CHAPTER VI:

Fictional accounts of the Rising from the Indian point of view

The representations of the Uprising of 1857 in fiction, from the Indian point of view, show an interesting development of a consolidated sense of a nation, through the passage of time. India being a multilingual country, diverse in its perception of events and people, when the Rising is portrayed by creative artists belonging to different regions and localities, it creates a tapestry of thoughts relating to a single historical event, and the spirit of resistance is seen to transcend the sense of time and space in the way it enables the formation of an integrated image of the nation. Geographically, the Rising was limited to a certain area in the northern states of India. However, when it is portrayed by various pens from various perspectives, it creates a complexity by universalizing the site of struggle as a symbolic representation of the entire nation, which historically was yet to develop in the context of the 19th century India.

The late 19th century was largely a period of silence regarding the Uprising on the part of India, understandably for the fear of English retribution. The altered nature of British administration in India brought about a number of changes in the social perspective. The dissolution of the titular Mughal empire and the corresponding decision of shifting the British capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi, in a way, perhaps, laid the foundation of
centralizing Delhi in the developing national consciousness of the people of India, and this may have been one of the major reasons in revisiting the rebellion of 1857 from the nationalist point of view in the later years, for during the Rising, the rebels had selected Delhi as the point of concentration.

The Uprising provided an example of anti-imperial resistance at its best probably due to the following reasons: firstly, it was spread over a large area compared to other such attempts such as the Vellore Mutiny of 1806; secondly, being diverse in its nature, it involved a large number of states and thus affected a large number of people across various classes and finally, the memories of the brutal acts of retribution by the British which meant destruction of life and property on a massive scale, were still fresh in the minds of the survivors, either through experience or through folk inheritance. Though there have been innumerable portrayals and references to the Rising of 1857 in 20th century Indian literature, a selective study of a few would reveal the pattern in which the lens of perceiving the Rising gradually began to change and how it came to be applied in order to promote the feeling of national solidarity amongst the masses.

One of the very first representations of this kind was Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gora* (1910). Written five years after the Partition of Bengal, the novel stands unique in its thematic application of the Uprising to comprehend the actual meaning of Indianness. In the hands of Tagore, the tumult and trauma of the period of Rising acquires a shade of cultural transplantation and assumes a larger dimension by interrogating the very concepts of nation and nationality against humanity and love.
Gourmohan or Gora, the protagonist of the novel, is a staunch believer of Hinduism and extremely conscious about ritualistically maintaining his caste as a Brahmin. He detests the English and voices his love for his country thus: "I will not be timid to anybody for the rites, beliefs, principles and the society of the land I was born in. I will accept whatever my country has with full conviction and pride, and save myself and my nation from all humiliation" (Tagore 643). Unlike him, his friend Binoy, is not very rigid about caste and religion. Gora nurtures the dream to serve his country; however, he remains shackled in his own idealism which obstructs him from fulfilling it and renders him restless. No amount of persuasion by his mother Anandamoyee, who does not acknowledge the divisions of caste, can make him take food in her room, since it is served by Lachhamiya, the domestic help who is an outcaste. Gora’s contradiction is revealed when he tells Anandamoyee that she may give away land or pension to her servant as means of sustenance but she must not keep her for work.

Tagore complicates the plot further with the introduction of Pareshbabu and his family who are followers of the Brahmo religion. Born in a Brahmo family himself, Tagore applies dialogic mode through the conversations between Pareshbabu, his daughter Sucharita, Binoy and Gora to highlight the confinements imposed by religious verdicts on human spontaneity. What is mainly addressed all through this novel is the issue of diversity – diversity of faith, thoughts, actions, caste and ideologies. While Gora, with his exclusionary outbursts, retorts every opposition which interrogates the supremacy of Hinduism, Binoy plays a foil to him in embodying all through the basic human values of accommodation and inclusion.
The novel does not elaborately refer to the Rising of 1857 or establish it as the basis of nationalist sentiments. However, the Rising comes to play a crucial role as Gora gets to know from his father Krishnadayal towards the end of the novel that he is not their biological son, but that of an Irishman who died during the rebellion and whose wife too died after giving birth to him at their house, during their stay at Etwa — thereby problematizing the very concepts of nation and nationalism. It would be worthwhile to notice here that Gora is the son of an Irishman, not an Englishman — the reason perhaps lies in the fact that though Tagore was trying to communicate a larger truth of universal humanitarianism, the time was yet not ripe enough to accommodate England as the origin of the protagonist.

Published just a few years after the Partition of Bengal in 1905, which aroused and united the Bengali intelligentsia in anti-British resistance much more directly than the Uprising of 1857, the portrayal of the protagonist trying to fathom the totality of Bharatbarsho as English by birth would probably not have been acceptable to Tagore’s readership. Moreover, Tagore’s familiarity with Ireland and the Irish resistance against foreign suppression might also have influenced his choice of the origin of the protagonist as Irish — since both these nations shared in common the cause of anti-imperialist resistance, as also the search for its own identity and an understanding of itself. With this revelation, Gora is bereft of his sense of national, religious and caste identities in a moment, and it is through this lack or dissolution of the defined borderlines of identity that he attains self-
realization and an understanding of India as separate from the confines of his illusory concept of nation.

Gora learns to accept and accommodate heterogeneity and plurality and in doing so, gets to understand Bharatbarsho. The most poignant declaration of this fact is achieved as he tells Anandamoyee after having returned to her at the end: “You are my mother. The mother I was searching for had been sitting at my home. You have no caste, no discrimination, no hatred – you are the epitome of well-being. You are my Bharatbarsho” (Tagore 925). In this manner, Tagore uses the historical fact of Uprising to interrogate the rigidities of one’s sense of identity – caste, religion and nation. Gora can understand Bharatbarsho when he learns to acknowledge the worth of love as greater than that of birth. Only when biologically dislocated and thus freed from the prejudices inherited thereof, he rises to attain an insight into the profound truth of human existence.

This kind of application of the Rising of 1857 to subvert the very concept of nation and nationality makes Gora a rather interesting text in understanding the rebellion as it came to be represented later in Indian fiction. It would also be worthwhile to remember that Bengal hardly had an active or popular participation in the Rising and so when represented in this light by a leading Bengali intellectual, the novel opened up new realms of thought to the readers by contextualizing the historical event of a different locality into the narrative of a post-Partition Bengal, otherwise discussing the issues of contemporary relevance. In this manner, perhaps, the relevance of the Rising is strewn
into the collective sense of history of Bengal as a state, integrating it with the larger terrain of the actual historical event, as a part of the same land and the same inheritance.

Another fictional representation of immense importance is the short story entitled ‘Shatranj Ke Khiladi’ by Munshi Premchand, written in the 1920s. Depicting the social reality of Awadh during the time of British annexation in February 1856, the story stands out in providing a glimpse of the stagnancy in the lives of the people of Lucknow in times of such immense crisis. It would be worthwhile to remember here that the annexation of Awadh later came to be understood as one of the major reasons behind the outbreak of the rebellion, as most of the sepoys of the East India Company hailed from that province.

Munshi Premchand is a towering literary figure of the late 19th and early 20th century in Hindi and Urdu literature, and many of his writings mirrored and critiqued the social picture of a certain time frame. During his stay at Kanpur, he came to be influenced by the nationalist idealism of certain leaders and in the later phase of his life, the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi also found expression in his writings. His selection of the social reality of Awadh just before the Rising therefore becomes important, not only due to his popularity but also his association with the nationalist events and thoughts of the early 20th century.

In ‘Shatranj Ke Khiladi’, Premchand portrays Lucknow as a city lost in the idle pleasures of nothingness. Reading it as a kind of diseased society and emphasizing upon the
manner in which this sickness engulfed the people, irrespective of class, he writes: “Everyone – from the king to the pauper – was taken by this craze. The situation was such that even the beggars when they were given money, would either get drunk or take opium instead of buying food” (Premchand 03). He describes how the rich would spend their time entirely engrossed in games such as cards or chess and in defence of this practice how they would cite reasons such as the sharpening of the brain or the enhancement of the ability to solve complex situations.

Thus portraying a complete state absorbed in worthless passions, he introduces Mirza Sajjad Ali and Meer Roshan Ali – the two jagirdars who had no practical necessities to think of having inherited huge jagirs and so, spent all their days at the game of chess. They were ignorant of their own domesticities and no amount of rebuke or insult could hold them back from this regular addiction. That they had no honesty even towards each other is beautifully expressed by Premchand at the very beginning, when Mirza in order to pacify his enraged wife tells her what an obstinate man his friend Meer is who compels him to play the game every day, while the latter taking advantage of Mirza’s withdrawal into the domestic interiors, changes the moves of the pieces on the chessboard in his own favour.

Side by side, Premchand describes the administrative deterioration of Awadh saying: “There was complete anarchy in the state. The masses were looted in broad daylight. There was no one to listen to their complaints” (Premchand 09). This simultaneous representation of Awadh from various aspects reveals the destructively stagnant social
reality of the province. He shifts to the story of the two jagirdars and describes how on being insulted by Mirza's wife, they decide to play at Meer's residence from where they are driven out when an officer of the king's army comes looking for Meer and says that he has been called for by the king, as directed by none else than Meer's own wife.

The fear of having to face battle and death makes them decide to continue their routine game of chess away from their respective households in an abandoned mosque near Gomti. It is here that they see the English army marching towards Lucknow to capture the state and the king, which scarcely moves them as they decide to continue with their game. Premchand writes describing the imprisonment of Wajid Ali Shah: "Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was captured and the army was taking him to an unknown place. There was no stir or violence in the city. Not a single drop of blood was shed. Till that day no king of an independent land had ever been defeated in this manner. This was not the non-violence which would draw applause from the gods. This was that cowardice which would bring tears to the eyes of the greatest poets...This was the ultimate limit of political degradation" (Premchand 12).

