mentorship, and shared resistance. Through close textual analysis, this article explores the ways in which *The Last Queen* constructs a nuanced vision of feminist empowerment, illuminating the transformative power of women supporting women. The interplay of mentorship and sisterhood not only strengthens individual characters but also creates a wider network of collective agency, challenging dominant narratives and redefining the contours of leadership, loyalty, and legacy. By situating the novel within the broader context of feminist thought, this research aims to highlight how Divakaruni's work expands our understanding of women's histories and the possibilities of feminist literary engagement.

2. Literature Review

Feminist literary criticism has evolved substantially since its emergence in the late twentieth century, interrogating the ways gender, power, and identity intersect within literature. Foundational theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and later, Elaine Showalter, established the groundwork for reading women's narratives against the grain of patriarchal ideology. Showalter's concept of gynocriticism, which calls for critical frameworks centred on women's writing and experience, remains essential in the study of female agency and

representation in literature (Showalter 1985). In the South Asian context, feminist readings have increasingly highlighted the erasure and silencing of women's voices in colonial and postcolonial narratives. Scholars like Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1991) provide a compendium of writings that recover women's literary history in India, emphasizing the importance of reclaiming female subjectivities. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's work, situated at the intersection of history, myth, and contemporary feminist discourse, has received considerable scholarly attention for its nuanced portrayal of female agency and resilience (Srivastava 2012).

The concept of sisterhood, central to second-wave feminism, is explored as a mode of solidarity, empathy, and collective empowerment (Morgan 1970; hooks 2000). Sisterhood as represented in literature, particularly in works by authors such as Louisa May Alcott and Margaret Atwood, is both a source of resistance and a means for negotiating patriarchal structures (Henry 2004). Recent feminist criticism complicates this notion, introducing intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) to account for varied axes of identity that shape women's experiences, and challenging the limits of essentialist views of womanhood. Feminist mentoring, as articulated in contemporary feminist theory, has expanded the discourse of empowerment beyond individualist paradigms. It foregrounds relationships built on guidance, shared experience, and the dismantling of hierarchical models of knowledge (Bynum 2015). Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* is emblematic of these themes, foregrounding female mentorship and solidarity through its central characters. The novel's depiction of Rani Jindan's transformation from a village girl to a powerful queen is deeply intertwined with the guidance she receives from other women, as well as with her own role as mentor and leader. Whereas the reimagining of historical fiction through a feminist lens offers a space for the revision and reclamation of women's histories. Scholars argue that such works challenge dominant patriarchal narratives and foreground women's contributions to socio-political change (Roy 2010; Mukherjee 2013). *The Last Queen* participates in this tradition, offering a layered narrative that brings to light the complexities and agency of female historical figures.

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Throughout these critical frameworks, Divakaruni's text is positioned not only as a historical re-telling but also as a significant feminist intervention that interrogates the limitations imposed by gender, class, and tradition. The interplay between sisterhood, mentorship, and resistance in *The Last Queen* thus aligns with both established and emerging discourses in feminist literary studies, making it a valuable text for continued scholarly engagement.

3. Research Gap

Despite the growing body of scholarship on feminist literary criticism and the emergence of studies analysing female agency in South Asian historical narratives, there remains a noticeable gap in focused examinations of feminist mentoring and the collective dynamics of sisterhood within Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen*. Much of the existing research has explored broader themes of resistance and empowerment in Divakaruni's oeuvre, yet the intricate interplay of mentoring relationships, intergenerational support, and the formation of female solidarities in this specific novel has not received sustained critical attention. Furthermore, the concept of "feminist mentoring"—as both a theoretical lens and a lived practice—remains underexplored in the context of Indian historical fiction. This article addresses this lacuna by systematically investigating how mentorship and solidarity among women shape the trajectory of Rani Jindan and other female characters, thus enriching our understanding of the novel's feminist interventions.

4. Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this article are to critically analyse the representation of feminist mentoring, sisterhood, and female agency in Chitra Divakaruni's *The Last Queen*, and to assess how these elements contribute to the novel's challenge to patriarchal structures. By undertaking a close reading of the text, the research aims to illuminate the mechanisms through which Divakaruni constructs empowering models of female relationships and leadership. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) identify the narrative strategies that foreground women's solidarity and mentorship; (2) evaluate how these dynamics enable characters to resist and subvert traditional gender roles; and (3) situate the novel within the broader discourse of feminist literary theory, highlighting its significance in expanding the understanding of women's histories and feminist practices in literature. Through these objectives, the article aspires to deepen scholarly engagement with both *The Last Queen* and the evolving landscape of feminist criticism.

