

## **A Critical examination of the bonding shared by Lakshmibai and Ellis in the novel RANI.**

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### **Abstract**

“Khoobladimardani, wohtho Jhansi waali Rani Thi.”- Subhadra Kumari Chauhan

Jhansi ki Rani Lakshmibai is one of the most well-known women warriors in the history of India. She was a brave, courageous woman and has inspired millions of people and had an independent personality. Her heart and mind were always for the welfare, emancipation of people of Jhansi. The history will always remember the way she fought against the British company. She got on to the peak of glory that even her foes also admired her courage and smartness. The students are taught about Lakshmibai so that they could grow up with inspiring stories of bravery. Lakshmibai has won the hearts of people for her sagacious approach. She used to invite women from all caste for celebrations like Makarsan kraanthi, Chaithra etc. It was an important step towards social justice. People started to call her “Bhai sab”. It was a bold step which even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century one is scared to take. This paper aims at finding the relationship shared between Rani and Ellis in the novel Rani.

**Keywords:** warrior, friendship, patriotism, bonding.

### **Introduction**

The visual of a woman warrior with child stuck on the back has been immortalized on the film, television, poems and plays. The icon of Rani Lakshmibai, her eyes unblinking seems propelled by some other worldly powers. She is riding horses, taking swords and through her bold decisions and courage we know she is a superwoman. Through the course of the film, we can discover that she is a book lover, a master political strategist, adorable mother and a loving wife. Rani Lakshmibai is a fascinating character throughout the film. We can see her leadership quality as compared to other women in the society of that period. The queen is the ultimate feminist icon who inspires the women to become a sworded individual in the battlefield. When her husband died, she rejected the ritual of Sathi, because her country's needs were the priority. She killed hundreds of Britishers underlining the fact that she is a real-life courageous lady. She is a fearless female, skilled warrior who stood against the British to defend her country.

Taking her age into account she is entirely different both in character as well as attitude from other women. As women, she faced many difficulties as compared to the other women of her age; as age played a great barrier to her duty. But even then, she didn't fail to find remedies for the adversities; she bravely overcomes all the subsequent atrocities. In the coming decades, her life became a subject for discussion and narratives. Indians hailed her as a superwoman and the British pictured her as wicked. Even between all these portrayals she emerged as an epitome not just of resistance but of the complexities associated with being a powerful woman in India. The life of Lakshmi Bai has been depicted beautifully in the novel titled RANI written by Jaishree Mishra and the film MANIKARNIKA directed by Kangana Ranaut and Krish Jagarlamudi.

The novel depicts the evolution of the little girl Manikarnika, called as Mani, to the Rani of Jhansi. The novel begins with the happy childhood of Mani at the house of Peshwa. Her playmates were Nana Sahib and Tantia Toppe and she received education very similar to her male friends. Manikarnika was given in marriage to Gangadhar Rao, Raja of Jhansi at her age of 14 and changed her name to Lakshmi Bai. There were little known facts about her married life in Jhansi but Mishra beautifully portrayed Rani's life with her creativity. Rani was more in a way treated as a friend rather than a wife by her husband Gangadhar. She was a dedicated and devoted wife but he was not made up of the same calibre. Mishra points out that ....sometimes in Rani's sleep she may hear the approaching footsteps, which pull her up from the sleep imagining the coming of her husband. She imagined his visit but he never appeared in her chamber. On the other hand Rani was allowed to interfere with the court administration. The novel also picturizes the historical details about the death of her son who died when he was three months old. This incident later brought them to adopt a son. They adopted a five year old boy Anand Rao, a member of Gangadhar's extended family and named him as Damodar Rao, the name of their departed son. At that time prevailed the system of Doctrine of Lapse. To convince the British that the adoption was proper the local British officials, the political agent Major Ellis and Captain Martin were called to witness the event. During the event, a bill was read stating the treatment of Damodar as their true son and Rani as the regent of Jhansi. But the British East India Company declared that the kingdom of Jhansi would be annexed under the Doctrine of Lapse. Even she played a role of widow, she did not confine within the walls of the Zanana but she was engaged in her duty of protecting her land. It was Major Ellis, the political agent of Jhansi, who gave all his support politically as well as emotionally. There develops an intimacy between Rani and Ellis that relationship is the highlight of the novel Rani. It was portrayed by Mishra as an unexpressed and unfulfilled love story between the Queen and her political agent. The collapse of Rani for private weeping after bidding a final goodbye to Ellis is the best panorama of their love. There are many historical records to prove the factual authenticity for their intimacy compiled with a lot of fiction as well.