In these lines, the fact that Premchand was trying to establish emerges distinctly. By depicting the inaction and sloth of Awadh in 1856 at this peak of Indian nationalism in the 20th century, he was perhaps trying to draw a line of distinction between non-violence and cowardice. It is well-known that Mahatma Gandhi's ideals of non-violence and Satyagraha ushered in a counter-discourse of anti-imperialist resistance into the nationalist scenario. Premchand himself had progressed from extremist ideals of Bal
Gangadhar Tilak to the realms of tolerance introduced by Gandhi. Probably, in writing about the quietness of Awadh during the annexation in 1856, he was trying to bring alive the memories of a not-so distant past in order to promote the nationalist instinct among the common people by exhibiting the shamefulness of lethargic inaction and contrasting it against the strength of non-violent protests which could only be induced through an intense patriotism towards one's own land, one's own nation.

The story progresses as the two *jagirdars* gradually engage in a verbal conflict over victory and defeat in the game of chess, and begin to abuse and blame each other in the process. Eventually, they draw out their swords and the story ends with Meer and Mirza killing each other. Premchand writes describing the pathos of the scene: "the people who did not shed a drop of tear for their king, sacrificed their lives to save their bishops in the game of chess", and concludes: "It was getting dark. The board was set. The two kings seated on their respective thrones were as if crying upon the death of these two brave heroes" (Premchand 16).

The satire implicit in these lines makes its presence felt all the more as Premchand paints in front of the readers the darkening skies of the city of Lucknow. This darkness, however, seems to be metaphorical. The two kings may be read as representing two different threads of nationalism, while the corpses of Meer and Mirza symbolize the futility of lives lost in mutual differences and petty confusions as masses perish in the web of personal passions and the sky is overcast with the darkness of foreign rule. The
annexation of Awadh is thus re-contextualized and the story ends with a silence which historically anticipated the Rising.

‘Shatranj Ke Khiladi’ was later made into a film by Satyajit Ray. Unlike Premchand, Ray focuses equally upon the jagirdars and the annexation of Awadh. The game of chess played by Mirza and Meer becomes a symbolic representation of the continuous political tensions between the Company and Wajid Ali Shah, and the subsequent transfer of power. It is also interesting to note that in Ray’s film, the jagirdars do not die at the end but sit down to play a new game of chess, this time as per the English rules, hinting at the transitory nature of power. The making of this short story into a film during the era of the national emergency in post-Independence India necessitates a re-thinking upon the nature of the fictional piece which could be thought of as a means to reach out to the common people, through two different mediums of representation, during two extremely different but immensely crucial phases of India as a nation.

Another revolutionary representation in this line was the long narrative poem called ‘Jhansi Ki Rani’ written by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan in 1928. In the realms of literary representation, the Rani of Jhansi has probably received more attention than any other figure directly involved in the Uprising of 1857, and the reason behind this perhaps lies in the fact that she was a 19th century woman in India who, in taking up arms against the British rule in the battlefield, had challenged and subverted the gender stereotypes of both the nations. Rani Lakshmibai was for the first time represented in fiction in Bengali by Chandicharan Sen, as early as 1888. However, it was perhaps too early to establish her
heroism as patriotic and nationalist. Apart from this, a biographical account of Lakshmibai was published by Dattatreya Balwant Parasnis in 1894 and elaborate references were made to the Rising in Jhansi in Vishnubhatt Godshe's *Majha Pravaas*, published in 1907.²

In English representations such as the play entitled *The Rani of Jhansi or the widowed queen* written by Alexander Rogers Westminster in 1894, Lakshmibai was portrayed in a derogatory manner, as an Indian queen alluring a British officer in order to save her kingdom, but this did not create much protest from the Indian quarters. However, when an attempt of the similar sort was made by Phillips Cox in 1930s, it received vehement opposition from the people of India, as by that time, the image of the Rani as a patriot had already been incarnated amongst the masses.³

The poem by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan stands unique in the point of view from which it treats the Rani of Jhansi. Born in Allahabad, Chauhan was the first woman Satyagrahi to join the nationalist struggle and had been twice jailed for her participation in the nationalist movements. Her poem of 125 lines, traces the life of Lakshmibai in an epical manner in rhymed couplets, and serves as a clarion call encouraging the participation of women in the nationalist movement equally with men, through the iconization of Rani Lakshmibai.

The first stanza recollects the ambience of India during the Rising of 1857 as the era when the people had come to realize the worth of the lost independence and refers to the
glistening sword of Rani Lakshmibai among the other heroes. Rooting the legend of the Rani with the consciousness of the masses, Chauhan writes: “Bundele harbolon ke muh humne suni kahaani thi/ khub lari mardaani who to Jhansi wali rani thi” (Chauhan 01). The reference to the local minstrels who kept the story of Lakshmibai alive through their oral narratives suggests her popularity amongst her own people while the epithet “mardaani” literally means ‘like a man’, thereby implying how Lakshmibai had overcome the limitations of her biological sex to unite with the men equally in all her strength and valour in order to fight for the freedom of her land.

It would be significant to note here that these two lines are repeated at the end of each stanza as a refrain all through the poem. The reason seems to lie in the fact that in uniting the tales of Lakshmibai and her deeds with the local people her existence is rooted and authenticated historically, while at the same time, the impetus of a mass movement is bestowed upon the narrative as the heroism of the Rani is celebrated by the common people and not just any particular class, thereby integrating her image with the soil of the land. Similarly, in equating her strength and courage repeatedly with the men, the poet’s intention as an activist herself was probably to inspire the women of India to join the nationalist struggle through the example of the legendary Rani Lakshmibai.

The second stanza describes the childhood of Lakshmibai and addresses her as the playmate of Nana Sahib of Kanpur. She is established an exceptional girl, right from her childhood, who knew the heroic tales of Shivaji by heart and had weapons like the sword and knives as her friends. The third stanza continues an elaborate description of her
childhood sports which included mock-battles and war planning. That these extraordinary traits might alienate the image of the Rani was also perhaps on the mind of the poet and therefore, here one finds her looking upon Lakshmibai as an incarnation of Lakshmi or Durga and an ardent devotee of Bhawani – the Hindu goddesses symbolic of power and wealth. In doing so, her outstanding capability is enshrined within each household and therefore the seeds of such potential are conveyed as culturally inherent in the women of India.

The fourth stanza provides a description of the marriage of Gangadhar Rao and Lakshmibai as an engagement of wealth and courage. The match is idealized by referring to the mythological couples like Shiva and Bhawani, Arjun and Chitra. Probably since Chauhan's agenda was to iconize Rani Lakhsmibai, the complexities of the marriage and the historical realities of the same are not taken into consideration by her. The very next stanza relates the death of the king and the widowhood of Lakshmibai as "teer chalaane wale kar mein usey churiyaan kab bhaai/ rani vidhva hui haay! vidhi ko bhi nahi dayaa aai" (Chauhan 02). In doing so, the grief and shock of this incident is summed up as the preordained predicament of fate, as this unique girl was destined for a higher achievement.

The next stanza describes the annexation of Jhansi by Lord Dalhousie as per the Doctrine of Lapse. Nevertheless, historical facts are compressed as right after the death of the king the English army is said to have taken control of the province almost as a legitimate heir. The usurpation of Jhansi is linked with the recollection of how the English had arrived at
India as traders, relying upon the mercy of the rulers and how gradually it had developed into the ruthless dictator thereby reversing the norms of hierarchy and had now come to dominate even upon the nawabs and the kings.

In the eighth stanza, Chauhan constructs an imaginary notion of India by describing how the English had now come to exercise complete power over various states such as Nagpur, Udaipur, Tanjore, Satara, Sindh, Punjab, Bengal and Madras. While the 20th century readership could relate to the truth of this picture in their own time, one can see that the same feeling of usurpation as in Jhansi did not hold true for Bengal or Punjab or Madras in the context of 1857. Thus in blending the time-frames of the past and the present, Chauhan obliterates the lines of historical actualities and creates a picture of an integrated nation with the aid of this slippery logic. Jhansi thereby becomes the microcosm of the entire nation in the rest of the poem, and in the next stanza the scene of cultural humiliation is established completely through the line “yon parde ki izzat pardeshi ke haath bikani thi”, literally implying how the respect of the Indian women kept secluded within the houses finally came to be lost at the hands of the foreigners, in order to promote feelings of national solidarity (Chauhan 03).

The tenth stanza describes the feeling of humiliation affecting the entire nation, including the common people as well as the sepoys, and the call of Nana Sahib to Rani Lakshmibai in order to accompany him in this battle against foreign rule. The next stanza begins with “mahalon ne di aag, jhopri ne jwala sulgai thi/ ye swantrata ki chingari antartam se aai thi”, thereby uniting the spirit of resistance against the colonial power across all classes

167
In doing so, Chauhan successfully constructs an image of a unified nation rising in rebellion against the British and thus re-contextualizes the Rising as a befitting precedent of the nationalist movements in India during the 20th century. This process of historicization of the Rising is completed in the twelfth stanza where the leaders of this period are mentioned as martyrs who sacrificed their lives for their nation, and Chauhan adds “lekin aaj jurm kehlati unki jo qurbaani thi”, thereby contemporizing the rebellion through the very fresh memory of the enforced Indian silence over this historical attempt for the fear of English retribution (Chauhan 04).

In the thirteenth stanza the battle between Lakshmibai and the English at Jhansi is described. However, history is manipulated as the fact that the Rani was defeated and thus moved on to Kalpi, is not mentioned anywhere. Even at the battle of Kalpi, Lakshmibai is portrayed as victorious and moving on to Gwalior to take control of that city ruled by Scindia, who was a friend to the British. Through the description of this journey of Lakshmibai from one state to another, without a mention to the defeats she had faced as the reason behind the same, she is portrayed as a figure leading this battle of resistance against the English in the context of multiple states, thereby obliterating the actual fine lines of provincialism prevalent during the Rising of 1857.

The fifteenth stanza records the mention of the two female companions of Lakshmibai in the battlefield – Kana and Mandara, and this again serves as a mode of inspiration to the women of 20th century India to join the nationalist struggle for independence against foreign rule. The next stanza describes the mortal wound which Lakshmibai received in
course of the battle and in her death the metaphor of a lioness is used to describe her who was fated to become a martyr in this war for freedom. Her funeral pyre is compared with a divine carriage meant for the final journey of a woman who was in fact an incarnation of the much familiar Hindu goddesses of power and fury. The intention of the poet emerges clear as she writes: “humko jeevit karne aai ban swantrata-naari thi/ dikha gayi path, sikha gayi humko jo seekh sikhani thi”, which iconizes Rani Lakshmibai as an example for every Indian woman who must now learn to raise her voice and follow the path shown by Lakshmibai in dedicating her life for the cause of the freedom of her nation (Chauhan 05).