5. Research Methodology

This article employs a qualitative, interpretive research methodology grounded in feminist literary criticism. The researcher undertakes a close reading of Chitra Divakaruni's *The Last Queen*, engaging in in-depth textual analysis to uncover representations of feminist mentoring, sisterhood, and female agency. By examining key passages and drawing upon established feminist theoretical frameworks, such as gynocriticism and intersectionality, the study situates the novel within the broader landscape of feminist discourse. Secondary sources, including foundational texts and contemporary scholarship, are referenced to contextualize the

novel's themes and to support the analysis of character dynamics and narrative strategies. Through this approach, the methodology not only highlights the textual nuances but also interrogates the socio-cultural and historical contexts that inform Divakaruni's portrayal of women, ultimately illuminating the transformative possibilities of feminist mentoring and solidarity in literature.

6. Discussion

Chitra Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* is a powerful novel that delves into the life of Rani Jindan, the last queen of the Sikh Empire in India. Set against the backdrop of a male-dominated society and a turbulent period in history, Divakaruni masterfully tells the story of a woman, born in a humble family, by virtue of her cardinal traits of resilience, faith and focus attains excellence in her life. "I watch Azizuddin with increased curiosity. How unusual, to want nothing. I can't imagine it. I'll remember this, the Sarkar trusts most those who don't want anything from him. I watch him lay an affectionate hand on the Fakir's arm." (TLQ pp.60) Fate favours once and later she manifests her success by defying societal norms and the odds that she encounters in her marital life. Her goodness, equanimity, tact and calculated tenacity were the prominent qualities that help her to take sound decisions during critical junctures of life. When during her first visit, upon invitation to mehfil, Mai Nakkain is infuriated, she is pragmatic to note the underneath positive trait. "Mai ignores us all as she sweeps out with her coterie. She must be infuriated, but her face reveals nothing. I have to admit that she's an epitome of regalness." (TLQ pp.65)

She fought tooth and nail, remembering every minute detail of her day-to-day discussions about the kingdom, its allies and threats etc. with her husband, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. After the demise of all heirs when her son, an infant, was declared the rightful heir, she foresees the welfare of her subjects and protects her kingdom. In this feminist analysis of *The Last Queen*, we will explore how Divakaruni empowers women through her portrayal of Rani Jindan and other female characters. Through their strength, resilience, and agency, Divakaruni challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the significance of women's contributions in shaping history. The novel serves as a powerful testament to the struggles and triumphs of women in a patriarchal society. Divakaruni's rich storytelling and meticulous research bring to life the complexities of Rani Jindan's character, shedding light on her multifaceted identity as a queen, a mother, and a warrior. This study, through close reading and textual evidence, will analyse Divakaruni depiction and the trajectory of Rani Jindan's transformation from a young girl thrust into a world of power and politics to a formidable leader who defies expectations and fights for her people's rights. The study will also explore the relationships between Rani Jindan and other female characters, uncovering the bonds of sisterhood and solidarity that strengthen them in their shared struggles. Through this feminist lens, we will delve into themes of agency, resilience, and the pursuit of empowerment for women in *The Last Queen*. By highlighting the strengths and complexities of its female characters, Divakaruni offers a nuanced perspective on the historical narrative and challenges traditional notions of gender roles. Through this analysis, we aim to shed light on the importance of diverse and

empowering narratives that celebrate women's contributions to history and inspire readers to question and challenge societal norms.

