

RECONFIGURING HISTORICAL WOMEN: FATEH KANWAR IN SANTOSH SINGH'S *ZENANI DEORDHI: THE LIFE AND JOURNEY OF A PRINCESS*

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the politics of women's representation in history books and emphasises the importance of historical fiction in reinterpreting history to reintegrate women into it. Dr. Santosh Singh's *Zenani Deordhi: The Life and Journey of a Princess* (2020) examines the life of Fateh Kanwar, a female figure in history who has been largely overlooked and thus neglected by historians. She was the first wife of Maharaja Sawai Jagat Singh of Jaipur. The study offers a brief analysis of the novel using the frames of New Historicism, highlighting the patriarchal restrictions that led to the exclusion of Fateh Kanwar. She served as the queen regent of Jaipur following the untimely death of Sawai Jagat Singh. Despite her noble lineage, education, and influential position, she faced numerous barriers imposed by a patriarchal society. The paper discusses her shortcomings and clarifies the strategies she employed to surmount them, thereby establishing herself as an independent and formidable woman, worthy of her own niche in the historical narratives

Keywords: History, Fiction, Women writing, Feminism, New Historicism.

In recent years, post-structuralism has significantly enhanced our understanding of literature as a whole, demonstrating that our engagement with the past is shaped by various interpretive works. The realisation that history, while not exactly 'fiction', adopts a narrative form similar to fiction, has been highly empowering for women and postcolonial writers in recent decades. Historically excluded from traditional historical accounts, fiction has enabled women to assert their presence within history in diverse ways, thereby also transforming our perception of history itself. However, this realisation is not new; examining the continuities in women's historical fiction can help us gain a deeper understanding.

As Harding observes, "For far too long, women's voices and experiences have been marginalised or erased from the historical records, leading to a distorted understanding of the past (Harding, p. 437). However, the female figure in history, previously obscured, has become increasingly visible; she is now palpable, multidimensional, and undeniably present. This figure has flourished in contemporary fiction, with authors working to establish her as central to both fictional and factual historical narratives. Their works explore the female figure in recent historical fiction: the tremendous success of writers such as Philippa Gregory, Kate Mosse, Sara Waters, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Indu Sunderesan... is a testament to the fact that the female figure is now not only desirable but also marketable, as their works examine

the growth of the contemporary historical fiction genre by analysing the implications of these new narratives for current gender politics.

Dr. Santosh Singh has made considerable contributions to the genre of historical fiction through her numerous literary works. Her writings frequently emphasise themes of gender equality. Her most recent publication, *Zenani Deordhi: The Life and Journey of a Princess'* (2020), narrates a fictional account of Fateh Kanwar, a young princess of Bikaner and the first wife of Maharaja Sawai Jagat Singh of Jaipur, who lived during the early 18th century. In the prologue of the novel, Singh elucidates her motivations for selecting Fateh Kanwar as her subject. She observes that Indian women, particularly Rajput women, embody a duality in their portrayal and perception: they demonstrate courage, valour, and determination on one hand, while also maintaining traditional values and cultural practices on the other. Through this work, she highlights the challenges encountered by Rajput women, irrespective of their social status at the time.

History has not been, and never will be, neutral or impartial. Unlike a mirror, history has never merely reflected the past exactly as it was or as it once existed. As Santosh Singh asserts, history resembles a court verdict based on the facts discovered and presented; however, the true story often remains hidden between the lines of such verdicts. Singh's endeavours to portray the extraordinary life of Fateh Kanwar. Singh feels burdened by the heavy responsibility of eliminating superfluous information weaved around Fateh to depict her as an authentic human being, embracing her pain and glory, thereby challenging the stereotypes constructed around her. The novel is set in the early 18th century, a period when the princely states of Rajpootana had ceased to govern in accordance with dharma. During this era, they were consumed by greed and lust, ultimately leading to their decline. Historians such as Jadunath Sarkar, in his *History of Jaipur State*, and Malcolm, in his *History of Persia*, along with authors like Chandramani Singh's *Rajputana: The Land of Princes*, Bhatt's *Rajasthan: The Land of Kings*, Mathur's *Jaipur in the Mughal Period*, and NathShastri's *History of Jaipur*, often commend Sawai Maharaja Jai Singh II, the grandfather, and Sawai Maharaja Pratap Singh, the father of Jagat Singh. But Jagat Singh is notoriously recorded in history for two notable incidents—one involving his lustful relationship with a dancer named Raskapoor, and another concerning his cruelty, which contributed to the death of Krishna Kumari, the princess of Udaipur. General Malcolm notably omits him from his *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, dismissing him as 'the most dissolute prince of his race or age'. That Maharaja Sawai Jagat Singh of Jaipur died young is a well-documented fact, but what happened to the many queens and concubines he left behind remains a mystery. Many such unanswered questions are lost in obscurity. However, one thing can be stated with certainty: Fateh Kanwar was the first queen of Jagat Singh and the first of his many queens to enter the Jaipur palace.