The poem concludes with a celebration of the spirit of Rani Lakshmibai and saying that even if Jhansi is eradicated by foreign aggression, she will continue to live in the memory of the people as she herself is the symbol for that indomitable spirit of protest and resistance, which remains immortal. The popularity of this single poem still remains unsurpassed and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan is best known for this piece, which is treated an invaluable contribution to Hindi literature. It would be worthwhile to mention in this regard that Chauhan’s contribution to the freedom struggle was acknowledged posthumously by naming a ship of the Indian Coast Guard after her and a commemorative stamp was issued by the Indian Postal department to mark her 72nd birth anniversary in 1976. Even today this poem by her forms a part of the textbooks of school children as they learn to perceive Rani Lakshmibai through her portrayal of the legendary queen.
Mahasveta Devi’s biography of Rani Lakshmibai entitled *Jhansir Rani* was first published in 1956 and later translated into English by Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta in 2000. This representation of Lakshmibai is perhaps one of the very first texts looking upon the life of the young queen after the attainment of political freedom in India. It stands out in defying any particular categorization as it weaves together history – written as well as oral, fictional accounts and the perspective of an Indian woman striving to arrange in order the narrative of a young female ruler from a past enshrouded in the mystery of de/glorification. Significantly, the book was published just before the celebration of the centenary of the Uprising as the first war of Indian Independence by the Government of India.

In the Preface to the book, the author mentions the hardships she had to face in writing this narrative due to the complete absence of any factual records other than those of the English historiographers. The section of the book called the Background familiarizes the readers with the sentiments of the local people towards the Rani even then – after the passage of a hundred years. Relating the various popular myths and legends about the Rani which the people of Jhansi would narrate, Mahasveta Devi writes: “If for a hundred years ordinary people have known that in her hands, soil turned into brave soldiers, wood became swords, and mountains got transformed to speedy horses, what kind of a woman could she have been?” (Devi xv). The biography thereafter becomes a probe into this question as it relates the life of the young queen and everything that she did for her people which had immortalized her spirit in their day-to-day lives.
Having related historically how Jhansi came to be ruled by Gangadhar Rao, the author describes the life of Moropant Tambe and his wife Bhagirathi Bai who had a daughter named Manikarnika, or Manu. The uniqueness of Mahasveta Devi’s narrative lies in the manner in which she continuously transgresses the role of the author by breathing into the biography her own subjective observations and musings, and thus obliterating the objective distance between the author/narrator and the narrative. One of the earliest and perhaps one of the most touching of these instances is found when she writes about the death of Bhagirathi Bai, Manu’s mother: “Manu was a little girl of two years, and didn’t understand anything – all she knew was that her mother had gone off somewhere decked out like a queen, lying on a flower-covered bed and dressed in colourful clothes. She spent many nights and days missing her, and she would sleepily reach out for her, but her hand only found the emptiness of the bed, and her mother never came” (Devi 19). In doing so, infant Manu is humanized through the spontaneous feelings of the author and the readers begin to comprehend her life through the shared empathy of the author which simultaneously liberates her from the shackles of historical distance and complexities.

The author traces the details of eight-year old Manu and her relation with Gangadhar Rao who was twenty nine at the time of their marriage, and refers to the well-known story which says how the young Manu asked the priest to “tie the knot carefully now” during the rituals, followed by her being renamed as Lakshmibai, the queen of Jhansi (Devi 22). Mahasveta Devi describes the relationship between Lakshmibai and her husband as one of love and understanding as Gangadhar takes care that Lakshmibai is trained “to become truly worth of the royal family” (Devi 24). The account of this marital relationship,
however, varies in Vishnubhatt Godshe's recollections where the king is said to have been a tyrant who kept Lakshmibai in confinement all through his life.4

The author acknowledges that "very little is known of the Rani's life" and depends upon the descriptions of Govinda Chintamani Tambe, the nephew of the Rani, who "had heard about the Rani ever since his childhood in his grandmother's lap" (Devi 26). It is from him that she comes to gather knowledge about Lakshmibai's action, behavior, speech and other minute details – things which "are of importance when it comes to understanding someone's personality" (ibid). It is interesting to note how Mahasveta Devi continuously refers to the unofficial sources of history to create a sketch of the legendary figure of Rani Lakshmibai, thereby introducing an alternative discourse into the realms of academic and creative considerations.

The death of Lakshmibai's child and the subsequent illness of Gangadhar Rao are recorded thereafter and the author provides a very caring image of the Rani as she writes "the Queen herself was constantly by his bedside to provide comfort with her solicitous attentions" (Devi 30). The adoption ceremony of Damodar Rao is described along with a reference to the repeated letters requesting acknowledgement of the child as his legitimate heir written by the ailing king to Major Ellis, the English representative in Jhansi, before his death.

The chapter ends with the death of the king, as the author observes: "the waters of Lake Lachhmital still strike the east side of that wall in wave after wave. Gangadhar, resting in
peaceful repose among the murmuring of leaves and waves, will never know about the descendants of his adopted son, who carry his name to this day and live in Imli Bazaar, in Indore. But none of them are princes anymore” (Devi 37). This personal observation of the author/ narrator not only enhances the pathos of a historical misfortune through the poeticality of flowing prose, but also enables the readers to comprehend the same by almost contemporizing the death of the king by creating a bridge between the glorious past and the nondescript present.

Mahasveta Devi traces a list of the correspondences between Lakhsmibai and the East India Company, and states how Major Ellis became a regular visitor to the court. She adds: “...Ellis received an impression of the Queen’s personality and his respect for her developed. A human bond was emerging between the ruler and the ruled” (Devi 47). This bond gained many shapes in the hands of the creative artists later, and Mahasveta Devi refers to such English representations called The Rane and Seeta in which Laksmibai was portrayed in a derogatory manner by the respective authors and adds “happily, Gillian’s The Rane and Meadows Taylor’s Seeta, never became popular even in England” (Devi 56). However, this subject was yet to be explored and given a form from the Indian point of view, which was later done by Jaishree Misra in her novel entitled Rani (2007).

When Dalhousie rejected the adoption plea of Jhansi and ordered annexation of the state, Mahasveta Devi records the famous reaction of Lakshmibai thus: “Meri Jhansi doongi nahn” (Devi 57). It would be worthwhile to remember here that this incident is oft-quoted in narrating the life of Rani Lakshmibai as this declaration by her stands unique in
voicing the first ever resistance from an Indian ruler, and in this case, the ruler being a 19th century Indian woman, this subverts the gender stereotype effectively. The author then beautifully glides through time into the present and depicts “the old man who roasts corn over a charcoal fire in the outskirts of Jhansi” and is unaware of all these historical details, as he shakes his head to the recitation of a poem about the majestic Lakshmibai by his granddaughter (Devi 58). This shifting time frame is wonderfully used by the author to incorporate the transitoriness of contexts and people and contrast it against the everlasting fame of Rani Lakshmibai, in and around Jhansi.

Historical authenticity is retained in the narrative as the author records “despite her proud proclamation of Jhansi's annexation, the thunderstruck Queen was compelled to accept the decision. The fort went into British possession” (Devi 64). The treatment given to Lakshmibai by Mahasveta Devi is one of empathy as she reads into the mind of the Queen, looking for reasons which might have persuaded her to participate in the Rising and portraying her sorrows, her sense of injured self-esteem in a manner arousing the emotional interest of the readers. Forecasting the outbreak of rebellion at Jhansi thus, she writes: “the world would see that the Queen did have an identity which was different from that of a vegetarian woman preoccupied with religious duty, who was overflowing with gratitude at the mercy of the English and was only an unworthy representative of an eroding feudal system” (Devi 74).

The contribution of Mahasveta Devi towards voicing the cause of the marginalized subaltern has been vivid in her works from time to time. In Queen of Jhansi she is seen to
link up the various causes of unrest and anger within the people of India in order to form the consolidated picture of a nation. She includes not just the rulers and the sepoys but also the peasants, the Santhals of Chhotanagpur and Rajmahal along with the various tribes such as the Kols, the Ferajis and the Moplas, thereby exclaiming “tortured and oppressed, our motherland, was paying with the blood of millions of her children. How can a mother stand by and not save her children? So, she cried aloud and sounded the battle cry” (Devi 77). That she perceives the reality of the Rising here through the 20th century consciousness of a larger nation and nationality is clearly discernible. However, given the fact that the novel was published in 1956 – just a year before the celebration of the centenary of the Uprising, and that throughout her narrative, she moves between time past and time present, a bridge between the 19th and the 20th century is effectively constructed which enables her to thereby establish the Rising as “the first conscious uprising against the English, and India’s first struggle for freedom”, by linking it with Mangal Pandey and the union of the sepoys at Delhi under the seal of Bahadur Shah Zafar (Devi 77).

Tracing the developments at Jhansi after the death of Gangadhar Rao, Mahasveta Devi provides an account of how Rani Lakshmibai tried to keep the English authorities informed about the prevailing scenario but never received any response. Referring to the episode of the Englishmen and women killed by the sepoys at Jhansi, the author recollects how “the Queen made arrangements to bury the dead English” and regrets the English point of view which later held her guilty of the massacre (Devi 95). She quotes the letter of Major Erskine requesting her to “take charge of Jhansi on behalf of the
British government” and reveals how the same man began mentioning her as the “Rebel Queen” in his correspondence with the British administration, at the same time (Devi 102-03). It is on having this letter from Erskine that Lakshmibai began to take control of the administrative and military affairs of Jhansi and raised a women’s troop “disregarding caste and religion” (Devi 107). Discovering the birth of a much contemporary tradition in this act of the Rani, Devi adds “we can be rightfully proud that 100 years ago an Indian woman pioneered this glorious tradition”, thereby immortalizing the thought and vision of the young queen in linking it with the presently acknowledged facts of global history (ibid).

According to Mahasveta Devi, it is when Lakshmibai gets to learn of Erskine’s duplicity that she assumes the entire responsibility of her state and the author records “the red flag of Jhansi Fort flew over the skies of 1857 with unbounded pride, as if personifying the agitation of millions of Indians” (Devi 116). It would be worthwhile to notice how the author glides the local into the national in holding the flag of Jhansi as a metaphor of anti-Imperialist resistance in India. In doing so continuously through a narrative of more than two hundred pages, she successfully creates a nationalist symbol out of Jhansi and a national icon in the life of Rani Lakshmibai.