Historically, the annexation of Jhansi according to the Lapse happened in 1854, and it led Rani to make a rebellion against the British in 1857. There was a great debate among modern historians on the role of Rani in the rebellion of 1857. Nationalist historians termed

the rebellion as the First War of Independence, when Rani entered colonial memory as a cruel unwomanly killer of innocent woman and children, and tried to paint Rani as anti-British and anti-colonial and tried to proclaim her a symbol of nationalism and patriotic resistance. In this novel, Mishra depicts Rani as a sympathetic woman who even turned over to help the needy, i.e., giving food and shelter to the British women and children, and very friendly with the British officials and their families till something went wrong. This is a sort of characterization of a great queen as someone with a great integrity and balance of judgment. The use of sword was her last choice, till then she used her education and sense to read situations in the right perspective. The novel sketches the warrior queen's powerful life and says she actually, stood for peace and harmony. She was not the one who took the sword at the very beginning, she was hunted by the British for something which forced her to use weapon. Mishra portrays Rani not as the expected fiery and spontaneous heroine but a sensible and matured ruler whose good education pulls her back from the war till she is forced to jump into the war. Till the final moment of war, she even keeps a distance from her childhood friends Nana and Tantia who have intolerance with the Britishers. When the Britishers attacked Jhansi, she was adamant not to surrender before the whites. She took up courage and dressed as a man, took up arms, her son Damodar Rao was strapped tightly to her back. Rani fought back with deathless patriotism and martyrdom. Jaishree Mishra explored her imagination and colored it altogether to create a wonderful character 'Rani'. The historical fiction is a marvelous genre for the writer's to fill the gaps left behind by recorded history. This novel is to explore a woman rather than a warrior. Here Rani is portrayed as an epitome of strong feminism, romantic inclination of Rani and triggers the attitude of women towards their responsibilities.

### **Manikarnika- The Queen of Jhansi**

Jhansi ki Rani is seen as one of the strongest women that India or history has come across with the heart or willpower that can exceed any man's. The novel altogether is a compilation of Rani as a female power as well as a strong warrior. She is a very soft hearted, tender woman with a lot of female touches and a lot of barriers a woman would face in the society. At times Rani comes out of the veil of a tender woman and fights for her people and her thoughts. She is the one who makes her own opinions and with her own decision making, she has come to the forefront of war and rebelled against the British to save her mother land from the ugly hands of the whites. Jaishree Mishra's novel consists of a love episode of Rani and Ellis which creates an unconventional bonding among them, which cannot be accepted by the Indians as they don't want their war queen to be looked down in such a derogatory way. Being a iconoclast of her age, she swept away all the conventions of a typical aristocrat woman and threw away all the fetters that restricted her to be herself. Through the novel 'Rani' and the film 'Manikarnika', we can find a conclusion that the topic of Women empowerment is not something that just started today but centuries before the same was discussed in different styles and manner.

A week after the encounter, Lakshmibai sat alone on her balcony, was thinking about Major Ellis, watching the distant hills turn from purple to pale pink to glorious rosy

amber. Her mind at times speaks to her as a woman and a widow. Absolutely, it was improvident to expect that she, a newly widowed queen, could drift unthinkingly into a friendship with her British political agent in the way her husband had done. Undoubtedly, there may emerge a talk on her conduct if she keeps on with the friendship of Ellis. She has to keep her people in trust and the high opinion of her people mattered more to her than anything else. But on the other hand, she was unable to deny that, even though she was busy with her official matters, and she had the companionship of her son and her father, there was some unfathomable space within her that still waited to be filled.