Fateh Kanwar was a princess of Bikaner from the Rathor clan, who was married into the Kachwaha clan to the Prince of Jaipur, Maharaja Sawai Jagat Singh. The persona of Maharani Fateh Kanwar inspired Santosh Singh to visit her deordhi. During her visit, she felt that women have largely remained invisible in history. Like her other counterparts, Fateh Kanwar was entirely overlooked by historians. The intriguing politics within the house of Jaipur prompted Santosh to explore the lives of these women, including Fateh Kanwar. How did these women stand and assert themselves against the harsh currents of fate and achieve remarkable feats amidst restricted freedom? Not much is known about them due to the restrictions imposed on

Rajput women in the name of tradition. Fateh Kanwar never crossed the threshold of the zenana, but she ruled Jaipur as the queen regent following the death of her husband, Maharaja Sawai Jagat Singh. Santosh Singh, through this novel, combines history with her fictional narration about the life of Fateh Kanwar. However, with no historical records detailing her life, she tells a fictional tale of love, courage, sisterhood, ambition, and betrayal, aiming to reintroduce her into history—a place she truly deserves as part of the historical record.

Santosh Singh provides an initial overview of Bikaner's history. She introduces us to the lives of Akhe Kanwar and Chandra Kanwar, the grandmothers of Fateh Kanwar. Akhe is depicted as a woman who accepts her destiny and remains solitary. Chandra Kanwar is portrayed as an ambitious individual eager for power. She collaborates closely with her son Surat Singh, the uncle of Fateh Kanwar, in orchestrating a series of murders to elevate Surat Singh to the position of Maharaja of Bikaner. Although her ambitions are realised, she dies prematurely, succumbing before reaping the benefits of her actions.

Fateh Kanwar is the daughter of Ajab Singh, brother of Surat Singh, and Padma Kanwar, princess of Jodhpur. Padma Kanwar resides in the zenana of Surat Singh as her husband abandons her, remarries, and establishes a new residence in Jaipur. Santosh Singh, by presenting the genealogical chart of the Bikaner royal family, underscores the plight of women within the royal household of Rajputana, where women were often regarded as commodities and objects of pleasure. Polygamy was openly practised and widely accepted. In the name of honour, women were compelled to lead lives of loneliness and solitude. This is evidenced when Fateh Kanwar empathises with her mother. When Jagat Singh, her husband, remarries multiple times after their marriage, she reflects internally, "Masa, I can understand today all that you suffered in your life." (Singh 67) Through highlighting such profound emotions, Santosh Singh elucidates the suffering endured by women in the royal household.

Why can a man marry with as many women as he wants to?

Why cannot he be punished for breaking seven wedding vows?

(Singh 67)

Fateh questions society's duplicity of ascribing different rules for men and women. Though she is reluctant, she too falls victim to the same destiny as her ancestors. On her wedding day, the questions that haunted her were, "Why must she go to some other place, that too with a stranger?" (Singh 50) Amidst these ambiguous thoughts, she marries Jagat Singh in a grand wedding celebration. She reflects on the rootlessness and alienation every woman experiences when they leave their family, as Singh observes, "Why then she was being uprooted and replanted at an alien place was the question she had been asking herself over and over again." (Singh 63) Through these statements, Santosh Singh reveals the timeless inner confusion faced by women.