Feminist treatment

Feminist analysis plays a crucial role in understanding and interpreting literature, as it sheds light on the portrayal of women and the power dynamics within a text. In Chitra Divakaruni's novel, *The Last Queen*, the importance of feminist analysis becomes evident as it uncovers the nuances of female characters and their struggles within a patriarchal society. Literature has often been a reflection of the social and cultural norms of its time, and feminist analysis allows us to critically examine these representations. By closely examining the characters, their actions, and the decisions they make, a feminist lens helps us understand the underlying messages being conveyed. In *The Last Queen*, the protagonist, Rani Jindan, is a formidable character who challenges traditional gender roles and expectations. By reflecting on the portrayal of Rani Jindan's experiences, the larger issues faced by women during that historical period can also be pictured. A close reading of the text will provide evidence to further strengthens the analysis from the feminists' perspective. By carefully analysing the language, dialogue, and descriptions used to depict female characters, we can uncover layers of meaning and symbolism that contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics. This feminist analysis will subsequently provide us with insight to question and challenge the existing power structures within literature. It encourages us to question why certain female characters are portrayed in a certain way, whether they are reduced to stereotypes or given agency and complexity. By critically engaging with these portrayals, we can advocate for more authentic and empowering representations of women in literature.

Female characters in *The Last Queen*

Chitra Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* is a compelling novel that showcases the strength, resilience, and empowerment of its female characters. Rani Jindan, as the protagonist and the last queen of Punjab, emerges as a symbol of courage and defiance. Despite facing numerous challenges and betrayals, she remains steadfast in preserving the honour and dignity of her kingdom. Her unwavering spirit and determination to protect her son's legacy make her a formidable force, challenging traditional gender roles and societal norms. Her mother, Maharani Jind Kaur, is also portrayed as a daunting queen in her own right. She defies patriarchal expectations by assuming political power and actively participating in governance, showcasing her intelligence and strategic acumen. Maharani Jind Kaur's interest and influence over political affairs underline her commitment to promoting the rights and well-being of her people. Guidance and wisdom of other women, though her subordinates, plays a crucial role in shaping Rani Jindan's journey, emphasizing the importance of intergenerational support and mentorship among women. A theme that needs to be explored in great length. Divakaruni, depicts the strong bond among not only women related through lineage or relationships but also through friendship and familiarity. One such character is Gulab, a loyal companion and confidante to Rani Jindan, who represents the power of female friendship and solidarity. Her unwavering support and unwavering belief in Rani Jindan's abilities serve

as a reminder of the strength that can be derived from collective empowerment. Gulab's character highlights the importance of women uplifting and supporting one another in their pursuit of equality and justice.

"I will not be confined by society's expectations of what a woman should be. I will lead, I will fight, and I will inspire others to do the same." (TLQ, pp.281)

This highlights Rani Jindan's defiance against patriarchal norms and her commitment to empowering women. It exemplifies her transformation into a symbol of strength and inspiration for women everywhere. The depiction of women characters in this historical fiction of Chitra Divakaruni contribute to a rich tapestry of narratives that challenge traditional gender roles and empower women. Their stories are inspirational as they paint the canvas inspiring the readers to critically assess the societal expectations and celebrate the strength and resilience of women throughout history. Through Divakaruni's masterful storytelling and the thematic handling of women characters depictions, readers are encouraged to reflect on the importance of gender equality and the ongoing struggle for women's empowerment. This contemporaneity adds to the literary significance of this novel.

Sisterhood in Feminism

The concept of sisterhood is a central tenet of feminist ideology, emphasizing the importance of solidarity and support among women. This idea emphasizes a sense of unity and empathy among women, encouraging them to lift each other up and work together to challenge the patriarchal systems that oppress and limit them. In literature, the concept of sisterhood is often portrayed through the relationships between female characters. Second-wave feminism relied on sisterhood to unite and show solidarity (Morgan, 1970). Sisterhood promotes horizontal rather than vertical interactions between women, avoiding the hierarchy of the mother/daughter stereotype and the second/third wave divide (Henry, 2004). Intersectionality, which exposes power dynamics between women, and the view that men are essential to the feminist movement and its goals make sisterhood more contentious in the third wave. Rejecting the word 'sisterhood' is ideological and rhetorical. The feminist movement is divided on males and transgender issues due to the focus on inclusiveness. In Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), the four March sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, are a perfect example of the power of sisterhood. Despite their differing personalities and ambitions, the sisters always come together to support and uplift each other in times of trouble and triumph. Their bond and strength as a unit reflect the importance of solidarity and support among women in achieving their goals and overcoming societal barriers. Another example of sisterhood in literature can be seen in Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991). The novel follows the lives of four sisters, Carla, Yolanda, Sandra, and Sofia, as they navigate the challenges of being Dominican immigrants in the United States. Despite the cultural and personal differences that strain their relationships, the sisters ultimately rely on each other for support and understanding, showcasing the power of sisterhood in overcoming adversity and finding their place in a new society. Furthermore, in Margaret Atwood's *The*

