

ISSN-0976-8165



# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

**VOL. 15 ISSUE-3 JUNE 2024**

**15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS**

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
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## **Blurring the Boundary between Fact and Fiction in *The Last Queen* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A Study**

**Prachi Sharma**

Research Scholar,

Department of Languages (English),

Integral University, Lucknow,

Uttar Pradesh, India.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12671324>

**Article History:** Submitted-10/06/2024, Revised-20/06/2024, Accepted-25/06/2024, Published-30/06/2024.

### **Abstract:**

Fiction and Non-Fiction are two completely different genres in literature. Fiction involves the fantasy world of an author whereas, non-fiction deals with actual facts. In current trend of literature the line between the facts and fiction is slowly blurring down. Authors include the facts in their fictional world and try to make it as real as possible. This helps in connecting with the real life situation. The heroic tales of historical or mythological heroes can be connected with readers. *The Last Queen* (2021) by Chita Banerjee Divakaruni revolves around the heroic life of Jindan Kaur, the last queen of Punjab. The novel is based on facts but it also includes fiction. Divakaruni specifies that not much information is present about Jindan Kaur but she loved to write letters. Based on these letters Divakaruni crafted the life of real heroine Jindan Kaur. An article published in *The Guardian* tilted as 'Based on a true story: the fine line between fact and fiction' supports this theory of blurring line. This article includes the views of authors such as Aminatta Forna, Alan Johnson, Matt Haig, Antony Beevor, Helen Dunmore, Adam Sisman, Jane Smiley, David Kynaston, and Kerry Hudson.

**Keyword: Fiction, Non-Fiction, *The Last Queen*, Chita Banerjee Divakaruni, and Blurring.**

Facts and fiction as the name suggests are two completely different sides of roads. Facts also referred to as non-fiction involves only the words which are well proven and have some historical or scientific foundation with them, with their respective fields. Fiction is the world where writer is in his imaginary world and make up things in his mind. These do not have any facts or base with them. Fictional world is seeks to be more creative as author paints the colour of his imagination onto the plain sheets of paper. Authors are free to imagine and make their own

rules. Fictional genre has given us some famous writers of English Literature along with their some well-known works. Such writers and their works are- P.B. Shelly's 'Kubla Khan', Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Marry Shelly's *Frankenstein*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and so many of them. There is also a special place for some famous fictional characters like Sherlock Holmes, James Bond, Harry Potter, Miss Marple and this goes on. Non-fiction is mainly about historical figures, biographies, histories and so on. There is a new genre which is much in discussion currently, this genre involves both fiction as well as non-fiction. Line between these two genres is slowly diminishing. Authors are currently on a trip to explore a different world which involves the elements of both fiction as well as non-fiction. *The Last Queen* (2021) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a part of such world. Divakaruni's work is based upon the life history of Maharani Jindan Kaur of Punjab. She was a fearless and marvellous queen who stood different from her contemporaries. She was known as Mother of Khalsa and was highly respected by public of Punjab. Unfortunately, we failed to record this extra ordinary queen in our historical databases. Divakaruni in her one of the interview stated that Jindan loved to write letters and some of them are available till date. She took help of these letters to craft the character of Jindan Kaur. Some of the evidences of Jindan still exist like her haveli at Lahore, Punjab (now in Pakistan), Dalip Singh's handwritten letter to Queen Victoria in which he demands his wealth of Punjab and Jindan's portrait. Jindan's prayer book is still present in British Library. These all are enough to prove real life existence of Jindan Kaur. Divakaruni carved the whole life Jindan by using these elements and her fictional world.

Mixing up of both the worlds is a challenging task. For an author he or she has to imagine the time period in which the real character of his novel existed. This is done with the help of text dealing with same time period. Some evidences also contribute in this study. The dialogues, tradition and culture should be according to a particular period while narrating their stories. In an article 'Blurring the line between fact and fiction' by Jen Scott he argues:

...benefits are clear. You can get realism, emotion, characterisation and an arc to your story that is not always easy to achieve. Dialogues can also be enhanced as, if you use memories of real conversations, you are more likely to avoid labour speech.