Mahasveta Devi continuously refers to the records of Vishnubhatt Godshe Versaikar in recreating the lives and times within Jhansi before and after the outbreak of the rebellion. Nevertheless, the fact that her narrative is different from the previous accounts in being written by a woman emerges clear as she observes “the Rani’s personality had not found
full expression when her husband was alive”, and breathes life into a historical name by describing her as an efficient administrator, intelligent ruler, competent warrior, caring queen and loving mother, through a detailed description of her regular routine (Devi 117). Of the faith and trust placed by the people of Jhansi in their Queen, the author writes — “The people of Jhansi realized that...a woman whose vermilion bindi had been wiped off her forehead by widowhood, whose mangalsutra had been torn off her neck, whose fatherless son was deprived of his rightful inheritance, had not taken to fighting motivated by a desire for her own personal success” (Devi 148). This shifting point of view of the omniscient narrator from the Queen to the natives of Jhansi to the author/reader of the post-independence 20th century is what lends the sweeping quality to the narrative technique of The Queen of Jhansi.

While history has perpetually ascribed the role of violence and aggression to man in the rise and development of civilizations through multiple wars and conflicts, the role of the woman has always been constructive in preserving and nurturing life through moments of immense crises, far away from the battlefield. The role played by the Englishwomen during the rebellion of 1857 provides a glimpse of the same fact. That Mahasveta Devi explores the life of Rani Lakshmibai from this angle, is seen as she elaborately describes not just the valour of Lakshmibai against the English during the war but also the manner in which she tried to preserve the lives of her son Damodar, her family, as well as the people of Jhansi by concentrating not only upon the war strategy but also upon the repair of the damage caused to the fort during the rounds of continuous firing, so as to retain the security of the province and in the process, created an example of unity as people worked
night and day to save their land from the foreigners. She records the astonishment of Hugh Rose thus: “Every evening, Hugh Rose would note happily that there were cracks in the walls of the forts and the Indian batteries had been devastated by his cannons. But the Queen’s masons would somehow repair it all overnight under cover of black blankets. Wet sandbags lined up against the walls of the fort and it helped resist the cannon fire” (Devi 165).

Having described the tremendous battle at Jhansi and the Rani’s decision to flee Jhansi with her son in order to join Tantia Tope and Nana Saheb at Kalpi in their fight against the British, Mahasveta Devi refers to the brave female warrior of Jhansi named Jhalkari Korin – the subaltern who scarcely found mention in the mainstream records of nationalist/imperialist historiography, but who is known to have fought the British along with Lakshmibai and who later posed as the Queen in front of them during the siege of Lucknow so that they could not follow Lakshmibai, but was unfortunately, identified and killed. She also refers to Ganga, Mandar and Kashi, the companions of Rani Lakshmibai who accompanied her to Kalpi and were with her till the end in this struggle for freedom against the British.

After the defeat at Kalpi and the subsequent move to Gwalior, there is a distinct tone of disillusionment in the narrative voice as she narrates the celebration of the Peshwa rule announced at Gwalior with the crowning of Nana Saheb. It is here that the author transcends the line of objective distance between the Queen and the narrator once again in portraying Lakshmibai standing alone on the veranda and wondering “Is this why
thousands of people of Jhansi gave up their lives? Is this why they fought?”, and further adding “the Queen’s fearless spirit apprehended the worst. Like many other heroes of the world, she felt completely alone” (Devi 229). Through this heroic isolation of the Queen from the others, the author achieves an elevation of the protagonist compared to the others through this intimate emotional bond which she shared with her very own people and thus the feeling of loss she goes through amidst the jubilations thrust upon her as a part of a group politically united, but subjectively miles apart in their perception of right and wrong.

The author describes thereafter the heroic battle and the death of Rani Lakshmibai, and writes of her funeral pyre: “with the flames raging and the wind sighing, all hope of freedom of the many thousands who had sacrificed their lives, were turned to ashes” (Devi 244). The novel then traces the fate of the rebellion and that of Damodar, guarded by the loyal companions of the Queen even after her death. Mahasveta Devi continues with “there’s always more to tell even when the story has ended” (Devi 250). In doing so she brings up the part of history which remains mostly neglected in mainstream historiographic records. She refers to the rumour that “the followers of the Queen who were still alive met every year at the Kumbh Mela”, relates the atrocities and tortures to which the rebels of the Uprising were subjected, and grieves the fact that “history is totally silent on them” (Devi 255). She further narrates the life of Damodar Rao thereafter and describes him as “a pawn of history” whom “destiny had toyed with” and compelled to live the life of “an orphan while his biological parents were alive” (Devi 256).
Mahasveta Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi* stands as an exception to the endless list of representations in the way she weaves the story of a nationalist resistance into the narrative of Jhansi and Rani Lakshmibai, and traces the chapters, moments and people lost down the cracks of mainstream historiography. Her empathy with the Queen relocates the dauntless courage and restores the immortality of the spirit of Lakshmibai who is linked up with the present as the woman who stood singular in her integrated resistance against British oppression and her love for her land and people, thereby exemplifying a true leader standing out amongst the beaten down history of 19th century India.

Utpal Dutt’s *Mahavidroha or The Great Rebellion* (1973) is yet another outstanding contribution to the later 20th century Indian representations of the Uprising of 1857. Applying to the rebellion the views and analyses of Karl Marx, Dutt’s dialogic mode of representation explores the Rising as a social reality of the nation, the grounds for which were being laid slowly but firmly by the increasing British domination over the land and the people. He complicates the historical event by weaving into it possibilities relating to one’s own identity and exploring relationships between the natives and the foreigners from various points of view, and in order to do so, he blends fact and fiction as some of his characters are taken from the pages of history and some are created to represent the voices of the anonymous heroes who never found a mention in the historical archives.

Divided into nine scenes, the first scene of the play is set in the year 1840 and depicts a village named Ghaziuddin, near Delhi. Amin Panjakush, the historical Urdu writer in the
Mughal court is seen to wait for the Commissioner beside Budhan’s family, who are weavers by profession and lead a life of immense poverty which doesn’t even allow them to buy wheat for their food. Through the conversation between them Dutt puts forth a picture of the 19th century India divided by the strict lines of class where the rich scarcely knew about the lives of the poor and voices the same through Budhan, who says to Panjakush: “You never bothered about the villages in your territory. You lived in Delhi and read your books” (Dutt 137). The gap between the two classes gains more prominence and serves as a metaphor of the factual social picture as Panjakush tells Budhan his tattered robe is made of brocade and was given to him by his uncle Wajid Ali Shah, and the latter replies: “You cannot put stitches on freedom torn. Nor can you bring back the past with a darning needle” (Dutt 137).

Gradually it is revealed that Budhan’s family has been summoned here in order to shut down their spindle as their cloth is better and cheaper than that brought to the market by the British and thereby causes heavy losses to the Company. While Frazer, the official of the East India Company says that “India is an agricultural country” and orders the looms to be shut down, Panjakush voices the other side of reality as he retorts “You are destroying the manufactures of this country, reducing it to absolute dependence on agriculture. You are trying to set its history back by a few centuries, to destroy its civilization” (Dutt 142). The scene ends with Budhan’s right thumb being cut off, his son Bishen fleeing the place, and his daughter-in-law Kasturi telling his grandson Kalu: “Listen, Kalu, you’ll have to go away to distant lands, change your name, take on
another. But wherever you go, no matter how many years pass, never forget this day” (Dutt 143).

In dating a play representing the Rising of 1857 back in 1840, Dutt reveals how the discontent and anger against the East India Company was latent amongst the people since long back and thereby portrays the cartridge affair mostly held responsible for the outbreak of the rebellion as just another incident which led to the final outburst. This setting in the first scene also acquires in his hand the shape and form of the complex plural identity/ies of the sepoys who hailed from different social classes and finally had to join the Company’s army for their livelihood. As for instance, in the second scene, through a correspondence of letters between Kasturi and her son Kalu (now Lachman Singh), it is seen how he is carving out his new identity from a batman to an English officer to a sapper, through various English wars under the guidance of the historical General John Nicholson, over a span of 16 years – from 1840 to 1856, until he is finally sent to Meerut to join the regiment of Risaldar Heera Singh – who, in turn, is but Bishen, the son of Budhan the weaver, who had eloped from the Commissioner’s office 16 years back.

Kalu or Lachman Singh further problematizes the issue of loyalties and nationalism as he writes to his mother: “…I have quite forgotten what my father looked like. The man from whom I have received fatherly love since childhood is my country’s mortal enemy, an English General” (Dutt 145). He detests the Hindu customs like Suttee and untouchability, and praises the English people who try to eradicate such social evils in the
name of religion from the face of the nation. When ostracized by the other sepoys at Meerut who treat Lachman as an outcaste because he has driven a locomotive, the latter does not hesitate in telling them – “If your represent Hindu society, then I spit in its face” (Dutt 153).

Heera Singh, on the other hand, emerges as a Risaldar quite revered by the sepoys, who has equal sympathy for his Muslim soldiers as well, and has the courage to defy the orders of the English officers Tombs and Wilson, when they ask him to direct his soldiers to return to work, whom he had ordered dinner since they were observing their Ramzan fast. Heera and Lachman embody two different generations and two different understanding of values and culture. Through this problematization of identity within a linear family line, Dutt is able to convey to the audience/ readers the changing worldviews right from the beginning, which later assists in understanding the reasons behind the failure of the Rising.

Historical authenticity is established by the playwright by including within the play names much familiar in the nationalist historiographic records of the rebellion. As for instance, in the third scene, Subedar Bakht Khan of Bareilly is shown to meet Heera Singh in the disguise of a fakir in order to plan the final date of the battle as 21 May 1857. In a short screen presence, he is portrayed as a patriot and an ideal representative of the proletarian sepoys, as he tells of Bahadur Shah Zafar: “the bitter cries of Hindustan do not reach his ears – he listens to classical music instead”, and further declares: “I pledge my life to her that gives me my bread, namely my country” (Dutt 159). It would be
worthwhile to remember here that it was the same Bakht Khan who found a completely different description in Durgadas Bandyopadhyay's factual recollections of the Uprising. It is this simultaneous reading of fact and fiction as forms of representing history which recreates a larger picture of the rebellion of 1857 in all its perplexing multiplicity.

