

A Blending Empowerment of Female Masculinity and Redefining Femininity in the Films: “Manikarnika” (The Queen of Jhansi) and “Padmaavat”

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❖ Abstract:

The portrayal of female characters in the Indian films has evolved greatly over the years as the society began to change. This article examines the portrayal of female masculinity and redefining femininity in two notable films, “*Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi*” (2019) and “*Padmaavat*” (2018). These films give gender relations a realistic approach breaking the constraints of stereotypical measures of feminity and masculinity. Using the characters of Rani Lakshmi Bai in the movie “*Manikarnika*” and Padmavati in “*Padmaavat*” this article discusses the construction, performance, and reception of female masculinity in modern Indian cinema.

Most importantly, by analyzing these two films, this paper articulates the

relationship between female masculinity and embodied femininity, and how these characters disrupt traditional masculinity and female roles. Indeed, both “*Manikarnika*” and “*Padmaavat*” offer valuable insights into evolving cinematic representations and broader cultural implications of gender, illustrating how contemporary Indian cinema blends traditional gender roles with empowered, dynamic depictions of womanhood.

Key Words: Female Masculinity, Redefining Femininity, Manikarnika, Padmaavat, Gender, Dynamic depiction.

❖ Introduction

The cinematic landscapes over the years have always been a glass that has mirrored and portrayed societal trends and culture, and as time progresses, this aspect of the movies has improved by depicting and recognizing the empowered female characters who do not conform to the expected feminine norms. Civilization has stereotypically distinguished the feminine role in the cinema, characterized by submissiveness, elegance, and sensitivity, and, on the contrary, the masculine role – is expressed through the signs of power, aggression, and physical force. However, the present generation of cinema has begun to transform these simple structures by presenting characters hence breaking gender stereotypes. This blending of traits traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity is particularly evident in Indian historical epics such as *Manikarnika*: Using historical characters as the central characters in movies like “*The Queen of Jhansi*” and “*Padmaavat*”. Each of the movies presents female characters, who reject the traditional gender roles of a woman and a man, presenting viewers

with ambiguous images of the feminine and the masculine, power, and leadership combined with spitting culture and emotions.

“Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi”, released in 2019 and directed by Kangana Ranaut and Radha Krishna Jagarlamudi recreates the life of the warrior Rani Lakshmi Bai who rebelled against colonial power and societal norms. Rani Lakshmi Bai’s characterization is a confusing construction of female masculinity, which aggressively adapts masculine roles of warfare and political leadership but does not strip off her femininity. Her character is an empowered female character in contact with an aggressive demeanor of battle, thus showing how leadership and strength are not exclusive characteristics of men. Thus, *Manikarnika* rediscovers the potential of feminine identity by combining the qualities of maternal care and warrior-like strength, consequently denying the dichotomous approach to gender roles.

Likewise, *“Padmaavat”* (2018) by Sanjay Leela Bhansali also reinvents the theme of femininity through the figure of Rani Padmavati who is described to be exceptionally beautiful, intelligent, and dignified. Unlike Rani Lakshmi Bai who fights on the front line, Padmavati does not brandish a sword and engages in battles, however, her character is full of strength in decision-making and wisdom and she is loyal to her principles. In the final scene of the film, the decision by Padmavati to commit Jauhar of the women of the kingdom and burn herself to death is a powerful statement for women’s rights over their bodies and freedom controlling the course of their lives. Although it is sad, it is an extreme act of rebellion against male authority and demonstrates the notion of femaleness as strength as it is illustrated by moral and emotional endurance.

Although these two films present a pessimistic view of Indian society, they give two different, but rather contrasting portrayals of empowered women and their

roles in Indian films. While Manikarnika deviates from the conventional male stereotype as she is a female warrior fighting for her people of India, Padmaavat breaks the pre-set female stereotype where a woman, Padmaavati outsmarts and dominates Sultan Alauddin Khilji who tries to overpower her. Collectively, they reflect the increasing diversity present in gender portrayal in the current Indian films and disapprove of the conventional stereotype that the incorporation of male attributes in female characters castrates the femininity of the latter or vice versa. It also depicts how women can have physical power like Rani Lakshmi Bai and how they possess moral power like Rani Padmavati breaking free from traditional gender roles that confine a woman as a passive figure.

This paper will aim to understand how these films fit into that narrative of gender fluidity, of adopting and navigating the more traditional forms of gender to innovate new liberating narratives for women. As such, the hallmark of this paper lies in the comparative analysis of Manikarnika- The Life of Rani Laxmibai and Padmaavat to understand the dynamics of portrayal of female masculinity or redefined femininity in the era of Indian historical epics.