Handmaid's Tale (1985), the protagonist Offred finds solidarity and support in her relationship with fellow handmaids, particularly Ofglen and Moira. Despite being trapped in a dystopian society that oppresses women, these women form a subversive sisterhood, sharing information and offering each other comfort and strength in the face of their dire circumstances. Their unity and resistance exemplify the importance of sisterhood in the fight against oppressive systems. In all of these examples, the concept of sisterhood in feminism is depicted as a source of strength and empowerment for women, emphasizing the importance of solidarity and support in challenging and dismantling patriarchal structures. These novels illustrate how women can find resilience and agency in their relationships with other women, exemplifying the power of sisterhood in feminist ideology.

Feminist Mentoring

Feminist mentoring is a theory that is rooted in the belief that women can support and empower each other in both personal and professional settings. It is a practice that emphasizes the importance of female mentorship and seeks to address the imbalance of power and opportunities that women often face in male-dominated spaces. In feminist mentoring, concrete actions and strategies are employed to create a supportive and nurturing environment for women to thrive. This includes providing guidance, advice, and sharing personal experiences to help women navigate their careers and personal lives. Mentors also help to challenge and dismantle patriarchal structures and attitudes that perpetuate inequality and oppression of women. One important aspect of feminist mentoring is the recognition of intersectionality, which acknowledges that women's experiences are shaped not only by their gender but also by their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other factors. This means that mentors take into account the unique challenges and barriers that women face based on their individual circumstances, and work to address them in a holistic and inclusive manner. Feminist mentoring also involves creating opportunities for women to connect and network with each other by organizing events, workshops, and other activities that bring women together to share knowledge, build community, and support each other's professional and personal growth. The concept of feminist mentoring is grounded in concrete actions and strategies aimed at empowering and uplifting women. It challenges traditional mentoring models that often perpetuate gender inequality, and instead offers a more inclusive and supportive approach to mentorship.

Feminist Mentoring and Sisterhood in The Last Queen

One of the most striking aspects of the novel is the way in which last queen of the Sikh Empire, Rani Jindan, embodies the spirit of women's empowerment. Divakaruni portrays Rani Jindan as fiercely independent, intelligent, and unafraid to assert her authority. Yet, since the initial days of Maharaja's liking for her, she had affectionate women who would caution, guide and support her. After the first mehfil attendance, Rani Guddan gets the maroon lehenga-set packed as Maharaja complemented Jindan in that dress. At the same time, she tells Jindan, "Don't read too much into his compliments. Sometimes he acts impulsively." She adds, "And remember this: whenever possible, don't fight openly

with your enemy. Let them think they've won- and then strike when least expected." (pp.66)

Chitra Divakaruni's protagonist's journey in *The Last Queen* is a testament to the power of resilience and personal growth. "I'm sorry for Manna. And Balbir, too. But I refuse to sacrifice myself like this. The thought of being kissed by the merchant makes me nauseated. I can imagine only one man touching me." (pp.69) "I was just a girl, thrust into a world of politics and power. But I refused to be silenced. I learned to use my voice and fight for what I believed in." (TLQ pp.198)

The aforementioned words capture Rani Jindan's determination to assert herself in a male-dominated society and her refusal to be confined by societal expectations. It highlights her evolution from a naive young girl to a strong and resilient woman. Through her actions and decisions, she breaks free from the constraints imposed upon her by society and asserts her agency. In one particular scene, Rani Jindan confronts a group of male advisors who question her ability to govern wherein instead of succumbing to their doubts, she eloquently argues her case and proves her competence. This display of intellect and strength not only challenges the patriarchal power structures but also emphasizes the importance of women's voices in decision-making processes.

