

**Feminist Historical Desire
and the Politics of Biopic Adaptations:
Review of *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi***

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Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi

Written by Prasoon Joshi (dialogue); K.V. Vijayendra Prasad, Kangana Ranaut, and Atul Kulkarni (screenplay)

Directed by Radha Krishna Jagarlamudi (Krish) and Kangana Ranaut
Zee Studios, India, 2019

The most prominent example of a popular Hindi film that re-visits the Victorian age in India is Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan* (2001), a film that attracted the masses and classes alike and has gone down in history as one of the only Indian films to receive an Oscar nomination entry in the best Foreign Language Feature Film category. Despite the critical acclaim, enormous popularity and stupendous box-office success of *Lagaan*, it failed to set the trend of reviving nineteenth-century India on the big screen. Except for Ketan Mehta's *Mangal Pandey* (2005), based on the heroic contribution of the Indian sepoy Mangal Pandey to the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny in India and incidentally starring Aamir Khan (the actor who played the hero of *Lagaan*) as the protagonist, few historical films have tried to recreate India's colonial context. There is much more sustained interest in Mughal India, with many historical films released to date re-imagining the various political events and people of that period. These films are extremely popular, as they throw light on the burning issues of religious fundamentalism and communal tension among Hindus and Muslims from past historical perspectives.

In contrast, filmmakers seem to have felt less of an urge to cinematically recreate nineteenth-century India under British rule, resulting

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in a paucity of Hindi historical films set in the nineteenth century more generally. However, the already cited 1857 Sepoy Mutiny in India provides an exception, having attracted filmmakers' interest in both parallel and mainstream cinema. One such critically well-received example is Shyam Benegal's art-house historical film *Junoon* (1978), a cross-religious love story set against the backdrop of the 1857 rebellion against oppressive British overlords. More recently, the 2005 release of *Mangal Pandey* generated a major revisionist impression in the minds of Indian (and perhaps some Western) audiences about the meta-narrative of the Sepoy Mutiny, providing a heroic retelling of Mangal Pandey not as a rebel but an Indian patriot defending his religious values and culture's integrity.

Released in January 2019, *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi*, directed by Radha Krishna Jagarlamudi (Krish) and Kangana Ranaut, is a similar cinematic attempt that brings the historical memory of nineteenth-century India back onto the Bollywood big screen in a postcolonial, but crucially also a feminist revisionist format. The thrust of the film thus subverts the patriarchal bias of male heroism in the history of the Mutiny, by foregrounding the contribution of the courageous warrior queen Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi to the uprising, reframing and re-contextualising the historical meta-narrative of the 1857 events from an Indian woman's point of view. The neo-Victorian biopic shows Rani Lakshmi Bai's solitary and eventually unsuccessful attempt to provide resistance to the British in India against the wider backdrop of the rebellion that makes her a national martyr to reckon with. The mass popularity of the names of Tantiya Tope and Mangal Pandey as the male martyr-leaders of the Mutiny is significantly revised by this cinematic attempt to reposition and highlight Rani Lakshmi Bai's role in India's First War of Independence against the British.

The overall ideological concern of the narrative is to glorify the role of women and reinvent their suppressed voices and history within the rigid socio-political and cultural framework of traditional Hindu patriarchy in India. In order to bring out its feminist ideological orientation, the film projects contemporary attitudes, desires and trends upon past historical situations. The freedom, confidence and autonomy expressed by the Queen seem anachronistically ahead of her time. This constitutes a common approach in most mainstream Indian historical films, which are quite prepared to flout historical veracity in the hope of catering to the present cultural imagination. However, *Manikarnika* cannot really be regarded as

stooping so low in using the presentification of history for marketing appeal, as it tries to generally project the seriousness and depth that the story of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi deserves in the context of the Indian Mutiny. The film freely mixes historical truth and biographical details to come up with a lively and riveting portrayal of the subtle political nuances and historical memory of the colonial struggle in India under the East India Company. It portrays the rebel queen as a legendary leader of the Mutiny and a symbol of truth, courage and patriotism. Even in such a grand and lavish film, the simple narrative of the Queen's sacrifice shines through. The disclaimer that comes before the beginning of the film frankly acknowledges the introduction of some imaginary incidents in its depiction of history: "cinematic liberties have been sought and certain moments have been dramatised". The questions of historical fidelity and the ethics of fictive invention seem to have genuinely concerned the scriptwriters and directors, and, hence, they try to portray the Queen's life and the turmoil of society in nineteenth-century India in very broad, realistic strokes and through life-like narrativisations of several historical incidents. They handle the issue of historical ethics by balancing the meta-narrative of the British rule in India with several micro-narratives of the Queen and her subjects articulating the Indian points of view. The film has an understated art direction, costume design and action direction so that the grandeur is appropriate but not ostentatious to attract the audience with lavish and larger-than-life visuals. As a neo-Victorian narrative, the film aims at telling a serious story about a heroic woman and remains committed to its core cause, instead of trying to distract the audience by mere spectacle celebrating the hollow magnificence of the royal era.