❖ Historical Context and Overview of the Films

➤ *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi*

Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi, directed by Krish and Kangana Ranaut, is a biographical drama based on the life of Rani Lakshmi Bai, one of the most prominent figures of the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Reflecting on the movie, we can see she grows from a young girl called Manikarnika to the queen who fights the British colonization. Kangana Ranaut performed exceptionally well in the

movie and she plays Rani Lakshmi Bai who stands against male chauvinism and comes out as a warrior who leads the revolt against the British.

➤ ***Padmaavat:***

The film “*Padmaavat*” is a historical drama film directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali which is written based on the epic poem *Padmavat* written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi. The film focuses on the period of history revolving around Rani Padmavati: a beautiful, intelligent, and brave queen. The film is dedicated to the themes of honor, sacrifice, and the protection of the kingdom and people; Deepika Padukone occupies the lead position and embodies the eponymous heroine. However, leaving all the controversies over the release of the movie aside, *Padmaavat* reflects the spirit and the power of the main female character.

❖ **Understanding Female Masculinity**

Defined simply, female masculinity is an idea, like that of female masculinity postulated by scholars such as Judith Halberstam, where women portray aspects of masculinity. Some of these traits include assertiveness, physical power, leadership, and hardness to emotions. Considering the representation of ‘female masculinity’ in cinema breaks the gender binary and offers a broader spectrum of portraying the female characters.

The fact that appears to be in both *Manikarnika* and *Padmaavat*, the heroine enacts female masculinity. They are strong-willed, independent, and bold; they present various forms of nonconformity to the stereotypical gender roles, assuming command positions, fighting, and showing unshakable determination. In this way, the nature of female empowerment is intertwined with the possession of male traits to transform the conceptual framework of domination and subordination within the framework of their stories.

❖ *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi*

➤ **Plot Summary**

"Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi: is a 2019 Indian biographical period drama woman-centric film written and directed by Radha Krishna Jagarlamudi and Kangana Ranaut as the lead actress. The movie is the biography of Rani Lakshmibai who was one of the actresses of the Indian uprising of 1857 and against British domination.

Giving an insight into the story, Manikarnika who is fondly known as Manu, is depicted to be a headstrong girl with an inclination towards martial arts in childhood. She is married to the Maharaja of Jhansi, Gangadhar Rao, and becomes the queen 'Rani Lakshmibai'.

One day Maharaja dies and consequently Rani Lakshmibai is left in charge of the kingdom of Jhansi. Nonetheless, she rises to be the queen of her kingdom and takes up the responsibility of leadership in this delicate time. The Govt of British East India Co. sought to annex Jhansi under the Doctrine of Lapse stating that the(ruler) had no direct male heir. Nevertheless, Rani Lakshmibai takes a son named Damodar Rao in her custody and does not relinquish her kingdom. When the climate becomes tense, Rani Lakshmibai takes the role of warrior queen and leads her people against the British. She takes time to train the army also women and she fights with an incredible ability and quite intelligent strategies.

The last phase of the film reflects the fighting scene of the British army and Rani Lakshmibai's fighters. But the British fought fearlessly and after a very stiff resistance, they overpowered the fort of Jhansi. Rani Lakshmibai also leads from the front and continues till her last breath and thus she becomes the symbol of a brave lady ready to sacrifice her life to free India from the British

rulers.

The movie concludes on a positive note by keeping her spirit alive and glorifying the spirit of Rani Lakshmibai as a warrior, a symbol of courage, a freedom fighter against the British, and a woman who rose against British oppression.

➤ **Character Analysis: Rani Lakshmi Bai**

Rani Lakshmi Bai, as portrayed by Kangana Ranaut, is seen as a brave woman who is ready to give her life for her people, a passionate fighter, and a loving mother. It is important to note that her character deviates from the subservient and weak female stereotype; instead, she possesses characteristics of courage, authority, and fighting skills. These are usually male characteristics however they are incorporated into the female personality cleanly.

1. Physicality and Combat Skills:

As the war is considered a man's realm Rani Lakshmi Bai's physical strength is a part of her male persona. Here, she is depicted as capable of handling a horse and a sword, as well as employing war strategies, even fighting the main male antagonists. It must be noted that physical strength and fighting skills are not only viewed as signs of practical utility but can also be a way of regaining power over the colonialists.

2. Leadership and Authority:

The major focus of the movie under analysis is the character of Rani Lakshmi Bai. In essence, the female monarch organizes her kingdom's defenses and goes to war against her opponents with vigor and intelligence. This portrayal deconstructs the history of queenship representation as beings who are seated and immobile in a palace. Rather, she is portrayed as a strong queen who is not only respected by her subordinates but also assisted by her people. Her combat abilities are illustrated in several fight scenes in which she portrays her capability to fight

as well as her soldiers. It breaks the gender paradigm that has been in existence for quite some time and paints a picture of women in positions of authority.