Fateh Kanwar joins the Kachawaha clan with the aspiration of a joyful married life. Unaware of what destiny has in store, she initially finds herself overwhelmed by the love lavished upon her by Jagat Singh. However, as is customary among royalty, other princesses soon become his wives. She is deeply distressed as Jagat Singh becomes increasingly inaccessible to her and "A terrified feeling of helplessness engulfed her." (Singh 67) She gradually withdraws into the obscurity of the zenana. She spends most of her time within her quarters with the assistance of Rupam Daavari and patiently awaits Jagat Singh's visit to her quarters; however, he never comes.

Jagat Singh becomes king after his father, Sawai Pratap Singh, passes away. Soon after, he falls in love with a dancer named Raskapoor, captivated by her beauty and talents in dancing, singing, and lovemaking. His affection for her grows so strong that he neglects his royal duties as Jaipur's ruler. When Fateh Kanwar sees Jagat Singh with Raskapoor one evening, she feels shame and disgust, leading to profound loneliness. She collapses onto her bed like a small, broken-winged sparrow, feeling as if a sudden desert sandstorm might sweep her away, shrieking and wailing. The discovery of her husband's true nature changes her life forever; she can no longer mourn or beg him to come back. She makes a firm vow to herself and her self-esteem is evident when she says-

*I may be crushed, yet I shall never ever invite pity from any quarter.
I have never posed; I am not an ordinary woman. I belong to Rathores of
Bikaner. I am not a fake woman. I am true to myself. So what if I am
a lone fighter today.*

(Singh 95)

Through the portrayal of the mindscape of Fateh Kanwar, Santosh endeavours to illustrate the void within women's lives in the zenana. Fateh Kanwar's circumstances exemplify the plight of all women confined to the zenana, who although accomplished princesses of different kingdoms, were often regarded as commodities and pawns in political games. While most succumbed to this fate, only a few managed to wield and exercise power. However, Fateh Kanwar was not among those women yearning for influence or power. She retreats from the tumult and finds solace in the solitude of Mukut Mandir. As she reflects upon her life, she thinks-

*I committed the foolishness of building a dream-mansion on the foundation
Of shifting sand. It was doomed to be destroyed eventually. When I came to
This palace, I felt protected because I found the surroundings very strong.
What a fool I was! Sitting on a fragile bond of marriage. I felt secure!*

(Singh 126)

The eternal questions that haunt her regarding why she or women like her had to confront this plight of loneliness remain unaddressed. Eventually, she, like all other women in the zenana, is compelled to conceal her pain and agony as Singh notes, "in the crumpled sheets of feigned ignorance." (Singh 140) She is made to accept the false pride that, as Singh further adds, "the quiet strength, ethereal allure, together with spectacular manners, were all cultivated in her since childhood. Her calm comportment rendered her every bit of the royal feminine grace she possessed." (Singh 140) Yet, in her solitude, she is unable to reconcile herself to the fact that her husband no longer loves her. Fateh endures her days in profound agony and her nights crying her heart out. Unable to confide in anyone around her, she remarks, "Is there anyone in the palace who can assure her that soon everything will be rectified; that by fulfilling her duties as a wife, her desperation and hopelessness will dissipate." (Singh 144) She is aware that her marriage to Jagat Singh was a political convenience rather than based on love; however, she questions, "why then, my heart bleeds today?" (Singh 144) Apart from Jagat Singh, she predominantly blames Raskapoor for her predicament.

Raskapoor, a Muslim courtesan, is criticised for her ambition. She arrives in Jaipur claiming to dance on the day of the king's coronation. Aware of the king's weakness, she captures his attention with her seductive actions. Ultimately, he leaves Jaipur with Raskapoor. He neglects

his royal duties and spends all his time in her company. Raskapoor is depicted as a cunning woman seeking wealth and power. However, she fails to enter the Chandra Mahal, a palace reserved for queens. Instead, the king constructs a separate quarters for her called the RasMahal, next only to his own palace. He even grants half his empire to Raskapoor, calling her 'Ardharajan', and coins are issued in her name.