In the film, the Queen's struggle is given a believable context by the depiction of several episodes from her life that highlight her strong sense of individuality, her transgressive and unconventional attitude, and her authentic sense of patriotism. The provision of a substantial background to the life of Rani Lakshmi Bai aims at countering a lack of knowledge about her life before her marriage in the popular imagination. Thus, she is introduced as Manikarnika, who is raised by the Maratha Peshwa Baji Rao and her father Moropant in Bithoor; the two liberal men encourage her to learn the art of sword-fighting and develop her warrior skills. Hence, in this neo-Victorian biopic, Rani Lakshmi Bai's is substantially re-contextualised by inserting a plausible context and a series of incidents to flesh out the

queen's larger-than-life image of extraordinary female valour and prowess that exists in the mass imagination.

The film tries to connect historical fact with present-day popular perceptions and bridges the gap between the two seamlessly, realising contemporary Indian women's desire for female self-discovery in the Queen's historical example. In the scene where the adult Manikarnika is introduced to the audience, she is shown to perform the daredevil act of hitting an arrow at a ferocious tiger. As the scene progresses, however, it does not revel in the woman's killing of the wild beast, but shows her benevolent attempt to save the animal. She merely tranquilises the tiger by using a sleep-inducing medicine at the tip of the arrow, puts herbal medicines onto the sleeping beast's wound caused by her arrow, and orders her servants to return the tiger to the woods from where it had entered the villages nearby to search for food. She saves the fearful local villagers from the ferocious tiger, and rescues the tiger from the violent attack of the scared villagers. This instance resonates with a clear strand of eco-criticism and environmental ethics discernible in neo-Victorianism which, akin to the film's feminism, could also be read as a presentist and/or anachronistic example of projecting today's concerns onto the historical past. Impressed by her bravery in taming the tiger, the minister of Jhansi, Dixit-ji proposes her marriage with the King of Jhansi, Gangadhar Rao.

Manikarnika displays a similar benevolence towards animals after becoming Queen of Jhansi. The British officers of the East India Company are shown rampantly snatching domestic animals from the common villagers of Jhansi to feast on roast meat. They also force Jhalkari Bai, a poor Dalit woman, to give up her favourite calf that she loves like a child. Lakshmi Bai enters the British enclave and releases all the animals pent up there and returns the calf to Jhalkari Bai. The British soldiers are surprised to find an Indian woman boldly entering their enclave and disrupting their revelry, but they dare not to interfere with her actions because she is the Queen. Her immense popularity with the common people of Jhansi later enables her to mobilise them against the mighty British army. These scenes involving animals not only express her benevolence but also her brave and transgressive nature, as her actions invite the wrath of her mother-in-law, who does not want Manikarnika to move so freely and openly in the public sphere thronged by the British soldiers and low-caste Indian subjects. As a free spirit, Manikarnika, renamed Lakshmi by her husband as per the royal

family protocol, continues to flout the boundaries of the private sphere designated for women of royal birth and makes meaningful, significant and emphatic forays into the male-dominated domain of the public space.

In this she is ably supported by some of the male members of her own family prior to her marriage. Manikarnika's foster-father, the Maratha Peshwa Baji Rao, and her father Moropant are both liberal men who permit her to learn the arts of war. These elderly men recognise and appreciate her qualities as a feisty warrior and never deter her from enjoying outdoor activities such as riding, usually forbidden to royal women. The men prove supportive and admiring, and her husband, the young Gangadhar Rao, is equally tolerant as he allows her to enjoy a degree of freedom. He also gifts her with the book *Harshacharita* in recognition of Manikarnika/Lakshmi's fondness for reading and writing.¹ Furthermore, her husband is depicted as soft-natured, a lover of arts and education, who enjoys performing in plays and lacks the heroine's strength of character and grit that eventually make her a more capable ruler. In contrast, Manikarnika is always at loggerheads with her conservative and domineering mother-in-law, who finds her recalcitrant and disobedient. Their most significant confrontation happens after the death of her husband, when the Queen refuses to dress and behave like a hapless widow, and instead requests her mother-in-law to move to the traditional place populated by the Hindu widows, Kashi.² Even as a widow, she continues to defy customs and conventions that facilitate the subjugation and social exclusion of women in her times, for instance by participating in a *haldi-kumkum* ceremony she arranges and encouraging another young widow to come out of seclusion to become a part of the public ritual.³