Another complication is introduced into the plot in the form of Waziran, the prostitute who caters to the requirements of the English officers, as she enters the barracks to talk to Lachman. The latter gives voice to the predicament of this marginalized section of women when his fellow sepoys condemn Waziran's existence as unclean and he replies: "You drive those girls to sell themselves, and now sit in a judgment over her? You lock them up in harems without education. Brahmans marry 100, 150 times. By what right do you judge her?" (Dutt 161). It is Waziran who informs the sepoys of the cartridges using the fat of cows and pigs - as confided to her by an English officer in a state of intoxication, and thus leads to the immediate outbreak of the rebellion on 10th May 1857. She observes: "Hunger weakens the body – an outraged religion weakens the mind. With the nation prostrate, they can rob it without hindrance" (Dutt 164). It would be interesting to note here that this fact of the sepoys being humiliated by the prostitutes is also referred to in Ketan Mehta's Mangal Pandey: The Rising – as late as 2005, perhaps as a social fact of "women taunting the sepoys for their cowardice", as Samik Bandyopadhyay also observes in his introduction to The Great Rebellion, probably because this enables the inclusion of the gendered Other in her marginalized contribution to the first war of Indian independence.
The scenario of the decadent Mughal court is portrayed in the fourth scene at the Red Fort, before the arrival of the sepoys. Dutt's treatment of Bahadur Shah Zafar is one of sympathy, as he recognizes the fears and insecurities of the aged king, and at the same time, his deeply hurt sense of dignity by the unruly behavior of the English. He voices the same as the emperor grieves upon the compulsion of having to interact with an English officer thus: "I have retired to a corner of the city, but they seek me out to insult me", and further "they toss the son's severed head into the father's face", which shows his anxiety regarding his sons and his dynasty (Dutt 170, 174).

Historically whether Bahadur Shah Zafar gave shelter and seal to the sepoys in/voluntarily has been a subject of great controversy. However, while recreating the moment on stage, the playwright depicts Heera Singh and Bakht Khan treating the emperor with due respect and explaining to him the reason behind failing to observe the mannerisms of the court as: "We do not know the rules of the court - we are sons of peasants, blacksmiths and weavers" (Dutt 178). It is in this manner that Dutt ascribes the face of a class revolution to the Rising by merging into his representation the story of a suffering society and enforced plural identities of the common men. As a royal gift, Bakht Khan is shown to hand over the glorious sword of emperor Jehangir, retrieved from Bareilly where the English had kept it after taking it away.

As Mirza Mughal is declared the commander-in-chief of the sepoys, Dutt reveals the miserable condition of the sepoys who are forced to fight without proper supplies of food or medicine while the rich continue with their idle pleasures. It is Lachman, representing
the generation of confused muddled identities who exclaims: “If we let the princes lead us, we shall die of starvation, not English bullets”, and further “I shall be only too happy if the English artillery smashes the whole city of Delhi. This India needs to be burnt to ashes” (Dutt 182,186). It would be worthwhile to note that no incidence of the city of Delhi being looted or ransacked by the rebel sepoys, which is a social fact recorded later, finds mention in this play as the playwright chooses to portray them as the dedicated martyrs of the first warfare for freedom.8

The difference between the outlooks of Heera Singh and Lachman emerges more distinctly when the latter protests in front of the former, saying – “I say our real enemy is not the English but our own princes and moneylenders”, while the former checks him sharply replying: “you have no roots and so cannot draw sustenance from the soil…in the freedom struggle, you see only struggle and not freedom” (Dutt 191). The irony is in the truth of the words of Heera Singh, for Lachman represents a generation uprooted from the soil by the British policies and fostered by the same administration, but governed by a feeling of loss and an all pervading identity crisis. This finds expression as Lachman tells Waziran: “I have found nothing worth having faith in. No father, no mother, no religion, no interest in this war” (Dutt 194).

A different angle of a diseased economy is brought to light with the sudden entry of Kasturi – the wife of Heera Singh and the mother of Lachman, who is depicted to be earning her livelihood by selling liquor to the sepoys and taking off accessories from the bodies of the dead soldiers at the camps of the rebel sepoys. The entire notion of
nationalism stands to be subverted as she tells the sepoys: "The more martyrs there are in this holy war, the better my business thrives. I want you to die in greater numbers" (Dutt 196). It is only when she discovers the identity of Lachman that she exclaims to him: "Don't die yet, please", thereby revealing the existential tussle between the personal, the political and the professional (Dutt 198).

In the sixth scene, Heera Singh and Bakht Khan stand to represent two ideal leaders of the Uprising speaking against the princes and the money lenders on behalf of their sepoys who are being forced to fight without food or pay, despite their own ranks, which allow them privilege to eat and drink with the nobility. Dutt, here, depicts the other side of the Uprising as a class conflict within the closed walls of Delhi where: "the sepoys are dying in battle while the rich sprawl in their harems, calculating their profits in chaste Persian" (Dutt 202). This hostility between the classes is shown further as Heera Singh is in the next scene entrapped by Mirza Mughal and his followers as a traitor, and eventually tortured and hanged by his own sepoys, which leads Kasturi, who can realize the truth of the picture, to grieve thus: "There are two battles raging at the same time – between us and the English, and between us and the princes. If you don't see that, you see nothing. The enemy is before you and behind you. While you fight one for freedom, the other stabs you in the back" (Dutt 213).

Significantly, the entry of Bakht Khan takes place on the stage once again after Heera Singh is hanged. Perhaps, the playwright did not intend to taint the image of a historically authentic figure by including him among the sepoys of Heera’s own regiment who
executed him at the orders of Mirza Mughal. Bakht Khan, instead, re-enters to glorify Heera Singh’s plan of war and elevate him to the level of martyr through the war cry: “Long Live Heera Singh” (ibid). In this manner, the playwright also unintentionally drops into the text a subtle comment upon the creation of martyrs like Heera Singh—killed and celebrated, but lost to the pages of history.

The play ends with a beautifully crafted alternative discourse upon the conflict between creation and destruction/constructive and destructive. When the English attack the city of Delhi, Nawab Ali, a sowar, takes out from his belongings a brass statue of Shiva and exclaims: “Let the English have a look at it. They make such wonderful rifles, such powerful cannon, such beautiful instruments to kill men with. But can they make a dancing Shiva? Can they make perfumes, weave shawls? Let them learn culture in this country” (Dutt 214). The reference to the shawls and perfumes bring in the fact of a traditional aspect destroyed by the East India Company while the dancing Shiva stands to symbolize the destruction of an old order—in this case, a line of tradition, as also a diseased society caught in mutual conflicts of class and religion.

Similarly, in the last scene at the Humanyun’s tomb where the Mughal princes are killed and Bahadur Shah Zafar and Zeenat Mahal are taken prisoners by the English, the last ruler of India is depicted to leave the stage at the melody of Sakina’a song as desired by him. It would be worthwhile to remember here that even in Shatranj Ke Khiladi by Satyajit Ray, Wajid Ali Shah was seen to welcome the British on the day of annexation at the notes of the shehnai. This shows how different creative minds in the late 20th
century have read into the silent resistance of these powerless and helpless kings during
the rebellion of 1857 an answer in the form of art and culture through poetry and music.

Another important representation in this context is *A Flight of Pigeons* by Ruskin Bond,
written around the 1970s and made into a film entitled *Junoon* by Shyam Benegal, in
1979. In this novella, Bond portrays the journey of Ruth Labadoor – the female
protagonist and the eye/I narrator who suffers through the Uprising as the daughter of an
Englishman and discovers new human relationships in those traumatic times with some
local people who rise above the demarcations of race, caste, nationality and religion to
offer help to them. In an Introduction to an edition of this novella, published in 2002, the
author writes: “...I attempted to bring out the common humanity of most of the people
involved” (Bond vi-vii). Through Ruth’s narrative, Bond thus focuses upon the essential
ties of humanity, in re-reading the rebellion of 1857 as a text of human agony.

The narrative voice of the Prologue distinctly belongs to the author who introduces the
readers to the scenario of May 1857 and describes the family of Mr Labadoor, his wife
Mariam Labadoor and his daughter Ruth as residents of the English quarters at
Shahjahanpur. The Prologue ends with the author/narrator signing off thus: “I will let
Ruth take up the story...” (Bond 05). In this manner the point-of-view is transferred upon
the female protagonist as the first person narrator who now reveals the trauma of the
Rising as felt and perceived by her. It would be worthwhile to mention here that this
style of devising the narrative and altering the narrative voice from the author to Ruth
Labadoor enables the author to ensure the capacity of the novella to move the reader/s in conferring the task of story-telling upon the one who directly experienced the horror.

The novella begins with Ruth recollecting the morning at the church when the rebels attacked and describes how she left the site of massacre to get help for her injured father only to find their house in flames. Her father eventually dies and she and her family are given shelter by Lala Ramjimal – a businessman who hired out dolies and carriages to the English officers and had a very close relationship with the Labadoor family, of which Ruth says: “He had held me on his knee when I was a baby, and I had grown up under his eyes” (Bond 10). That there was no political motive behind Lala Ramjimal’s help is established as Ruth observes “his motives were always personal and if he helped us, it was not because we belonged to the ruling class...but because he had known us for many years, and had grown fond of my mother, who had always treated him as a friend and equal” (Bond 12, 13). This statement problematizes the stereotypical understanding of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled during the mid 19th century, for Mariam Labadoor in her person, stands to symbolize the age-old humanitarian bond between the two races in being the daughter of a Frenchman who had served in the Maratha army and a woman of a well-known Muslim family of Rampur, and the wife of an English officer.

While the British historians have time and again held the Rising of 1857 to have been an act of aggression by the Muslims, Bond introduces a counter-discourse to this homogenized understanding of human individuals through the religious aspect of their identity in revealing through Lala Ramjimal how the dead Christians at the church were
buried by two Muslim people who said that "something had impelled them to undertake this task" and that they "were willing to face the consequences" (Bond 23). The author does not elaborate upon "something", but leaves it to the readers to decipher meaning in it through their basic human selves and consciousness.