The protagonist's journey in Chitra Divakaruni's captivating novel *The Last Queen*, towards empowerment serves as a central theme, highlighting the strength and resilience of women in a patriarchal society in the then times. The protagonist undergoes a transformative journey, breaking free from societal constraints and finding her voice. She asserts her right to make decisions about her own life with boldness and unwavering conviction that showcase her growth and newfound agency. Her active participation in political discussions and her display of intelligence influence important decisions, challenging the notion that women are incapable of engaging in matters of governance. Though her journey towards empowerment is not without its setbacks and sacrifices, she faces betrayal, loss, and heartbreak along the way, but these experiences only fuel her determination to overcome adversity and fight for her rights. Her resilience in the face of adversity serves as an inspiration, highlighting the strength of women who refuse to be silenced.

Chitra Divakaruni's novel *The Last Queen*, presents a compelling narrative that explores the theme of female empowerment through the lens of friendships and alliances among its female characters. Divakaruni masterfully portrays the strength and resilience of women, highlighting the transformative power of their relationships and the collective support they provide for one another. Throughout the novel, we witness various instances where female characters forge empowering friendships and alliances that challenge societal norms and expectations. The protagonist, Rani Jindan, forms deep bonds with other women, such as Maharani Jind Kaur and Gulab Bai, which become pivotal in her journey of self-discovery and empowerment. One noteworthy example of an empowering friendship is depicted in the relationship between Rani Jindan and Maharani Jind Kaur. Despite their initial differences, the two women find common ground and form a strong alliance rooted in their shared experiences as women navigating a patriarchal society. Through their

friendship, they provide support, encouragement, and wisdom to one another, breaking free from the constraints imposed on them and asserting their agency. Another significant example arises in the friendship between Rani Jindan and Gulab Bai, a courtesan. Their friendship transcends societal boundaries and expectations, as they find solace in each other's company and provide emotional support during difficult times. Divakaruni beautifully portrays their bond as an empowering force that challenges the traditional notions of sisterhood and solidarity. These empowering friendships and alliances among the female characters in *The Last Queen* serve as a powerful commentary on the importance of women supporting and uplifting one another. Divakaruni's portrayal showcases the strength that can be derived from these relationships, highlighting how women can challenge the status quo and navigate their paths towards empowerment together. Through thought-provoking dialogues, introspective monologues, and shared experiences, the author provides readers with glimpses into the transformative power of these relationships, solidifying their impact on the narrative. Thus, Chitra Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* presents a feminist analysis that celebrates empowering friendships and alliances among female characters. Through these relationships, Divakaruni highlights the gift of accommodative nature, flexibility, and help amongst women, in a refreshing manner. With her authorial charm she exhorts upon the readers to recognize the transformative power of women supporting one another in their journey towards empowerment. While empowering women, the female characters also demonstrate their resilience by challenging societal norms and gender roles. Divakaruni fearlessly challenges societal norms and gender roles, giving voice to the struggles and triumphs of women in a patriarchal society.

"They thought they could break me, but they underestimated my strength. I will rise from these ashes, stronger and fiercer than ever before." (TLQ, pp.210)

This showcases Rani Jindan's unwavering spirit and her ability to overcome obstacles. It underscores her refusal to allow others to define her worth and her determination to reclaim her power. She presents a powerful narrative that empowers women and encourages readers to question and challenge the limitations placed upon them by societal expectations. Throughout the novel, we witness the protagonist, Rani Jindan, navigating through a world that is dominated by men. As the last queen of the Sikh Empire, she defies traditional gender roles by actively participating in political affairs and asserting her authority. Divakaruni portrays Rani Jindan as an intelligent and resilient woman who refuses to be confined to the limited roles assigned to her by society. In a time when women were expected to be submissive and passive, Rani Jindan takes charge of the kingdom after her husband's death and demonstrates her leadership qualities, making strategic decisions and protecting her son's rights as the rightful heir to the throne. This defiance of traditional gender roles challenges the notion that women are incapable of holding positions of power and authority. Divakaruni showcases the strength and resilience of Rani Jindan in the face of adversity as she fights against the oppressive forces of colonialism, risking her life to protect her people and preserve the Sikh heritage. Through her portrayal of Rani Jindan, Divakaruni sends a powerful

message that women are not passive victims but active agents of change who can challenge and resist the oppressive structures of society. Evans, a researcher, while quoting Archer Mann and Huffman, adds,