The most diabolical opposition that she encounters is from her jealous and conniving brother-in-law, Sadashiv Rao. He flouts all sense of justice by helping the British in order to grab the throne of Jhansi after his brother's death. This character is expressive of the failure and compromise of some of the male rulers of the Indian states at that point in history, which gave ample scope to the power-hungry British to manipulate and misuse them. In the aspiring Sadashiv Rao and other Indian kings like the Maharaja of Gwalior, we find the dismaying manifestation of cowardice, treachery and hypocrisy that precipitated a crisis in aristocratic masculinity and political ethics. Thus, the dark side of Indian royalty, their cowardice, treachery, excessive self-interest, and resulting lack of patriotic conviction are also brought to the forefront to show how Indian states fell to the

cunning and ruthless ambitions of the British. These Indian male rulers fail to provide leadership for their individual states or India more generally. Instead of motivating and unifying the common people in resistance to the foreign enemy, they indulge in escapism, betrayal or spineless acquiescence.

The British men are likewise shown in a bad light. The East India Company generals are self-seeking, brutal, manipulative and treacherous. They use Sadashiv Rao to conquer and plunder Jhansi but refuse to grant him rulership, destroy the royal fort of Jhansi, and delight in burning King Gangadhar's library of rare books and manuscripts. Arguably, Sir Hugh Rose's vindictive order to torch the library symbolises an attempt to destroy Sanskrit/Indian literature, knowledge systems, and culture so as to assert British hegemony. Sir Hugh Rose is also depicted killing a local girl who quenches the men's thirst by the roadside while they are passing her house, only because she bears the Queen's name, Lakshmi. During the British siege of Jhansi, Sir Hugh Rose proves a weak opponent, only narrowly escaping capture by the Queen. In the final battle scene of the film, he looks on helplessly as the Queen gives up her life in the fire instead of enduring the ignominy of getting arrested and executed by the British.

By foregrounding the moral weaknesses of both Indian and British men, the film succeeds in projecting the Queen of Jhansi as an able symbol of both female empowerment and national resistance. She proves to be a force to reckon with in every scene in the narrative. Her firebrand personality shines through in every situation, be it within the royal household or in relation to the British representatives of the Company. Yet her feminine qualities also balance her extrovert and daredevil nature, when she proves a good wife and loving partner to her husband. Additionally, she mothers a beautiful son, Damodar, who is poisoned by Sadashiv Rao – a situation that brings out her vulnerable and agonised self. Later, her natural motherly instinct enables her to choose an ordinary infant as the adopted child of her dying husband, much to the chagrin of her scheming brother-in-law, who wanted her to adopt his own son.⁴ She resists the British dominance of the kingdom after her husband's untimely death, again due to poisoning by his brother. However, initially, the Queen avoids involvement in the Mutiny until the seizure of the Jhansi Star Fort by rebels, as did her real-life counterpart, who was then – quite possibly unjustly – accused of implication in their subsequent massacre of British officers, women and children.

The heroine's decision to fight the British is a courageous one; she requests all people of the state to give up their metal utensils and gives away her own ornaments to prepare more weapons against the British. The scenes where she participates in training the women of Jhansi in warfare are awe-inspiring and create significant moments of female empowerment on screen. The cinematic foregrounding of the suppressed history of the common women's participation in the struggle against the British is praiseworthy, as it establishes the power and courage of ordinary woman, but such instances have been either erased or silenced by the official history written by patriarchal male historiographers.

In this biopic of Manikarnika, a small but very significant space is also offered to the Dalit woman Jhalkari Bai. The Queen not only befriends her, but also benefits from her help in escaping from the castle with her infant surrogate son, renamed Damodar Rao after her dead biological son, while Jhalkari Bai acts as her decoy to confound and attack the British. Thus, the film's feminist politics merge with liberal class politics, subverting both gender and caste hierarchies and implicitly advocating for cross-caste female alliances in the struggle for equality. *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* thus promotes apparently ignored and deliberately suppressed historical narratives of female heroism to establish its ideological focus on female empowerment and emancipation in today's Indian context.

