

A COMPARATIVE ESSAY ON A TESTIMONY BY SUGUNAMMA AND JHANSI KI RANI BY SUBHADRA KUMARI CHAUHAN

Key Words: *Sugunamma, Jhansi Ki Rani, Women
Warrior, Women Writer*

ISSN 0975 1254 (PRINT)
ISSN 2249-9180 (ONLINE)
www.shodh.net

A Refereed Research Journal
And a complete Periodical dedicated to
Humanities & Social Science Research

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“Jhansi Ki Rani” and Testimony of Sugunamma in the book “We Were Making History...” are similar attempts by women writers who have tried to retrieve the struggle of women in the Indian freedom struggle and Telangana People’s struggle respectively. The uniqueness of both the texts is that they not only increase women’s visibility as warriors but also as writers as both the texts are written by women. This paper makes a comparison of the warrior image of Jhansi ki Rani and the testimony of Sugunamma, who was a fighter in the Telangana people’s struggle, to explore the gendered images of women in the history.

SUGANDHA SINGH PARMAR

Women’s history is always a question to me. Appearances of Women in the history books are rare. Women in literature and history are often represented with reference to a great man. There are a few attempts to acknowledge the great women in history by some writers but they continue to remain on the periphery of the main stream history. Many philosophers like Foucault has said that the truth is a construction, similarly, history is also a construction by the powerful and dominating groups. We need to critically analyse the characters in the literature and find out the reasons that will explain why they were not deleted from the literature and why other characters were.

“Jhansi Ki Rani” is a poem about Rani Laxmi Bai from Jhansi who fought to save Jhansi from the Britishers who wanted control over the kingdom of Jhansi. The poet, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan describes Laxmi Bai as a strong warrior who fought till the end and killed many Britishers in several Battles. Rani Laxmi Bai became a widow soon after her marriage with the King of Jhansi, and she was left alone. In this period, British government came up with a rule that said that all the kingdoms where there was no heir, i.e., no son (son had to be own son and not the adopted one) to be taken over by the government and controlled by it thereafter. Laxmi Bai strongly opposed this and fought against Britishers for Jhansi. In the end, she was trapped by the British army and then killed by its officers.

S. Sugunamma, whose testimony is the second text, was a part of the Telangana People’s Struggle which began in late 1940s. In the book, she gives her life story which starts with her family, especially her elder brother who inspired her the most. She had explained her experiences of being an undercover messenger as a fourteen year old: a child who felt excited and thrilled to be undercover. Then she explains how she lost all her near and dear ones in the struggle. She also explains her fear in the den from other men in the party who try to take advantage of the only unmarried girl in the den i.e. her, and then she decides to get married. Her struggle continues even after the marriage and begetting a child. She also explains her life after she came back home and after the struggle was over. Unlike Rani Laxmi Bai,

she is not considered an inspirational figure or even a respectable person in the village. She is questioned about her child and the proof of her marriage and her movement even within the village is restricted by her own family. She lives a life of financial and social struggle even after the freedom struggle was over. In this essay, I intend to explore the contrast between Jhansi ki Rani by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan and a testimony by Sugunamma, a fighter in the Telangana Struggle in terms of the their image as a fighter: a gendered fighter.

In the beginning of the poem "Jhansi Ki Rani", Subhadra Kumari Chauhan writes about Laxmi Bai's relationship with the great freedom fighter Nana Saheb which is like that of a brother who played and studied with her. In other parts of the text, she writes a little about her father. Chauhan then moves to her relationship with Jhansi's king. He died soon after their marriage, she writes that Laxmi Bai was in extreme grief when her husband died, which reflects an emotional and a genuine wife figure which was typically expected of a woman in the society of that era and even today. Then the poet moves on to her relationship with British Officers who were her opponents in the Battle field. There is a description of two officers who were defeated by Laxmi Bai and they ran away with fear and horror. They were also astonished at the same time and the reason for this could be that they did not expect a woman to be such a strong fighter. After their first defeat, they tried to persuade and bargain with her but she didn't yield to any of their demands. She was very determined and was not ready to enter into any kind of treaty or contract with them at all. It is interesting to know that even by repeated defeats they didn't submit their defeat rather they attacked her again and then trapped and killed her. Thus, in the poem, Laxmi Bai's relationship with men is largely that of a sister and a 'gendered' fighter. Subhadra Kumari Chauhan repeats a line which shows that she is brave like a man, the lines are, "Khub Ladi Mardani woh toh Jhansi wali Rani thi" (Chauhan, n.d.). The concept of "Mardani" to show how gendered fighter image is constructed is explained later in the essay.