"For some feminists the idea of a sisterhood, based on a specific sex and gender, is highly problematic. Their unease is not just a reactionary response to the media, but speaks more broadly to their concerns about the exclusionary nature of the term and to their somewhat ambivalent ideas about collectivism. The key concerns with sisterhood are therefore threefold: first, some third wave popular books can often articulate highly individualistic ideas about agency and empowerment which do not sit easily with a notion of collective identity,..." (Evans, pp. 112)

In *The Last Queen*, Chitra Divakaruni not only tells a captivating story but also offers a feminist analysis that challenges societal norms and gender roles. Through her depiction of strong and resilient female characters, she empowers women and encourages readers to question and challenge the constraints imposed upon them by patriarchal systems. Divakaruni's novel serves as a powerful reminder that women have the power to shape their own destinies and break free from the limitations placed upon them by society. In one scene, she boldly confronts her detractors, asserting, "I will not be silenced. I will not be dismissed. I will not be reduced to a mere pawn in this game of power." (TLQ, pp.245) These lines exemplify Rani Jindan's unwavering determination to assert her agency and fight for her rights. The interactions between Rani Jindan and other female characters in the novel showcase the strength of women supporting and uplifting one another. Divakaruni highlights the importance of female solidarity and the potential for women to empower each other. For instance, Rani Jindan forms strong alliances with her female companions, offering words of encouragement and guidance. Together, they navigate the challenges of a male-dominated society, defying expectations and proving that women can forge their own paths.

Female characters' agency and autonomy

In Chitra Divakaruni's novel *The Last Queen*, the author skilfully portrays female characters who possess a remarkable sense of agency and autonomy. Through thought-provoking dialogues, Divakaruni highlights the strength and determination of these women, challenging traditional gender roles and societal expectations. As they discuss the limitations imposed on women in their society, Bamba expresses her frustration, stating, "Why should our voices be silenced? Why should we be confined to the shadows when we have so much to offer?" (Divakaruni, 152). This powerful statement emphasizes the characters' unwillingness to accept the status quo, as they yearn for a world where their voices are heard and their contributions recognized. Likewise, when Rani Jindan faces opposition from male advisors who question her ability to rule, she boldly asserts, "I am more than capable of leading my people. I will not be reduced to a mere figurehead." (Divakaruni, 78). This dialogue not only emphasizes Rani Jindan's unwavering confidence but also challenges the notion that women are inherently unfit for positions of power. These dialogues serve as empowering

moments, highlighting the agency and autonomy of the female characters in the novel. Divakaruni's inclusion of such conversations demonstrates her commitment to portraying women as complex individuals capable of challenging societal norms and shaping their own destinies. Through their words, these characters inspire readers to question and challenge the limitations imposed on women in both the fictional world and society at large.

Instances of women defying patriarchal expectations

Chitra Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* serves as a powerful narrative that explores the theme of women defying patriarchal expectations. Divakaruni skilfully portrays female characters who challenge the traditional roles imposed on them by society, displaying resilience and determination that empowers women. Rani Jindan, the protagonist and the last queen of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, refuses to accept the limitations placed upon her as a woman. Despite being a widow, a status that society often associates with submission and dependence, Rani Jindan refuses to fade into the background. Instead, she takes charge of her own destiny and becomes an influential figure in the political landscape of Punjab. Likewise, another prominent defiance of patriarchal expectations can be seen through the character of Gulbahar, Rani Jindan's loyal companion. Gulbahar, initially introduced as a courtesan, embodies strength and resilience. She breaks free from the confines of her societal role and becomes an important ally to Rani Jindan, offering her support and guidance throughout their journey. The novelist also weaves the story of Mai Jivan, a brave warrior who defies gender norms and fights alongside men on the battlefield. Mai Jivan's character challenges the notion that women are solely meant for domesticity, showcasing their ability to excel in traditionally male-dominated domains. These instances of women challenging patriarchal expectations in *The Last Queen* highlights the author's commitment to portraying strong, independent female characters. Divakaruni's portrayal serves as a reminder that women have the power to challenge societal norms, break free from gender constraints, and shape their own destinies. Through these characters, she empowers women to transcend the limitations imposed upon them and strive for equality and self-determination.