The lead female actor, Kangana Ranaut, embodies the protagonist in such a manner that it is difficult to imagine anyone else in this role. Her powerful personality, body language and impeccable screen presence speak volumes of the tremendous maturity she has attained over the years.⁵ Such an actress might not have emerged from a family that already has famous senior members working in this industry, and she is a real asset in an industry propelled mostly by coterie politics, sexism and favouritism. By making her own presence felt in a male-dominated and nepotistic film industry, Ranaut has posed a challenge by virtue of her sheer merit, grit and dedication. It is highly ironical, then, that there should be a controversy regarding her role as one of the directors of a film that contests women's exclusion from official metanarratives of the Mutiny history: complaining that Ranaut decided to direct some scenes of the film because she was not happy with his work, the main director Krish refused to participate in the film's promotional events and made a media controversy out of this fallout

with her. In other words, the film's production and marketing strategies reiterated similar patterns of women's exclusion, which the film very emphatically challenges.

This neo-Victorian biopic makes a powerful feminist statement about women's courage in the face of political adversity even in the patriarchal society of mid-nineteenth-century India. It also succeeds in enlivening the historical features, events and contexts of colonial India with a fair amount of muted grandiloquence and mimetic fidelity and throws light upon the complex interconnections between the royal families, their common subjects, and the foreign invaders in various Indian states. It is this trans-historical celebration of women's power and the ideal artistic projection of a feminist historical desire that drives the imaginative content of the film and definitely makes it worth watching.

Notes

1. *Harshacharita* is a classic Sanskrit historical poetic prose work, written by King Harshavardhan's court-poet, Banabhatta, in seventh-century CE (Common Era in non-Western contexts, used to avoid reference to Christian eras) India. It is the first historical work in that tradition and in an ornate style depicts the life and achievements of the King. Manikarnika requests this book from the Peshwa before her marriage, but is only gifted it by her husband, Gangadhar Rao, after her marriage.
2. Like Varanasi, Kashi is one of the oldest and most holy cities in North India, connected with the rise of Hinduism. In Kashi, there are several *ashrams* (holy lodging places), in which widows of various parts of the country were kept by their family members. It is considered a holy ritual when the widows stay together in this sacred city and pass the rest of their lives in penance (for the loss of their husbands). The Queen refuses to go to this city and ignore her responsibility of protecting her subjects from the British. In this respect, she flouts the command of her widowed mother-in-law and the conventions of rigid Hindu patriarchy that hardly countenanced royal women to rule their kingdoms in the absence of any 'legitimate', that is adult, male ruler.
3. *Haldi* is turmeric that is applied to women's bodies when they get married, and *kumkum* is vermilion that the husband places on the bride's forehead on the day of the marriage, and a woman wears it as a mark of her married state as long as the husband lives. The *haldi-kumkum* ceremony is a sacred

ceremony between married women when they give these two things to each other as holy gifts. The widowed queen participates in this ritual as she regards it as an auspicious ceremony in which women should participate irrespective of their married (or widowed) status. By giving *haldi* and *kumkum* to another young widow, she transgresses patriarchal rituals that forbid widows to participate in mainstream societal events. The Queen responds to this sexist politics of female exclusion by making a powerful intervention in this tradition.

4. The practice of adopting a male heir in absence of a natural one was very common in Hindu royal families. Being a minor, however, the child was not allowed to ascend the throne and was under the guardianship of an adult member of the family or the royal court who officially took care of all the king's duties until he became an adult. In this case, Gangadhar Rao and Rani Lakshmi Bai had arranged a formal ceremony to adopt Sadashiv Rao's infant son, but in course of the event, the Queen finds a young civilian infant rushing towards her and fondly calls him by her dead son's name Damodar. Respecting the bereaved mother's fragile emotional state, Gangadhar Rao decides to adopt him instead of Sadashiv's son. This infuriates Sadashiv and he misbehaves with the Queen, which forces the King to exile him from the kingdom. After the King's death, the Queen decides to rule until her adopted son becomes an adult, so that the British cannot annex the state to their dominions under the Doctrine of Lapse. In actual fact, in 1853, the British proceeded to annex Jhansi regardless, refusing to recognise the legitimacy of the royal adoption.
5. Kangana Ranaut is one of the front ranking female actors in Bollywood today. She made an impressive debut in *Gangster* (2006), and went on to win accolades for her roles in *Fashion* (2008), for which she got her first National Award, *Life in a ...Metro* (2008), and *Tanu Weds Manu* (2011). Her magnum opus blockbuster was *Queen* (2014), for which she again garnered the National Award and many other prestigious awards. She has given stellar performances in films like *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* (2015), for which she received her third National Award, *Revolver Rani* (2014), *Shootout at Wadala* (2014), *Rangoon* (2017) and *Simran* (2018), among others.