She sipped her tea, reflecting on how much she started enjoying the company of an English man. It bounced her thoughts on what other women enjoyed in great abundance, was denied to her. She was again in her thoughts about England and she had been spellbound by the picture Ellis had drawn of snow on the field outside his home in winter time. Again her thoughts turned sombre. She had not been blind to the fact that, although Ellis had slowly grown comfortable telling her trivial things about himself; there was still an inner core within him that trapped his real thoughts and feelings. Standing before the mirrors, she brushed out the night-time braids from her hair, imaginary everyone's shock if she suddenly announced how much she too hungered sometimes for the small, mundane, everyday preoccupations that other women were so blessed with; the chance to choose pretty trinkets and bangles for herself from the bazaar stalls, buy favourite foods for her dear ones.... even, indeed, beautify herself while awaiting a lover's footfall in the night.

Lakshmibai thought again of the man she was preparing to meet so recklessly. She gave herself a long look in the mirror, seeing an unnatural glitter in her eyes. Ellis was also aware, without even being cold, of the unspoken understanding between Lakshmibai and him that they needed to be discreet about their morning rides together, the times they lived in were as tremulous and uncertain as the surface of the lake on whose banks they met and a friendship like theirs would only be misunderstood. It had been just over a fortnight that they had been meeting at the lakeside forests to ride together. Ellis could not help wondering at her boldness but realized that her courtiers and people would probably forgive her anything, her popularity in Jhansi being what it was. It was he who would pay a high price if his superiors found out about these unofficial meetings with Rani. Nothing serious was ever discussed during their meetings. Ellis was too conscious to let any confidential information stop and Lakshmibai had seemed to respect that. They had conversations of inconsequential things. Stray memories of childhood – Lakshmibai's of Varanasi and Ellis' of Shropshire. The passing of winter, Prince Damodar's academic progress, each of their first impressions of Jhansi. They told each other the stories that had brought them both together; a younger officer on board a ship for India and a girl travelling in a royal caravan to be crowned queen. Two journeys from different places that now linked them to same piece of land and inextricably to each other.

Mr. Ellis tried his utmost to keep from imagining a closer intimacy with Rani but, under the softly rustling canopies of trees, it was all too easy to picture their world transformed into one where hierarchies and barriers magically fell away. An unexplainable

bond bounded the two into one and there was a magic in their relation which was invested to the core. He also felt that she enjoyed his admiration of her; which was obvious in the sudden downward curve of her lashed when he looked at her and that shy smile playing around the corners of her lips, if he gazed her for too long.

He stood watching her gallop across the escarpment in his direction, her silk scarf fluttering in the wind behind her and entangling with a dark length of hair. Ellis shared his certain weakness had for Old Persian poetry other than painting. Hearing this, Rani welcomed him to the public library in Jhansi which had wonderful collection of Persian manuscripts gathered from all over Hindustan by one of Rani's husband's ancestors. Rani gave her consent to Ellis for turning up on every Thursday afternoon, especially for him. It was usually shut at that time to encourage people to attend the assemblies. It was not merely the Persian texts that offered appeal. His secret hope was that they working in the library would give him further opportunities for Rani's company. He further asked the help of Rani for translating some of the older Persian poetry into English, which was readily agreed by Rani Lakshmibai.

### **A Bonding beyond Words**

It was raining heavily on the afternoon of the first session; Ellis was riding eagerly to meet Lakshmibai. And she was awaiting him under the arches of the old building, accompanied by her archivist. She laughed when she saw the Englishman's dripping figure dismounting his horse and sent her guard in search of towels from the palace next door. But Ellis barely noticed the discomfort of his clamp clothes, he was elated to see that Lakshmibai intended to stay and help him with the translations. Both discussed about a book of Rumis Verses. The conversation came up to the childhood days where Lakshmibai stumbled down by emotions, a girl who lost her mother, at four, which made her days brooded with unhappiness and bitterness. But she was not allowed to miss her mother; she was given the best possible childhood. She mentions her love and gratitude towards her father and Peshwa- sahib for the combined attentions. Sometimes she felt like he gave more love than he gave Nana, Peshwa – Sahib's excuse being that daughters were passing treasures. She ran through the memories and suddenly dropped in the present and asked Ellis to start on with the poetry. Ellis wanted to ask her more about those memories that so animated her but obediently pulled his chair closer to the table to start the work. She was so close that he could smell the sandalwood and jasmine of her skin and hair as she learned towards him. So, as she started to read, he summoned up all his powers of concentration to think of the words to write. She stopped in between for him to write, he could hear her soft breathing, the gentle clink of the bangles on her wrists. He wished that such a moment should last forever. As they slowly worked through the first page, the rain outside gradually stopped. The end of the shower seemed to alter the mood inside the library too. He was expecting the next line from Lakshmibai; she abruptly got up and kept the book aside. Ellis too stood up, confused by Lakshmibai's sudden coldness. She turned away from him, walking swiftly through the musty gloom of the library. He was totally dismayed and surprised at the sudden step of Rani. She very authoritatively begged his leave and reminded