The courtiers and the women in the zenana disapprove of Jagat's relationship with Raskapoor. Although they are cognizant of the king's vulnerabilities, they blame Raskapoor for scheming and diverting the king from his royal responsibilities. Jagat Singh is consistently advised by his mother and other loyal senior courtiers to dismiss Raskapoor and focus on his duties as a monarch. However, all such advice is disregarded and the kingdom of Jaipur persistently faces threats from the Marathas and other princely states. Jagat Singh engages in warfare with the Marathas but is invariably defeated and returns empty-handed. The royal treasury is diminishing due to his lavish lifestyle and ongoing wars. Consequently, peace and prosperity remain elusive for the people of Jaipur. Ultimately, Jagat Singh's interest in Raskapoor wanes as another distraction presents itself as Singh writes that, "Krishna, a young maiden, a tender girl. Seeming to be a formidable challenge for him." (Singh 147) Jagat Singh was now interested in Krishna Kumari, the princess of Udaipur.

Polygyny among the royals was a common practice during those days. A king could marry as many times as he wished, and the reasons were as varied as the number of marriages. Sometimes it was for political expediency; at other times, it was due to the physical charm, the wisdom of the princess, or simply because of lust. Whatever the reason, all ended up in marriage. One such incident that made its way into the pages of history was the proposal of Krishna Kumari, the princess of Mewar. Though it initially seemed unusual, it eventually led to a situation that resulted in the annihilation of three kingdoms - Mewar, Marwar, and Jaipur. When she was a child, Krishna Kumari was betrothed to the Maharaja of Jodhpur. It was a political alliance, as Krishna's father Bhim Singh, the king of Mewar, aimed to secure his borders from the Marathas, who were constantly causing havoc. Sadly, the Maharaja of Jodhpur died in a skirmish at the border. Bhim Singh, devastated by the incident, proposed the marriage of Krishna Kumari to Jagat Singh being oblivious to Jagat Singh's notorious escapades. Jagat Singh accepted the proposal for two reasons. One, because he was increasingly bored of Raskapoor, and the proposal of young princess Krishna Kumari provided a distraction. Two, because Man Singh, the younger brother of the king of Jodhpur, ascended the throne after the Maharaja's death. Jagat Singh did not like Man Singh and saw this as an opportunity to humiliate him. Little did he know that his pettiness would lead to such infamy that it would never be erased by any act of repentance or penance. A foolish act ignited a great fire that consumed Jagat Singh, Bhim Singh, Man Singh, and the innocent young princess Krishna Kumari. "When other children of her age were busy in merry making, she was at the threshold of the toughest challenge of her life." (Singh 153) Krishna, the young princess of Mewar, was made to pay the heaviest price. She was forced to consume poison to end her life. Jagat Singh realised his mistake, but it was too late. The tragic death of Krishna caused upheaval in Jagat Singh's life. These ominous clouds continued to hang over Jaipur for many years, and Jagat Singh failed to wash his hands of the blood of the innocent princess. He lost interest in Raskapoor completely for the first time. For many days, he led a secluded life. He repented for not living up to his people's expectations and bringing this plight upon his kingdom. After a

long time, he considered reconciling with his wives and mother, especially Fateh Kanwar. "Fateh loved him and forgave him. She decided to be with him." (Singh 173) Those were the most blissful days for both of them; once again, like the early days, they enjoyed each other's company. But this happiness was short-lived, as Jagat Singh died from illness shortly thereafter, leaving the throne of Jaipur in a state of gloom.

After him, Jaipur experienced a period of political uncertainty. Numerous issues eventually arose. The foundations of peace and stability had gradually eroded during his final years in office. The kingdom had to endure the strain of more violent and virulent forces, which, although simmering for some time beforehand, gained frightening momentum following the blunder of Jagat Singh, especially after his death, the most crucial aspect being an heir to the throne. Maharaja Jagat Singh left no legal heir for the throne and Jaipur became a hotbed of unwarranted interference in its internal affairs by all kinds of people. Mohanram, the chief nazir, was one such eunuch. His influence extended beyond the role prescribed for him. He almost controlled all royal matters in Jaipur, even the succession to the throne.