3. Emotional Resilience:

A most prominent feature that stands out about her is her emotional endurance. However, there is much more to Lakshmi Bai's personality, and her character also includes such values as sensitivity and love. Despite such personal losses she seems to have suffered in her life – the loss of her child, the husband, Rani Lakshmi Bai remains adamant in her decision to defend her kingdom. How she can turn grief into strength is a good example of female masculinity since most women who lose loved ones turn into a ‘pile of flesh’ as described by A. Haley in their struggles for freedom. This emotional endurance is inarguably a part of her characterization that brings out her fighting spirit in the kitty of survival even against all odds. Their love interest and her fighting abilities make her a tender and strong woman making it clear that women are not monotonous in the portrayal of masculinity.

❖ *Padmaavat*

➤ Plot Summary

“*Padmaavat*” means a divine other half or companion in Sanskrit is a 2018 Indian epic period drama film produced and directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. Based on the historical tale of ‘Padmavat’ by Malik Muhammad Jayasi this historical drama is set in the 13th century and revolves around the life of Rani Padmavati, famous for her beauty, intelligence, and courage.

The movie starts with Sultan Alauddin Khilji of the Delhi Sultanate played by Ranveer Singh who is depicted as a power-hungry man and a sexual pervert. Listening to the rumors about the incredible beauty of rich Rani Padmavati depicted by Deepika Padukone, a dark-skinned undying king Alauddin Khalji gets obsessed with her beauty deciding to conquer her.

Rani Padmini or Padmavati is the queen of Mewar, married to Maharawal Ratan Singh of Mewar, acted by Shahid Kapoor. During the war, Khilji invades Mewar to capture Padmavati and this leads to a very intense war. However, owing to the sheer strength and onslaught of Khilji's troops Ratan Singh and his army are overpowered.

To maintain her dignity with the values of the kingdom and save herself from the shameful capture by Khilji, Padmavati and the women of the fort perform Jauhar which means self-combustion. At the end of the film, one can get the impression of the 'martyrdom' of two young men who embody the best values of humanity, namely courage and defiance despite the hopeless situation and the oppressiveness of the situation.

➤ **Character Analysis: Rani Padmavati in “*Padmaavat*”**

A female character Rani Padmavati in the movie “Padmaavat” Similar to how Rupali Ganguly embodied female masculinity in Dansom, Deepika Padukone also performs Rani Padmavati in Padmaavat in a different yet equally different manner. While Rani Lakshmi Bai has to fight on the battlefield, Padmavati is a woman with more brains than brawns, a great strategist, and a woman of principles. She is physically described in the text as a skilled archer and a hunter pointing to her strength. However, unambiguously, it is her strategic and leadership role that truly captures her identity.

1. Intellectual and Strategic Brilliance:

Padmavati of course demonstrated righteousness in her principles and her people. Chittor becomes the backdrop when Alauddin Khilji lays siege to the fort in his attempt to capture her, and the beauty shines for

her strategic prowess. Her leadership aspect is also seen when she is bargaining with Khilji and in the process of the bargaining, she does not lose her temper or behave lamely even though she is in a life danger. Her ability to think strategically is the most valuable asset that could be found in her kingdom; this affirms the role of intelligence and resourcefulness in leadership.

2. Moral Courage and Agency

The final scene of the movie where Padmavati commits the *Jauhar* along with the other women of Chittor is very symbolically empowering the women of the Indian society. Although the act of Jauhar itself is the subject of historical and ethical analysis, the film, Jauhar shows it as a final victory and a possibility of choice and therefore the heroine, Padmavati, as a leader who makes such decisions for the welfare of many. Her courage is also moral seen from her readiness to die for what is right and the people she loves.

➤ Blending Empowerment with Masculine Traits:

The film 'Manikarnika' portraying Rani Lakshmi Bai and 'Padmaavat' portraying Rani Padmavati presents an interesting blend of assertiveness that is maleness-oriented. This blending is significant in several ways:

▪ Challenging Gender Norms

It is evident from the films described that both of them undertake to change the established gender roles by presenting women as powerful characters with characteristics of male heroes. Rani Lakshmi Bai's fighting spirit and actual

participation in the skirmishes nullify what was believed to be the ‘proper’ female behavior. In Like the same way, Rani Padmavati has sound tactics, and ethical fortitude to disregard the stereotype that women should be limited to their homes.