herself for the public assembly. She stumbled out of the library; of course she too might have felt that arc of awareness pass between Robert Ellis and herself, a feeling so acute that made her leave the scene before it weakened her. She was trembling with fear as she thought of how closely she had been observing his hands as he had rolled up his sleeves before the writing, how elegantly she had coming to lose herself. At one point she had even squeezed her palms tightly in her lap to prevent them straying to the table. The chiming of the clock in the hallway reminded her that it was time for her assembly. But she ran towards her husband's portrait instead, standing before it the tears rolled down her cheeks. She always loved this portrait of Gangadhar, she gazed in this picture to calm her restlessness. But today it was his for giveness she sought. Forgiveness for not having mourned him enough, forgiveness for disrespecting his memory; she covered her eyes with her hands, praying with all her heart to somehow find the strength to turn all treacherous feelings away.

Throughout the assembly, it was difficult for her to concentrate on the petitioners. It was all distant figures lapse in and out of a blurred dream like vision. She was unable to focus on them as her thoughts were running for someone else and she felt shame for the same. Later that night, when Sundar had snuffed out all the lights in her Chamber, she again started to feel the lonely spaces wind around her again. Her body turned cold and suffocating, the night was calm and cold, she could smell a storm brewing somewhere which signalled, a forthcoming rain, for which she waited sleepless on the bed. Their meetings became daily on those days and every morning at dawn or in the dusty evening houses, they rode out to meet at the Barhwa Sagar forests. Ellis made his weekly visits to the library and sometimes she joined him there. Their emotions towards each other were never voiced but Ellis took Lakshmibai presence as a sign that she desired his company as much as he did hers. They seem to be very content being unspoken and the weeks passed by, with neither of them willing to do anything that would disturb the surface of the unending depths that lay between them.

Then came the first day they failed to meet since their rendezvous had begun. Ellis had failed to turn up for his appointment in her library. His thoughts continuously revolving round on the paper. He read once again the copy of the letter that had been sent to him, ordering the current resident of Nagpur to take charge as its first commissioner with immediate effect. The fact that the copy was given to him was like a warning that there would be absolutely no room for negotiation on Jhansi. He was thinking over the fact that if Nagpur case had been so easily made, then Jhansi stood no chance at all. Not only Lakshmibai was about to lose her land but it was to be Ellis' pitiless job to wrest it off her.

**Struggling Between the Reel And The Real:** Ellis was completely under pressure. He felt unbearably suffocated. He wanted to contemplate about the fact before she heard about it from anyone else. The next, morning, he was early to their meeting place. Her handmaiden was not in attendance that day, she was alone. She very quickly could understand that Ellis had some sort of bad news for her. She could understand that they are going to take her Jhansi. Her voice was breaking and was completely downed by the gestures of Ellis. All her years of rule and administration have come to nothing. She will be given a pension of six

thousand pounds per annum and some sort of agreement on inhabitation has to be built up. Ellis was so sorry to introduce such things to her and he wanted to comfort her, desperately take her in his arms. But he could not touch her as ever his very touch would sting her. He saw that her chin and her mouth, always so ready to break into a smile had crumpled and puckered. Her eyes, usually dancing with golden lights, were flooding over. But he dared not to move towards her for fear of offending her again. Even though it was a comfort from him, would be too painful for her to bear she took the envelope, Ellis was still holding in his hand, turned on her, heel and returned to her horse without another word, silently and helplessly, he watched her mount the horse in a swift movement before kicking its flanks and riding as hard as she could, back in the direction from which she had come.