Mohanram, the chief nazir, wanted to declare Manohar Singh, the king of Nurwar, a small state in Madhya Pradesh, as the heir and the next king of Jaipur. Mohanram devised this plan because the king of Nurwar was a minor, and he believed that by doing so, he could rule over Jaipur for many years as a regent and exercise full control over Manohar Singh. His plan failed because Fateh Kanwar was pregnant with Maharaja Jagat Singh's child. Her pregnancy was kept secret to protect her from the evil eyes of the Nazir. Fateh Kanwar delivered a baby boy on 25th April 1819, exactly four months and four days after the death of Jagat Singh.

Consistently guided by her mother-in-law, Fateh Kanwar skillfully assumed the role of queen regent. She began engaging in court politics and actively participated in the decision-making process. Gradually, her efforts yielded results as Jaipur's economic situation started to improve. However, this was only temporary because those she depended on began to betray her for their own benefit. Rupan Daavari and trusted Juntharam, driven by their devious motives, started to undermine her. As she, "liked to trust her people. She was kind-hearted and intelligent. But she was not well-versed in the manoeuvres of power corridors." (Singh 234)

Fateh Kanwar's mother-in-law, Maji Sahib, openly opposed her son and supported her daughter-in-law, knowing of her son's weaknesses. She struggled to find meaning in her existence as she thought to herself, "Are they made only to suffer in this world? Why does a man inflict pain on a woman in his various forms, father, husband, and son, and so on? Why does he have endless capacity to crush his own flesh and blood? Why does he only care for his own desires? Why do the feelings and pain of others not matter to him?" (Singh 110) Despite her inner turmoil, she remained strong and tall, managing the political affairs without her son. She was fully aware that her son was incapable of ruling the kingdom, and with her trusted confidants, she had to take control on his behalf. Consequently, she succeeded in removing Raskapoor in Jagat Singh's absence and imprisoned her. Knowing court politics well, she remained loyal to her duties and expected the same from her daughter-in-law Fateh. When Fateh hesitated to assume her responsibilities as queen regent, Maji Sahib advised her, "You don't take up this role for me, not for yourself, not for anyone on this earth, but only for dharma." (Singh 215) It is this longing for righteousness, devoid of any selfish interests that needs to be the primary trait of the leader, which is seen among women and not men groomed to hold power is the irony as portrayed by Singh.

Rupan Daavari, assistant to Fateh Kanwar, is another woman worth discussing, as she had a significant influence on Fateh Kanwar. Though a fictional character, Rupan has a strong influence on Fateh Kanwar. Singh depicts Rupan as an ambitious woman who quickly learns the tactics of politics. After a troubled childhood—deserted by her parents and assaulted by an unidentified middle-aged man—Rupan enters the zenana as a servant of Jagat Singh. Impressed by her calm manner, Maji Sahib chooses her to assist Fateh Kanwar. Fateh Kanwar, being gentle and kind, considers her a true friend and trusts her completely with the state's financial matters during her regency. However, Rupan becomes greedy and starts to deceive Fateh Kanwar. She is enticed by power and enjoys the political game to the point where she plots to eliminate Fateh Kanwar and her son Jai Singh to gain total control. She ultimately succeeds in her plan. However, Santosh Singh's characterisation of Fateh Kanwar is sympathetic and critical. She portrays Fateh Kanwar's transformation from a naïve girl to a woman who displays immense courage and strength.

Conclusion

Santosh Singh, through her approach to historical fiction, creates a bridge to renegotiate history. She utilises available historical records to craft a captivating narrative. The unique blend of historicity and fictional narration, therefore, highlights the subjectivity of history and questions its authenticity. Since it is important to view historical narratives within the social, political, and cultural contexts, they serve as a bridge connecting the past with the present. This paper also adopts a feminist perspective on historiography. Santosh Singh's historical retelling of the past gives readers a window into the lives of people who lived in a different time period. The challenges faced by people then add to the complexity of the narrative. By allowing readers to see how people lived during specific historical periods, such works enable them to relate to and understand history, as well as gain a sense of their own society within a historical framework (de Groot, 2010, p. 4). Women need to tell and re-tell their stories; otherwise, their perspectives will be marginalised. By merging women's voices and perspectives, we pave the way for a more inclusive and promising future for all.

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