There is an emotional connectivity which is experienced by author and his character. This connection makes it difficult for author to write according to the facts as often author is seen supporting the character. *The Last Queen* is free from this biasness. Jindan is represented as hot-headed queen who has flaws. She is sometimes tempted with money and power and makes decision which later on leads to her regret. Divakaruni wrote a text which is based on the concept of imperfections in a woman. Whenever we hear queens of India the names which strike to our mind are Rani Lakshimibai and Razia Sultan. There are many other queens who were present but lack the space in history such as Rani Durgavati, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Avantibai Lodhi and many more. Jindan Kaur is among the lost heroines of Indian history. Divakaruni tried her level best not move away from reality as the book gives readers the flavour of realistic elements. The use of various historical settings makes the book more authentic. Poynter Institute for Media Studies, United States published a report by Roy Peter Clark in which he stated:

To make things more complicated, writers of fiction use fact to make their work believable. They do research to create authentic settings into which we enter. They return us to historical periods and places that can be accurately chronicled and described...

This reflects how settings play a major role in novels and on readers mind. Settings provide a foundation block to novel on which the whole story of the author lays. In *The Last Queen* Divakaruni describes Lahore as a beautiful city where, Jindan along with her brother Jawahar came to make their lives better. It was like an 'American Dream' for both of them. Children were amazed by the grand structure of Lahore as they have never seen something like that before.

A fort looms over us, pink in the last of the evening light. Massive, gorgeous, overwhelming. Lit by hundreds of diyas, glimmering like heaven. A slender minaret, crowned with the moon, rises up. It makes my heart ache though I cannot explain why. (Divakaruni 28)

This is well-described beauty of Lahore. Maharaja Ranjit Singh is known as Lion of Punjab and Lahore was his capital it was surely meant to be beautiful. Other description

includes: “‘The Badshahi Qila’... The Hathi-Paer Darwaza,’... ‘Why’s it so huge’” (Divakaruni 28). This shows the realistic setting of the novel.

Non-fiction fiction too sometimes contains made-up facts. An author adds some stuff just to make readers believe in it. Clark argues that, “They place characters in scenes and settings, have them speak to each other in dialogue, reveal limited points of view, and move through time over conflicts towards resolution.” This highlight the fact not only fictional but non-fictional authors too use the fictional element to make it more connecting to the readers. In west authors are experimenting with blurring the line between both the genres. This attracts more amounts of readers towards the work. Clark further states, “The line between fact and fiction in America, between what is real and made up, is blurring.” He goes on elaborating his idea by giving reference of American author John Berendt. Berendt is the author of best-seller book *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, this book was nominated for Pulitzer Prize in 1995. Clark states that, “Book authors such as John Berendt condenses events and use “composite” characters supposedly nonfiction work, offering only a brief allusion in an authors note to help clarify what might be real and what might not.” Hence the idea clearly suggests that authors often mix up between facts and non-fiction and give a raise to completely different genres. This work seems more reached to readers as they can connect to it. The same technique is used by Divakaruni she used all the evidences present including Jindan’s letter, her haveli and her portraits to form a complete history about Jindan’s life. Letters exchanged between Jindan and Dalip also between Jindan and Fakir her counsellor in court are making this work more accurate. Edmund Morris, an American writer and winner of Pulitzer Prize created fictional characters in his authorized memoir of Ronald Regan, book was known as *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Regan* (1999). Another life story or biography of a Mattie Baylock, second wife of Wyatt Earp by Glenn G. Boyer also contains fictional elements. According to Boyer his work belongs to the category of “creative nonfiction”. Divakaruni took the help of real as well as fictional characters to make her work more close to reality. Characters like Ranjit Singh, Dhian Singh, Dalip Singh, and Chand Kaur are real but characters like Mangla, Maahi, Jawahar, Avtar, Guddan are assumed to be fictional ones. These characters helped Jindan to become the queen of Punjab. They spent a good time with Jindan and guided her in every way possible.