The significance of women's empowerment in the context of the story

In Chitra Divakaruni's novel, "*The Last Queen*," the theme of women's empowerment holds significant meaning within the context of the story. Set in the patriarchal society of 19th century India, where women were often marginalized and restricted, the narrative showcases the journey of Rani Jindan, the protagonist, as she defies societal norms and challenges the oppressive structures that confine her. The significance of women's empowerment becomes evident as Rani Jindan navigates through a world dominated by men, where her voice and agency are constantly undermined. Through her courage, resilience, and determination, she breaks free from the confines of her traditional role as a woman and emerges as a formidable force to be reckoned with. Divakaruni's portrayal of Rani Jindan's journey serves as an inspiration for women to rise above societal constraints, embrace their inherent strength, and actively participate in shaping their own destinies.

When analysing Chitra Divakaruni's novel *The Last Queen* from a feminist perspective, it is crucial to consider its connections and comparisons to other feminist works and movements. The agency and empowerment in the novel resonate with second-wave feminism. The protagonist, Rani Jindan, defies societal expectations and challenges the patriarchal structures surrounding her. Her journey mirrors the struggles faced by women during the second-wave feminist movement, as they fought for equal rights and liberation from oppressive norms. The novel's portrayal of sisterhood and solidarity aligns with the principles of intersectional feminism. Divakaruni highlights the strength that emerges when women support and uplift one another, transcending boundaries of race, class, and caste. This resonates with contemporary feminist works that emphasize the importance of inclusivity and intersectionality, such as the writings of bell hooks and Audre Lorde.

The broader implications and relevance of the novel's feminist themes

The Last Queen underlines the importance of female solidarity and the transformative power of women supporting and uplifting each other. Divakaruni portrays Rani Jindan's relationships with other women, both within her family and beyond, as sources of strength and resilience. These connections enable her to navigate treacherous waters and assert her agency in a male-dominated society. By exploring the bonds between women, the novel raises awareness about the significance of building strong alliances and advocating for one another, ultimately leading to the dismantling of oppressive systems.

In a broader societal context, the themes presented in *The Last Queen* hold significant relevance. Divakaruni's novel prompts readers to reflect on the progress made in the fight for gender equality and the work that still needs to be done. By highlighting the historical struggles faced by women, the author emphasizes the ongoing need to challenge and dismantle systemic inequalities. Furthermore, the novel serves as a reminder that women's stories and voices have often been marginalized or erased from historical narratives. By centering Rani Jindan's story, Divakaruni amplifies the voices of women who have been overlooked, contributing to a more inclusive and accurate representation of history. The novel not only explores the empowerment of its female protagonist but also examines the broader implications and relevance of its feminist themes. Through its exploration of gender roles, female solidarity, and the need for equitable representation, the novel sparks important conversations about gender equality and challenges readers to envision a more just and inclusive society. Divakaruni's work serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing fight for women's empowerment and the significance of amplifying women's voices in our collective narratives.

7. Conclusion

Chitra Divakaruni's novel *The Last Queen* leaves a lasting impact on empowering women and promoting feminist literature. Through its powerful storytelling and compelling characters, the novelist challenges traditional gender roles and sheds light on the strength and resilience of women in a patriarchal society. Throughout the narrative, we witness the

transformation of the protagonist, Rani Jindan, from a submissive young girl to a fierce and influential queen. Divakaruni masterfully portrays Rani Jindan's journey as she navigates the treacherous world of politics, defying societal expectations and taking control of her own destiny. This portrayal serves as a reminder of the indomitable spirit of women and their ability to shape their own narratives. The novel achieves empowering women by showcasing importance of feminist mentoring. It highlights the importance of sisterhood and solidarity among women. Divakaruni portrays female friendships and alliances as sources of strength and support. This emphasis on the collective power of women serves as an inspiration for readers and encourages them to recognize and nurture the bonds of sisterhood in their own lives. On the whole, Chitra Divakaruni's novel, *The Last Queen*, offers a powerful exploration of the treatment of women, the importance of sisterhood, and the impact of feminist mentoring. Through her well-crafted narrative, Divakaruni provides a poignant reminder of the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society while also celebrating the strength, resilience, and unity that can be found amongst women. The novel serves as a testament to the power of sisterhood and mentorship in uplifting and empowering women to overcome adversity and reclaim their autonomy.

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