Ruth describes their life at Ramjimal’s residence and recollects how they had fallen into the habits of this new household. The harmonious life shared by people belonging to two completely different cultures under the same roof is highlighted further as the readers are told how the business of Ramjimal had deteriorated in the absence of the Englishmen and how Mariam in this hour of need, handed over her box of jewels to him – the only asset she had managed to carry with her at the time of escaping from their burning house. It is through him that Ruth and her family get to learn that all the Englishmen at Shahjahanpur had been killed and that Qadar Ali Khan – the Subedar Major of the sepoys had been proclaimed the new Nawab.

Their stay at Ramjimal’s house soon comes to an end as Javed Khan – “one of the biggest ruffians in the city”, as Ramjimal describes him, comes to search the former’s residence in his absence and takes Mariam and Ruth as captives to his own house (Bond 20). It is here that they get introduced to Kothiwali – an elderly woman at Javed Khan’s house who is the first one to ask Mariam about their origins compassionately. The strong and steady Mariam, who is compared by Javed to “an enraged tigress, whose side has been pierced by a barbed arrow” in her attempt to save Ruth from his clutches, is seen to weep for the first time in response to Kothiwali’s care and affection as she gradually reveals to
her the reality of their condition (Bond 47). This relationship of Ruth and Mariam with Kothiwali, her daughter-in-law, and later Javed’s wife shows a beautiful instance of female bonding, as women from different castes, religions, cultures and nations come to attain an understanding of each other from the shared experience of belonging to the marginalized half of the human population irrespective of differences, who have endured as victims the outcome of male aggression silently through times immemorial and have then been lost to the pages of mainstream history.

Through this struggle for survival, some of the memorable moments, still filled with joy and human emotions, as described by Ruth are those which she and her mother spent with the Kothiwali or the other women like Qamran, the sister of Javed Khan. As the women develop a beautiful homely unit together during their stay at Qamran’s place, Ruth observes: “politics seldom entered the four walls of the zenana – wars and deeds of violence were considered the prerogative of man” (Bond 76). Similarly, even after the fall of Delhi, she describes the Kothiwali thus: “apparently the news did not affect her one way or the other: she dealt in individuals, not in communities” (Bond 106-07).

This perspective knits into the narrative an alternative understanding of power and politics as women like the Kothiwali, Qamran and Khan Begum continue to carry on lives based on practical necessities despite such times of crisis, where their oppressor is not confined to the foreign ruling class, and their sense of community is not embedded in a sense of nation/alism but humanity and womanhood. This is distinctly visible in the novel as Khan Begum tells Mariam after Javed Khan’s approach to marry Ruth:
"Mariam, you are my mother. Do not help him to inflict greater torment on me than I have already suffered. Promise me that you won't give your daughter to him" (Bond 70).

Javed Khan’s attraction towards Ruth and the eventual course of events as he takes them away from Lala Ramjimal’s house to his own and asks Mariam for Ruth’s hand in wedding brings in a different perspective to the depiction of the Rising as Javed here is shown to be a part of the rebellion in order to satisfy his own desires related to his infatuation with Ruth. When he comes to Lala’s house, Ruth describes their first encounter as – “…I was like a doomed bird, fascinated by the gaze of a rattlesnake” (Bond 46). Her sense of insecurity finds apt expression here, as also the intensity of Javed Khan’s passion. It is gradually through Javed Khan’s liberal treatment of them made possible by the women of his household and his patience despite urging Mariam repeatedly to hasten her decision about Ruth’s marriage with him that the latter develops a different understanding of Javed.

While Shyam Benegal’s film based on this novel portrays a silent bond emerging between Ruth and Javed through the motif of the white pigeons whom they both feed and care for, the novel shows no such instance. Here the only change of Ruth’s attitude towards Javed is voiced at the end of the novel as she sums up stating about his fate after the rebellion – “secretly, I have always hoped that he succeeded in escaping. Looking back on those months, when we were his prisoners, I cannot help feeling a sneaking admiration for him…there was in him a streak of nobility which he did his best to
conceal" (Bond 133). The unsaid thus gains importance against the larger canvas of the totality called life.

Similarly, in the novel, Sarfaraz, the brother-in-law of Javed Khan, is depicted as rational and tolerant who soon acquires a sense of reverence towards Mariam, unlike the absolutist anti-British character portrayed in the film. It is in these grey areas which show the gradual emergence of humane bonds and relationships that Ruskin Bond completely negates the idea of understanding the Rising as a civilizational war. He explores human identities and seeks in them the aspects which unite human individuals beyond the limited understanding of identities caught within the web of finite dimensions. Thus he adds in his Introduction to the 2002 version of this novella: “I published this account...about thirty years ago. I feel it still has some relevance today, when communal strife and religious intolerance threaten the lives and livelihood of innocent, law-abiding people”, thereby contemporizing the Rising in the transnational context of the 21st century (Bond viii).

Two more interesting representations of the Rising of 1857 at the turn of the century focused on the figure of Rani Lakshmibai – re-exploring and re-inventing the life of a rebel who might perhaps be said to have been the most popularly cited leader in the context of the rebellion. The first in this category is the Rani as seen by Tapti Roy in her biography entitled *Raj of the Rani* (2006), while the second one is a novel by Jaishree Misra entitled *Rani* which interestingly, weaves the narrative of a young girl in the
violent scenario of 1857 as she tried to defend her kingdom from an alternative perspective – weaving in her own personal thoughts and desires as an individual.

Tapti Roy’s *Raj of the Rani* begins with her Preface where she writes: “they say in Jhansi that the best thing that ever happened to their town was Lakshmi Bai” (Roy xiii). Through the entire length of the biography she then explores the life of the Rani and the legends which gradually evolved around her name, trying to separate the facts from fiction and thereby weaving together the person and the image as passed onto history. She describes her book as an effort “to integrate authenticated incidents with imagined ones in the same narrative” and adds that Lakshmibai “became the victim of the very indomitable spirit that made her immortal” (Roy xvii, xix). From this perspective, she refers to the representations of the image of the Rani as found in other versions of biographies and also the English records in generating the probability of the real situation and the person in the 19th century.

In her description and analysis of Lakshmibai’s life, Roy seeks to re-establish several angles and facts of the Rani’s life as different from those normally held to be true. As for instance, unlike the mainstream belief that the Rani was 23 years old at the time of the Uprising, she argues historically with reference to known facts and also the impression of Lakshmibai as provided by Robert Hamilton to historian John Kaye to conclude that the Rani was actually “a twenty-nine-year-old woman during the time of the uprising in 1857” (Roy 05). Similarly, she writes of the marriage of Lakshmibai and Gangadhar Rao: “according to the popular version, the Raja was past forty when he married for the second
time. In reality, he was in his late twenties” (Roy 14). In this manner, she re-invents a new image besides the one conventionally accepted in trying to re-incarnate a revised vision of the historically familiar figure.

Another unique technique used by Roy to re-create the life of the Rani is that of drawing assumptions regarding her personal life on the basis of the known historical/political facts. For instance, while narrating the pilgrimage undertaken by Gangadhar Rao and Lakshmibai, nine years after their marriage, the author observes: “…those months must have been by far the best of her married life” (Roy 43). This repeated use of “must have been” with reference to various situations, enables her narrative to rise to the height of an independent biography instead of just being a documentation of available historical/literary resources on Lakshmibai.

While attempting to trace the reason behind the Rani’s exceptional popularity in the context of the Uprising, Roy observes how she was “admired” by the foreign visitors for “her unconventionality and non-conformism”, and compared to “Durga, the goddess of strength” by her own people for being “the wronged Rani, smarting under the injustices of the white rulers and fighting for the cause of her people” (Roy 81). She analyzes the reason behind this phenomenon to be the Rani’s intelligence with which she “put her religiosity to excellent political use” and thus was able to earn approval from the Brahmins for her “unusual lifestyle as a widow” (ibid). It is, Roy argues, in this manner that “Lakshmi Bai emerged as the perfect protagonist of the hour – young, beautiful,
vivacious, deeply religious but tragically wronged by fate and now the conquerors”, and thus became “the ultimate Indian heroine” (Roy 85).

Roy further contradicts the nationalist historians directly and writes that from the letters and evidences available till the summer of 1857, the negotiations of the Rani with the East India Company “were not acts of rebellion but signs of reconciliation” (Roy 88). She narrates the outbreak of the rebellion at Jhansi followed by the massacre of the Englishmen and women – of which the queen was innocent, and shows that Lakshmibai had no possible means of going against the rebels at that point of time. She further adds “the reason Indian biographers are reticent to talk about it is because logically it becomes difficult for them to assert her leadership of the movement and her innocence in the crime, in the same breath” (Roy 109). Such conclusions strongly subvert the image of the Rani as drawn in nationalist historiography.

Similarly, Roy rationalizes the comprehension of the Rani as a rebel queen by the British administration by saying that though “she was not guilty of masterminding the rebellion but once the British governance had been replaced, she represented the alternative order that the rebels endorsed” (Roy 124). It is here that the question of the identity of an individual is seen to be determined not by conscious choice but by the prevalent socio-political conditions, and the Rani thus came to be conceived as that which she gradually came to symbolize – un/consciously.
The historical event of Jhansi attacked by Hugh Rose and resisted by the Rani is thus seen as a misconception on the part of the former who took it to be an act of rebellion while “all she doing actually...was trying to keep her Jhansi from being invaded by the Orchha troops and the town slipping into perfect chaos” (Roy 142). Roy reads the act of resistance on the part of Lakshmibai as a compulsion thrust upon her by the circumstances, preceded by “circumspection” wanting “to settle for peace” as seen from “her last letter to the British agent” (Roy 149).

This re-discovery leading, in turn, to a shift from the dominant paradigm of understanding and portraying the life of Lakshmibai at the turn of the century, is worth reconsideration. In conceiving the Rani as a competent ruler, patient and intelligent in her decisions and trying to maintain peace for the well-being of her people until forced to rise against the British, Roy perhaps attempts to strike a balance and create a civilizational bridge, meant to cater to the global reader in an age of diaspora – an initiative hitherto unseen in the representation of Rani Lakshmibai and her role in the Uprising of 1857.