This kind of historical study involves a great understanding of past, culture, history, religion and language. It is described as fourth genre by Clarks where imagination and reality meets. The Guardian's article quotes several writers and their views on this new take of literature. Aminatta Forna, a Scottish writer states in *The Guardian*:

My first full-length work was a memoir of war, the rise of a dictatorship and my own's family consequent fate. In the 12 years since its publication I have continued to explore the themes of civil war, though almost exclusively in fiction. Fiction allows me to reach for a deeper, less literal kind of truth.

Therefore the technique of merging two genres is becoming increasingly popular. It makes the work more sensible and accurate. Forna names few writers who have broken the barriers of non-fiction and reached to the world of fiction these authors are Joan Didion, Marry Karr, Roger Deakin, Helen Macdonald, William Fiennas and Robert Macfarlane. Alan Johnson, a British writer argues, "For a time I even stuck to a pedantic sequence of fiction followed by fact as if it were an unwritten commandment passed onto autodidacts like me." According to Johnson it gives him more pleasure rather than reading a non-fiction. Matt Haig is an author as well as journalist believes that, "The aim of any writer, even a fantasy writer, is the pursuit of truth." Haig believes in multiverse theory which says that any boundary between fiction and non-fiction is false. Multiverse theory goes on with believe that if something is written by the author it can be false in this universe but it is true and fits in another universe. So anything written can never be completely false. Haig has worked on both the genres and states:

I wrote a science fiction novel that was very autobiographical about my experience of depression, and then I wrote a nonfiction book about depression.... We need both genres, sometimes at the same time, because the moment we trust too much in one fixed idea of reality is the moment we lose it.

In an effort to get to get close to reality writers use the techniques such as composite characters, interior monologues and conflation of time. Antony Beevor, a British military historian believes that the phrase "based on a true story" is overly used now. He states that, "A blend of historical fact and fiction has been used in various forms since narrative began with sagas and epic poems." Beevor terms today's fiction as "hybrid fiction". He says it has various

different motives behind it. He further goes on quoting the example of Hilary Mantel' trilogy about Thomas Cromwell, according to Beevor, "... however impressive her research and writing, I am left feeling deeply uneasy. Which parts were pure invention, which speculation and which were based on reliable sources?" The famous characters arise from the imagination of the author. Character of Mangla in *The Last Queen* is important though she is considered as minor by some critics but her role in the novel cannot be ignored. She is witty, wise and knows the royal games very well. She is also the secret-keeper of Jindan. Jindan also depends on her for her help in decision making. While meeting first time with Jindan Mangla says some harsh stuff to her in order to make her realise that she will be facing these kind of situations in her everyday life at palace as Jindan was daughter of a dog trainer unlike Ranjit Singh's other wives who belonged to royal background. Mangla says:

After all, if a princess marries a king, there's nothing special about that. But you—when people look at you, you *want* them to think, she was a dog-trainer's daughter and still Sarkar [Ranjit Singh] chose her, she must be really something! But for that to work, *you* have to behave like the queen you are. (Divakaruni 102-103).

This highlights the importance of Mangla's role in Jindan's life.

Helen Dunmore, was a British short-story writer and novelist, said that fiction added to facts help to reform social laws. She quotes examples of some famous works such as Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runways* which depicts the problems of immigrants without proper paperwork, Emma Healey's *Elizabeth Is Missing* is all about dissolving minds in contemporary era. These books leave a long lasting effect on the minds of readers. She further argues that:

...Toni Morrison's *Beloved* exposes cost of slavery with searing brilliance, while Chinua Achebe dramatises the crude irruption of western missionaries and colonialist into highly complex, sophisticated Igbo culture. Such novels not only add to a reader's knowledge: they transform that reader's internal landscape.