To begin with the analysis of Sugunamma's relationship with men, I would like to mention that her brother is her idol and she brings in his work and activities in Telangana's People struggle very often. Infact, her involvement with the Party could only start

because he enabled her to do so and stood for her. She saw the policemen with hatred. She also hates the Razakars who were killing people, threatening general public, looting shops and raping women. Her hatred for them and her family's experience with the Razakars and the policemen leads her to fight for freedom and so she became passionate in working for the struggle. Sugunamma's brother was a very active member of the Party, and in her life, the most honest man she ever knew. She had a very strong emotional bond with her brother and eventually she saw every man in the party as a brother. She narrates many incidents with other comrades, who treated her literally like a sister and a daughter, those who protected her and made arrangements for her escape and stay. But at one point of time, she realized that when she is all alone when all her well wishers have died; there are many men within the party who are trying to make "use" of her (Lalita et. al., 1989). It is because of this fear that she decides to get married to a man who is almost sixteen years older to her who earlier had asked her for marriage. Though she saw wedlock as a strategy for safety from other men in the Party, she becomes emotional and weeps when she gets the news of her husband being arrested and chances of him being killed. Also, she begets his child, and the birth of her child brings in a fear in her: fear of losing her child and fear of policemen torturing her child to get information out of her. Thus, she develops motherly instincts after the child birth. At the end, when the party was disintegrated, movement was called off, she finds herself very alone, she feels supportless and this is when she realizes her dependency on her brother and other comrades.

Thus, the passion for the fight is present in the texts but it is very much supported by the reference of men in their lives. At every point, their relationship with a man is established. Also, in Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's poem, her relationship is largely focused on her brother and opponents who were the government officers. Her sexuality is very neatly ignored, but her gender is not. As discussed earlier, the poet compares her to men warriors in poem by the repeated usage of "Mardani". "Mardana" refers to bravery of a man and "Mardani" is a gendered term to refer to bravery of a woman. But the term "Mard" means "man", thus using "Mardani" for a woman means bravery of a woman like a man. (Chauhan, n.d.). In the testimony by Sugunamma, the kind of work that was given to her was limited to transferring

messages when she was a child and after that it was writing papers and making stencils in the den. She was asked to stay at the den and do the work inside the den. Even after the movement, she was asked to stay outside the state to be safe. In her narrative, she mentions that she wasn't even allowed to see her brother's dead body for her own safety. The construction of safety and protection by men shows how gender prevailed among the fighters and within the party. Sugunamma begets child and had to take care of the child even when she didn't know how to take care of a child. This is what forced motherhood is. She explains an incident where she was unable to bathe her child and almost kills her by accidentally putting soap in her nose. She narrates,

I got soap in her into her nose and she couldn't breathe and I was stunned – I just kept crying! That man- Gangadharam- took the child to a doctor. He knew nothing about children either. We thought the baby was dead. (pp.90)

From the beginning she keeps on explaining how much she wanted to work for the Party and how much she wanted to be unmarried and even when circumstances are such that to get married was the only option left, she explains "...it wasn't really for marriage- or a married life- it was because I had to marry someone to find a solution to my problems." (Lalita et. al., 1989, pp.88). But after marriage, she eventually becomes a wife who cared for her husband, weeps for him when he is in trouble and after the struggle was over, she settles down with him. Yet another incident is where she feels unsafe in the party itself. She used to see them as her brothers but then she realizes that they don't feel the same way. She was young and unmarried: this was seen as an opportunity by other men to "use" her (pp 87). She started to feel unsafe even in the safe house. This shows that at several points in her life, her gender was reinforced ignoring all other characteristics. We can see how in both the texts, certain things construct their gendered fighter image.