After the historical siege of Jhansi and the escape of the Rani with her son Damodar Rao, Roy writes “when facts are fuzzy, stories are born and legends grow” (Roy 171). From this point she traces the rise of the spirit of Lakshmibai as a symbol and observes that “she was the archetypal Oriental Indian princess, mystifying, distant and romantic” (Roy 172). Having provided an account of the battles at Kalpi and Gwalior, the author concludes with the death of Rani Lakshmibai and the versions provided by the Indian and the British historiographers, respectively.
What makes Roy’s representation even further interesting is the way in which she relates the spirit which the Rani came to symbolize in the Epilogue, where she analyzes thus—“in the course of the national movement and more so after India’s Independence, the Rani’s struggle came to be regarded as the quintessential symbol of resistance that Indians offered to colonial rule. Being a woman, she highlighted the vulnerability of a victim and the daring of a rebel” (Roy 207). This integrates the gendered concept of the nation with that of oppression and victimization and makes Lakshmibai a subject of renewed research and reading from the point of the view of gender studies, where the historical figure gradually metamorphoses into the symbolical and transcends the national to merge with the universal.

It is this very scope of reading into the life of Rani Lakshmibai the story of an ordinary woman of the 19th century India which Jaishree Misra explores further in her historical novel entitled Rani (2007). Tapti Roy, in her narrative, describes Major Ellis— the English officer at Jhansi as one who “had no time and even less patience” for any sort of emotional bonding with the state (Roy 49). However, Misra makes this the focal point of her narrativization which seeks to explore two different lives – that of a girl who “was to become queen” and a young British boy “destined to wrest her land from her”, and who would eventually come to share a special bond through the “land they had both grown to love and would both come to lose” (Misra 05).
Rani begins with a Prologue describing a woman who “surveys the crowded bazaar through her veil” and “knows she must not linger” (Misra 01). Having created an aura of mystery around the veiled woman thus, the Prologue ends as she spots him who had “returned to his country, sailing the black waters to reclaim his land and his people” and “stands, poised uncertainly between past and future” knowing that “he has seen her too” (Misra 02). With this dramatic exposition of two people hailing from almost two different worlds which in turn creates a renewed suspense regarding an otherwise known historical episode, the novel starts unfolding gradually.

The first chapter begins with Robert Ellis on his way back to England in 1855, as he continuously thinks of Jhansi and wonders how long it would be “before he would escape the torment of her memory” (Misra 05). He recollects the times he had spent with the Rani – “their sudden burst of laughter, echoing eerily in the walled garden, when they realized that their joys as children had been identical – riding horses and climbing trees” (ibid). It is through this unique technique of introspection, far away from the site of action in India, that the author begins to construct a cultural bridge between Ellis and Lakshmibai by seeking the roots of the present bond in the innocent grounds of childhood – uniting dreams across cartographic borderlines.

The reader is thus given a cue that this text would redefine inter-human relationship in the context of civilizational conflicts and offer a contrapuntal understanding of life, literature and historiography. The chapter concludes reinforcing this vision as Ellis “wanted to take her hands and tell her that it was possible for worlds riven apart by
everything else to be coupled...by shared memories of childhood. By trust and love”
(ibid). The dateline then goes back to 1835 and the narrative begins to offer the story of
little Mani in her process of growing up from an altered perspective – much closer and
comprehensible to the global reader of the 21st century.

Moropant Tambe, the father of Mani, is portrayed right from the beginning in a
progressive and sympathetic light – a father who has his daughter educated in various
subjects, including English, and on being asked by her about the separate dwellings of the
Englishmen explains “we all feel safer gathering amongst our own...the British respect
us much more than those Muslim invaders of yore”, thereby teaching her to treat
differences with respect (Misra 11). Similarly, unlike the popular version where
Moropant is known to have immensely rejoiced the selection of his daughter as the queen
of Jhansi, in Misra’s representation, he is the logically worried father who says “…I
cannot help worrying that Raja Gangadhar is a widower and forty years old or more,
almost my age...and anyway, I still feel Mani is too young...” (Misra 31).

The contemporary reader is made to share and empathize with him completely as the
author writes of him on their way to Mani’s wedding at Jhansi – “he was glad he had
never allowed Mani’s natural intelligence to wither and die, just for having had the
misfortune of being born a girl”, and further – “he feared deeply for his daughter, about
to walk straight into the seething cauldron of uncertainties and mistrust that royal life
invariably was” – thoughts which integrate Moropant Tambe with any parent universally
across the ages of civilization, concerned and apprehensive about the well being of his child (Misra 54, 55).

Similarly, the way of looking at Mani, who later becomes Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, is also altered by contemporizing the thought-patterns of the protagonist who, despite being a woman based in the 19th century Indian society, merges with the lives of 21st century through her sense of identity, self and dignity. Unlike the other portrayals, in this novel, Lakhsmibai is bestowed with an independent mind by the author – which can dare to think of people and events as an individual, and contemplate upon situations subjectively, thereby transcending the specificities of historical time and place.

The first glance at this exceptional little Mani is provided as she replies to the query of the visitor of Jhansi who asked her what she had been doing – “I was reading. A book” (Misra 27). While being carefully inspected for marriage, the omniscient narrator describes her state of mind thus – “…she felt embarrassed, violated even, by the way in which she was being examined by these strangers who were all looking her up and down in such an openly curious manner” (ibid). This picture reveals a very different individual who, even as a child, has the ability to detest and criticize the prevalent social practices, instead of being humble and docile as expected of her.

It would be important to remember here that until this novel, perhaps no other representation of the Rani – verbal or visual had ascribed to her this identity of one transgressing social norms from the very beginning of her life. Similarly, on hearing of
the age of the Raja whom Misra, unlike Roy, relates to have been forty at the time of their marriage, the reaction of Manu is recorded thus — “forty was so old, it was positively ancient. Mani felt frantic fingers clutching at her belly, making her want to vomit” (Misra 32). This is yet again an image radically different from the one commonly found where Mani looks forward to the marriage as her destiny.

If Tapti Roy attempted a biographical sketch of Rani Lakshmibai, Jaishree Misra crosses her in adding to it the sensibility of time present and the charm of fictionalization. In this historical fiction, she re-defines the life and times of a woman, historically renowned, as an individual — revealing her silent joys, fears and sorrows — her struggle to discover her self. One such masterstroke regarding the question related to identity is seen when the narrator describes the thoughts of Mani dressed in colours of Jhansi visiting the Ganges for the last time before leaving her village in the following manner — “only the flaming orange of her silk achkan, painstakingly stitched for her in Jhansi style, was discernible in the rushing waters, her face a mere blur” (Misra 48). This image precisely captures the alternative reality which the novel dwells upon — how the individual draped in hues of Jhansi was obliterated as a nationalist leader in the pages of historiography and iconization.

The first glimpse of Gangadhar Rao as attained by Mani during the marriage ceremony is also described by Misra in very realistic terms — different from the technique adapted by the other authors till now, as she writes — “Mani’s first observation of the raja was of how narrow-framed he was which...had the effect of turning him into a wizened, sickly little
boy", and further "...she was acutely aware that she may even be taller than him. She hunched her own body in an effort to shrink inside her bridal robes and felt a sudden shameful pricking of tears behind her eyelids" (Misra 72). An indication of the compromises that the life of Mani as Lakshmibai would have to go through is perhaps hinted at in this description.

The loss of identity and the fragmentation of self are further brought out by employing a very cinematically strong image where Lakshmibai after marriage looks at the mirrored walls of the palace — “her own many reflections seemed to be watching her lying on this strange bed. It was as though she had suddenly split into a hundred different selves, each of which knew nothing of the other” (Misra 76). Her consciousness of the re-orientation of one's identity during the ceremony of renaming after wedding finds expression as she tells her companion Sundar: “did you know, Sundar, the custom of new names comes from girls having to subsume their personalities and pasts along with their childhood names...” (Misra 90). Through such observations, Misra not only critiques the prevalent customs of the 19th century in India, but also highlights a knowledgeable and introspective mind of an individual who struggles to retain her entity all through the narrative.

Another unique feature of Rani lies in the frankness with which Misra explores the question of sexuality and conjugality in the context of Rani Lakshmibai. Having been neglected by Gangadhar Rao, who was good and gentle to her, but maintained distance regarding physical intimacy, Misra portrays the first attempt to get close being initiated
by the Rani herself, as she walks into her husband's separate bed chamber despite being stopped by his guards – which is not just unconventional but also shocking to a certain extent, especially in the case of Lakshmibai – a figure so intimately linked with the realization of Indianness. Tired of this long wait followed by disappointment, she writes of the Rani – “...she had found her own calling, taking Jhansi to her bosom as a mother would a motherless child” (Misra 108).

Lakshmibai is then gradually portrayed to be taking interest in matters of administration and governance and Gangadhar Rao is projected to rely upon her in matters of political management, to the extent that Ellis is “surprised that the raja appeared to be awaiting the arrival of the queen before beginning his business” (Misra 110). The latter’s keen interest in the Rani is reflected as he feels “overwhelmed by curiosity about the queen’s appearance” after having seen the intelligence with which she managed the court affairs (Misra 115). Similarly, Lakshmibai’s observation of Ellis is recorded as she observes him speaking to her husband and wonders – “what sorrows were those that afflicted the Englishman...he never sounded as though he were really enjoying himself, even when narrating tales for Gangadhar’s amusement” (Misra 135).

In this manner, even before they embark upon direct communication, the two worlds of an English officer and an Indian queen are gradually brought closer – both mystified by the other and sympathetic towards it. Her outspokenness draws admiration from both Ellis and Malcolm – the two British representatives at Jhansi, as she makes it clear regarding certain British policies that “it was the government she was furious with rather
than Ellis himself, only wanting her views to be passed on to his superiors in Calcutta”, at a political meeting with them in the absence of Gangadhar (Misra 137). It is this approach which leads them to conclude that “she already rules the palace with more vigour than her husband does” (Misra 138).