This reflects the importance of fiction mixed with facts. Adam Sisman, another British writer who is biographer as well argues, "Nicholas Shakespeare... he has ... written an excellent biography of Bruce Chatwin. Before concentrating on thrillers, Robert Harris wrote several

works of nonfiction, including *Selling Hitler*, a brilliant account of the “Hitler diaries” story.” Jane Smiley is an American novelist. She won Pulitzer Prize for her work *A Thousand Acres* believes non-fiction is generally historical context. It is usually assumed to be accurate. Findings of different archaeological sites add weight to these facts. These archaeological sites are usually incomplete they have stones, walls, mosaic but they needed to be connected through a story. This story engages readers in knowing more about the history. She further adds to her theory:

...the history of literature shows that listeners and readers want to know not only what happened, but also how it looked, sounded, smelt, felt, and also what it meant then and what it means now. The want to know but also to experience, and therefore they seek completeness, and so they willingly suspend disbelief in fiction...

According to Smiley fictional writer also had a theory about past, present and future. Changes developed in people around this time. This is well known to them by studying of facts. Facts provide a base to novel upon which fictional writers build their castles. Divakaruni studied the past deeply and recreated the character of Jindan Kaur which was rebellious for that era. David Kynaston is an English historian gives the example of George Orwell’s *The Lion and The Unicorn* saying it gives the idea of 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain. He goes on with his list adding EP Thompson’s *The Poverty of Theory* in which he showcased the attack on Louis Althusser, a French philosopher. Kynaston believes fictional works also gives us the idea about the time period or history as they are completely does not belong to fictional category and had elements of non-fiction in it. Kerry Hudson, a British writer states:

...reality bites and holds on tight and, as a writer, though it felt natural I would write fiction that still need truth, something ‘real’ to begin from. I will stretch and twist that reality, filter it through various fictional smoke and mirrors, expand and compress its meaning but at the centre of each book there is that grain of “this really happened”.

According to Hudson nothing can be completely made-up facts there always lays a truth behind each fictional story.



John Berendt in his work *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* states, "...this is a work of nonfiction, I have taken certain storytelling liberties, particularly having to do with the time of events." Hence nonfiction also combines the elements of fiction. Divakaruni's main source is the letters through which she wrote the life history of Jindan. Dalip send her letter during her stay in Nepal. Jindan was overwhelmed by this letter as she was hearing from her son after fourteen years. Letter stated that:

*Dearest Biji,*

*Thanks to the kind intervention of my guardian, Sir John Login, I trust this letter will reach you safely. The British government has given me permission to visit India for a tiger hunt. I have missed you greatly and would very much like to see you again. We can meet in Calcutta, if you agree....(Divakaruni 297).*

Another important letter which she wrote during her escape in Chunar Fort to warden stated:

*You put me in a cage and locked me up. You surrounded me with sentries. You thought you could keep Rani Jindan imprisoned. But look, I got out by magic from under your nose! (Divakaruni 283).*

Therefore, after this it can be concluded that fiction with a little mix of fact or non-fiction goes well for the readers. It is knowledgeable and also keeps readers engaged throughout. This genre needs to be explored more on different levels. It can become one of the best writing spaces in future. The only caution which author needs to follow is, it should not be decisive. Fiction always has an essence of facts and it can never be completely imagination of the author. For writing historical fiction author relives the era which he talks about in the novel. This is not an easy task to do as it involves study of culture of that time period. The research paper concludes with the finding that it is a trend in literature to break the barriers between fiction and non-fiction and Divakaruni's text falls under this category. She carefully deals with these two genres and without hurting anyone's feeling she made Jindan stand out of her contemporaries. Jindan makes mistakes, she is greedy for power, she wants to rule Punjab, she was eager to make her brother position in court and many more regrets she had but she knew how to deal with these things. She even fought with British to save her kingdom from them. Jindan's life is full of ups and downs and the backbone of the novels is its characters which are used in an amazing way. These

characters make it more interesting. Hence, with taking both genres and dealing with them effectively Divakaruni brings readers the history of Jindan Kaur.

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