▪ **Redefining Femininity**

In this way, the films construct the feminine subject by embodying the representation of masculinity and producing femininity as an acceptable social type. Thus, Rani Lakshmi Bai and Rani Padmavati are not emasculated by the fact of their strength and assertiveness; on the contrary, these attributes help amplify their femininity. They are depicted as humans with this and that, having everything concerning human folks, and these characters transcend the conventional traditional gender roles.

▪ **Empowering Female Audiences**

An analysis of representations of women in mass media: How powerful women are portrayed in mainstream cinema affects the audience, especially women. An aspect such as seeing characters like Rani Lakshmi Bai and Rani Padmavati on screen is empowering because they present model women who can face complex issues with strength and integrity. These portrayals help women to reason they can rise and be great leaders in the future.

▪ **Cultural Implications**

What the representation of empowerment together with female masculinity in these films means culturally is not limited to the screen. It enshrines and participates in ongoing discourses on gender equity and women's rights within Indian context.

▪ **Historical Revisionism**

Through such depiction, the films indulge in historical reconstructionism for which the contribution of women in India’s past is portrayed magnanimously

through figures such as Rani Lakshmi Bai and Rani Padmavati. This change in perception brings to traditional historical accounts, which have previously been colored by masculinity and the dominance of the male gender. In so doing, the films play their part in widening people's understanding of women's contributions to history.

▪ **Representation in Media**

Hence, the accomplishments of Manikarnika and Padmaavat are evidence of a new increase in the demand for movies with empowered women characters. This trend has implications for the rest of the media in that it influences filmmakers to come up with more empowering story plots for women. This means that it is by securing representation of women in the media then one can be able to alter attitudes towards gender roles. These films make a future for other stories that feature the complexity and strength of female characters thus creating a more diverse media landscape.

Feminist Discourse

Overall, female masculinity in these films forms a part of the discourses within the feminist framework in as much as it seeks to empower women to define spaces within the social strata that are customarily associated with the 'masculine' domain. It furthers the idea of powerful feminism which does not encompass only strong and beautiful women but differentiates and gives self-empowerment to everyone. Due to the representation of non-stereotyped male and female characters, the films help to challenge the spectator's perception of gender and power.

▪ **Impact on Indian Cinema and Society**

Empowerment of women along with the incorporation of female masculinity in "Manikarnika" and "Padmaavat" has brought a significant change in Indian

movie industry and society as well. These films have grossed very well in the box office while at the same time creating important social concerns in the portrayal of gender in movies.

➤ **Conclusion:**

The films “*Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi*” and “*Padmaavat*” differ from other movies in Indian cinema that portray women in several ways, yet now we see in these flicks the empowered woman characterized with a mixture of both the masculine and the feminine iconic image. Simplistically categorizing these films under the ‘strong woman’ or ‘woman empowering woman’ or ‘woman against man’ genre fails to capture the complexity of gender portrayal where each of the film’s female protagonists has a different journey, strength, intelligence, and agency in their respective worlds.

In “*Manikarnika*”, the main character Rani Lakshmi Bai epitomizes female masculinity in as much as she assumes man’s functions like a warrior and a political leader. Through her character, continues to show the audience that essential qualities such as courage, strength, and assertiveness are not qualities that belong to men alone but also to women without having to lose their feminine qualities. These features of a vigorous and aggressive character essentially are embodied in Lakshmi Bai, who, starting from the position of a young queen, turns into the defender of her kingdom.

On the other hand, “*Padmaavat*” invents the iconography of the feminine through the character of Rani Padmavati who exudes moral and intellectual power. Still, Padmavati does not wield a sword and does not fight, but her disobedience to the male authority is just as effective. She was right, wise, and strategic in her thinking, proving that power is not only muscle and a sword but

intelligence and right opinion as well. When Padmavati decides to perform '*Jauhar*' she can break the shackles placed on her by male-dominated society to act in a manner that is subservient to male authority. Although this act has been seen to be violent and abusive, given the context whereby it is portrayed, this form of violence is symbolic of a reclamation of agency or female assertion translated to the redefinition of femininity as rebellious, and autonomous.

The two films therefore fit into a broader motion picture dialogue as to how female characters often assume these male and female traits thereby subverting the conventional cultural norms. Thus, "*Manikarnika*" and "*Padmaavat*" uncover the capacity and potential of women, presenting them as fighters and superwomen of flesh and spirit as well as propose the new non-traditional vision of a woman as the subject who is not afraid to fight and die for her ideals, to use her intellect and to govern, having no exclusive belonging to the feminine sphere and being, instead, the universal human subject. Above all, these films mark the change of gender portrayal in Indian cinema, where women are not just subjected to their circumstances but are powerful and progressive, can change their fates and mold the world around them.

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