Ellis hoping to meet Lakshmibai for the second time formally, after telling her of the annexation order as literally hard for him. He had made many other attempts too for meeting her, but all in vain. After certain procedures in locking the treasure of Jhansi in the presence of Dewan Rao Bande, Ellis decided to return. He rode slowly; with a heavy heart that Lakshmibai was avoiding him. It could not be coincidence that he could not meet her on both the occasions that he had attempted meeting her since the annexation.

Her pain was on many counts. She knew it was illogical to blame Ellis for the annexation and was also aware of how powerless political agents were against the powers of Calcutta and London. She rechecked herself with the conversations she had with Ellis. Lakshmibai realised that even during their morning rides, he was always loyal to his country. She could not even remember even one stray remark he had made against the powers and he had never revealed any kind of unhappiness with the nefariousness of his government. Now, wounded by the latest events, she felt herself terribly wrong. She cursed her folly too in imagining that Ellis would, be loyal to Jhansi merely because of his admiration for her. She felt ashamed of being so close to an Englishman so, unthinkingly when, in fact, they all so obviously held her in such low esteem. Ellis, who was a good companion, always encouraged her to tell things that she had never told anyone before. The thoughts almost filled her by seducing the events where happened that shouldn't have happened. She left deeply ashamed at having allowed her trust to grow in such unseemly directions. She was suddenly furious with herself for allowing the seductive peacefulness of the forests they had ridden in to cause her to forget where she came from; her identity, her culture, her self-esteem and all that really mattered.

Ellis could find that he had fallen hopelessly in love. The love will never bloom, he was like a dying man who had given a handful of water with due warning that it may be poisoned. He was totally devastated and felt merely empty. A person who came to India, who had seen nothing else of the world and had fallen in love with his country's majestic beauty. He was not able to betray his country as well as betray his emotions. Then he thought of resigning the post. When he had offered them his resignation, he had seen both shocked and relieved at the speed they accepted it, though they too were expecting his moving out of India as fast as possible. Ellis closed his eyes, finally allowing Lakshmibai's face to draft into his mind. He tried to remember the pretty smiling face he had fallen in love

which had turned into anger and hatred towards him. He felt for her and thought whether she missed his friendship at all. He had contemplated sending Lakshmibai, a note that informed his departure and his urge to meet her for a last time. But his pride had prevented him from doing so.

### **Conclusion**

In the end, Ellis could not leave Jhansi without seeing Lakshmibai. He went to the court in order to see for her the last time. He announced his resignation from the role of the Jhansi's political agent. Rani was shocked and surprised to hear the decision. Ellis observed her changed tone with a piercing feeling in his heart. She was remembering all her happy times. She hesitantly asked "will you not miss India....and Jhansi?" To this he answered as he will miss many things in this land and he have also missed his country and it feels as though he has stayed far away for too many years and it is time now for him to return to his own country.

Even though Major Ellis was physically in London, but his soul and emotions were for Rani in Jhansi as the commotions were rising in the country. Ellis feared deeply for Rani and thought of returning to Jhansi. But those days, a place on a vessel to India had been prohibited. He went from port to port for a space, but there seemed no recourse. India now had her back firmly turned to him.

Ellis and Rani found a comfort between them which did not exist long. What can be the name given for such a comfort was a matter to be explored. They can't be titled as "mere lovers" because the parameters they built in were not in support to the statement. They were friends who exchanged their happiness and sorrows at different point of time. Two people with different cultures united with their thoughts and observations gains more importance. Their identities and background was not a barrier for them to get separated. But it gave a deep and close harmony for them to build a new path in the name of friendship. The meeting gave them both comfort and solace. They both had a similar wavelength of enjoying the stories of each other. The narration, conversations and meetings paved way for a strong soul- stirring relation between them. The sexual love was not at all a matter of discussion between them; rather the mental condition admired and pampered their bonding.

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