Having discussed the struggle, I take up the issue of the martyrdom of Laxmi Bai and Sugunamma. In this part, I aspire to explore how these women are acknowledged as woman fighter, if at all. I start this part with Sugunamma's testimony. The testimony has been published in the book "We Were Making History..." which was a product of immense research

on women's writings in India that were not present in the history or had been sidelined or intentionally overlooked. This was done by K. Lalita and five other authors who wanted to "locate, and place alongside the great men in the history, the great women who had been 'left out'." (pp. 19). Sugunamma was a part of the Telangana People's Struggle, which is major historical event. There were many other women like her but their participation were omitted from the records and also, their struggle after the movement was never remembered. Even the parties and the comrades never took up their issues as a mainstream problem. Sugunamma worked for the party since she was fourteen, she dedicated her life for party's work but at the end, what she got, was no place of dignity to live. Even her family did not accept her in the way as it was in the earlier days. The attitude of the villagers was also not the same as it was for her brother. Instead of respect, they treated her with suspicion and blames. She struggled for resources like land and money; she was left with nothing but the responsibility of her child. She finally got her husband back but that could not improve her position. When the struggle was over, they had to work hard to survive because they did not have any money or land or anything to ensure a good future. The authors of the book have written that in the pages of history, "only those women ...crossed those pages [who] were the women great men loved, or who through some accident of circumstances, could enter fields customarily reserved for upper class men." (pp.19).

Moving to Laxmi Bai, the poet dedicates a substantial part of the poem to write about her martyrdom. The lines are the following:

*Jao Rani yaad Rakhengey yeh krutagna
Bharatwasi,
yeh tera balidaan jagavega Swatantrata avinasi,
hovey chup itihaas, lagey sachchai ko chahey
phansi,
ho madmaati vijay, mitaa dey golon sey chahey
Jhansi.
Tera Smarak tu hi hogi, tu khud amit nishaani
thi,
Bundeley Harbolon key munh hamney suni
kahani thi,
Khoob ladi mardani woh to Jhansi wali Rani thi.
(para. 18)*

The English translation for this is:

The people of India will remember this debt of yours (O! Rani Laxmaibai), may you be blessed, dear Rani, Your this life sacrifice will awake an indestructible soul of freedom in the people,

History may be made silent or if truth is hanged or killed, or if the drinkers become victorious or if they destroy Jhansi with cannonballs,

You, by yourself be the memorial of Rani (queen of Jhansi) because you had been an eternal token of courage.

From the mouths of the Bandelas and the Harbolas (Religious singers of Bandelkhand), we heard the tale of the courage of the Queen of Jhansi relating how gallantly she fought like a man against the British intruders: such was the Queen of Jhansi. (para. 18, translation by Web World Fobia, 2010)

In the above lines, the author glorifies the image of LaxmiBai, "who fought to retain her husband's kingdom" (Lalita et. al., 1989). But in this attempt of glorifying, she acknowledges the sacrifice by LaxmiBai. In the third last line where she writes, "Tera Smarak tu hi hogi..." (Chauhan, n.d.) , in my views, this sentence is actually radical, breaking the stereotype of gendered image, as it is not relating her to any man, rather it establishes that she by herself will be her memorial. There is no connection made between her and anyone else. She is described as an independent figure that will be remembered as a martyr always. This poem had actually managed to be a part of the school curriculum in many parts of the country till now. Thus, I feel that Chauhan's attempt to credit LaxmiBai in the freedom struggle by glorifying her gendered warrior image and the usage of metaphor as a poetic trope in some of the line like, "Hui veerta ki vaibhav ke sath sgrayi Jhansi me" (in these lines, LaxmiBai becomes a metaphor for bravery), has proven to be successful and powerful representation of a women warrior.

In the end, I would like to bring in the contrast between LaxmiBai and Sugunamma, who were both involved in struggle for freedom and were women fighters. LaxmiBai became a metaphor for bravery and an image that was liked by everyone and is praised even today. But, Sugunamma on the other side, was not respected in her village, treated with suspicion and never liked by anyone in the village. It is something ironical that at one side, I am writing about a nationwide popular image but on the other

side, I am describing Sugunamma's oblivion and both of them dedicated major proportion of their lives in fighting but there is a huge difference in the way the masses perceive them to be.

To conclude, I would write that the construction of LaxmiBai warrior image is glorified by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan in her poem as compared to Sugunamma's testimony. LaxmiBai's physical strength in the battle field is comparable to the struggle that Sugunamma experienced throughout her life: struggle for freedom and then the struggle for safety and survival. Also, the element of gender in the warrior image is constructed in a similar way. Gendering of a warrior has not proven to be very empowering to women as Sugunamma, who came much later than LaxmiBai, also fought like her but never got respect or recognition. It was the project initiative by the authors of "We Were Making History..." which enabled her to bring out her life story in the Telangana People's Struggle. It is important to know the actors behind this kind of ignorance of women in history and even in the present day writings.

I wish this essay could give some insight to the writers who construct or have constructed or are about to construct gendered images of women in history, present or future.

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