Lakshmibai’s loneliness in the marital relationship with Gangadhar is perhaps best expressed after the death of their son Damodar when the aggrieved king loses trace of everything around and the narrator expresses the condition of the Rani thus – “Lakshmibai looked at Gangadhar as though he were a stranger, for a moment loathing him for not having thought of comforting her in the night. It was his child that had died, the loss was of the heir to his throne. Had that made him forget that she had lost her most precious gift too?” (Misra 177-78). This picture of Lakshmibai as a woman deprived of all concern by her husband during an immense emotional crisis is rarely seen. Most of the biographies and stories of Rani Lakshmibai portray the queen as raised to tragic heights attending her ailing husband, just after having lost her son.

That this concern is very humane is further stressed upon by the author as she writes of Ellis meeting Rani Lakshmibai at the court after the death of her son and observes how he “wished he could find some good tidings to alleviate her pain” (Misra 181). Misra’s projection of Ellis serves as a continuous foil to the character of the feeble and sickly Gangadhar who is shown to gradually bestow all his responsibilities of the state too upon his queen, without assuming any supportive role towards her. Lakshmibai thus absolutely drained out by her regular duties and multiple role-playing begins to find a sympathetic
ear in this foreigner — who has limited control over situations but is compassionate
towards her state and her people.

In the mainstream representations of Lakshmibai, she is mostly idolized as a wife, a
mother and a queen, and little space is spared to exploration of the person as she might
have been. Misra, in Rani, devotes much space to work out a rough sketch of the
individual Lakshmibai in this regard. After the adoption of Damodar Rao, when
Gangadhar is bedridden and she is managing all the duties and responsibilities
singlehandedly, while at the same time maintaining her regular visits to his apartment,
her state of mind is expressed thus — “sometimes she could not help feel annoyed at his
abject dependency, especially when her own duties so consumed her energies. What
exasperated most of all was that all the doctors agreed there was nothing physically
wrong with Gangadhar. It was all in his mind, they said; a diagnosis Lakshmibai felt
irked by, despite her best efforts to understand” (Misra 201). Such observations
humanize the otherwise distant figure of the 19th century Rani of Jhansi as they offer a
glimpse of the limitations and weariness of an ordinary human being, and suggest that
this perspective of Lakshmibai should also be given some attention.

The only blessing in the life of Lakshmibai is shown to be her adopted son Damodar Rao,
who despite his dislike for the king, is immensely attached to her in whom he finds a
playmate and a mother. After the death of Gangadhar, she steps outside the purdah for the
first time and the author notes — “she had evidently chosen the misfortune of her
widowhood on which to hang up that last ritual of submissive deference that had never
seemed to suit her in the first place (Misra 207). A new and relieved Lakshmibai gradually evolves henceforth, who at the cremation of Gangadhar catches Ellis looking at her and assures herself — “she had no reason at all to feel guilty in enjoying the pleasure of a man's admiring glance” (Misra 208).

This side of Lakshmibai transgresses the role so far ascribed to her by the historians and biographers from the nationalist perspective, deifying her as a re-incarnation of Durga and Savitri in accepting her fate and yet fighting against all odds in a determined manner, though never stepping beyond the lines of socially accepted codes of behavior, except in taking up arms for the well-being of her state and her people. It subverts the hegemonic notion of idolizing a flesh and blood human being without acknowledging his/ her independent thoughts, feelings, desires and necessities.

Misra portrays a relationship gradually evolving between Lakshmibai and Ellis as they start going for long rides together each morning, some days after the death of Gangadhar. The first accidental meeting of the two at the ruins near Jhansi and Ellis’s first encounter with the Rani outside the courtroom is described thus — “how strange and how pleasurable to see all of it, rather than merely catching tantalizing glimpses of eyes and mouth through the lacy ivory screens that had hidden her from view all these years” (Misra 210). It is during these meetings that the Rani and Major Ellis gradually come to know each other as Mani and Robert, respectively, and the image of the other side of Rani Lakshmibai starts emerging on the canvas of Major Ellis, the painter: “with just a few firm brushstrokes a face started to emerge, olive skinned, dark eyed and smiling. Her
face had been against the sun and he was not sure if he ought to use black paint or brown
to daub the eyes” (Misra 212). With passage of time they develop an understanding of
each other and the author portrays them as sharing common literary interests, for
instance, as they read together Rumi’s verses in the library during a rainy afternoon.

The dilemma within the mind of Rani Lakshmibai finds expression as the author writes
how on one hand “she was determined not to feel guilty, having instructed herself many
times since her husband’s funeral to take the meagre delights that may now come to her,
newly freed of the shackles that had been cast on her by matrimony and by Gangadhar’s
illness”, while on the other “she ought not to forget that, as a woman and a widow, there
would be mutterings about her conduct and the high opinion of her people mattered more
to her than anything else” (Misra 216-17). The longings of the individual obliterated
under the crown of Jhansi are revealed as Lakshmibai wonders about “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” in her
moments of lonely musing (Misra 218).

It is interesting to note that though Misra targets the global reader in contemporizing the
image of Rani Lakshmibai and offering a contrapuntal gaze towards her life and times,
yet she strikes a balance with the sentiment of the Indian readers and the Indian
nationalist/ gender-specific points of view by ascribing to the Rani certain instances of
detachment from the subjective self where she seeks the “forgiveness” of Gangadhar “for
not having mourned him enough” (Misra 225). She simultaneously raises the question of
natural instincts in making the omniscient narrator conclude of this situation —
"Gangadhar was gone and custom demanded that her every last aspiration should have
departed with him...But what did one do with expectations that refused so obstinately to
die?" (ibid). The reader is thus drawn to contemplate upon the crisis of the individual as
separated from the image and her story attains a tragic splendor in depicting the
helplessness of an individual before fate.

In Misra’s representation the news of Dalhousie’s decision regarding the annexation of
Jhansi is given to Lakshmibai by Ellis in one of their secret morning rides. The line of
demarcation between the personal and the political gradually fades out as the omniscient
narrator relates how Ellis, away from his role as the political agent of East India
Company in Jhansi could “feel her anguish and wanted desperately to take her in his
arms” (Misra 229). Similarly, Lakshmibai “knew it was illogical to blame Robert Ellis
for the annexation and was also aware of how powerless political agents were against the
powers of Calcutta and London” (Misra 238). After a cold meeting at the court with
official intimation of Dalhousie’s order and the Rani’s public response, she is, however,
still certain that “he will understand that it was my pain over the annexation that caused
me to behave so discourteously to him” and soon they resume their rides together
“whenever they could, careful to avoid the cantonment area” (Misra 244). The warmth of
inter-human relationship is thus shown to transcend the lines of race, religion and nation.

This relationship enables both Ellis and Lakshmibai to detach themselves from their
respective loyalties to the extent that Ellis finds “himself wishing for the first time ever
that the British had never come to India at all" while Lakshmibai realizes "how much she had already grown to depend on him" (Misra 249). Interestingly, the Rani’s companion Sundar is shown to arrange a meeting for them at Motibagh one night with "every last inhibition thrown to the winds, as he beheld her countenance, awash finally with tears" and where "she slowly raised her eyes to look at his face before daring to run a finger over its features, memorizing it for a time when it may not be before her anymore" (Misra 250-51). The omniscient narrator defines this unnamed bond between them saying – "they were not lovers, although what lay between them, so still and so deep, could only have been love...like their two countries whose deepest roots lay entwined as one, they were to remain separate in the eyes of the world, parted by their own unspoken fears" (Misra 253). This statement successfully creates a cultural bridge between the two nations and lends a humanitarian view to the subject of the 1857 Uprising in retrospect.

Quite strategically, as required by the novel being rooted in the context of the Uprising, Ellis is soon sent to Awadh for a while by orders from Calcutta. Through him the condition of Awadh after annexation is revealed and the difference between Begum Hazratmahal and Rani Lakshmibai is highlighted as that between aggression and tolerance. He returns to Jhansi to discover a changed Lakshmibai – “more remote and less inclined to accept his views without disagreement” (Misra 263). At the same time, due to his friendliness with Lakshmibai, Ellis “was being shunned socially by everyone in the cantonment” (Misra 267). Eventually, Major Ellis resigns from his position as the political agent of Jhansi and decides to return to England. After his formal leave-taking from the court of Jhansi, the description of the condition of Rani is recorded through the
eyes of Sundar who sees her “flying up from her courtroom and running to her room in haste...as she slammed the door shut behind her and slid its iron bolt shut before bursting into loud sobbing breaths” and holds herself back thinking that “Rani Lakshmibai would prefer to think that her grief at Major Ellis’s departure had passed unnoticed by all” (Misra 274-75). In relating the secret outburst of the Rani through Sundar, the author subtly establishes the authenticity of this emotional liaison as a thing witnessed by the Rani’s attendant in the inner chambers of the palace – thus quite naturally unknown to the writers of nationalist historiography.

The gender perspective resonates all through the narrative. After the departure of Major Ellis, as Captain Skene arrives at Jhansi with his wife and family, Misra appropriates this opportunity to re-assert the difference of Jhansi from the other states of 19th century India, and thus Margaret Skene observes on reaching the palace of Jhansi – “how like woman’s palace it looked...small and exquisite and quite unlike the sweeping splendours of the Mughal palaces she had seen in Delhi and Agra” (Misra 278). Women across boundaries are seen to integrate in their understanding of each other’s plight as “…Margaret could see, from the mauve shadows under her eyes and a smile that did not quite reach her eyes, that she was a woman encased in a strange kind of luminous grief” (Misra 281).

Apart from the general discontent against the East India Company highlighted by the experience of Jhansi and cursorily discussed through Ellis’s visit to Awadh before his resignation, the novel takes up the central subject of the Uprising directly as Dewan Rao
Bande, the prime minister of Rani Lakshmibai tells her about “a stack of mouldy chappatis, carefully wrapped and delivered at the European barracks at Jhansi cantonment” mentioned to him by Captain Skene in a “casual conversation” (Misra 291). The second reference is brought in when Lakshmibai reads about Mangal Pande in *The Mofussilite* where the sepoy had been said to be “under the influence of a narcotic agent” and inquires of Dewan Rao Bande why such a matter had not been covered in the *Delhi Gazette* (Misra 294). To this the latter replies — “…an English-language paper would prefer to have the man appear to be deranged or suffering from drug-induced delusions rather than acting out of genuine conviction against them!” (ibid).

It is in this manner that Misra blends history with analysis and authenticates the same as the probable other side of the known scenario of the Uprising of 1857 by selecting certain historical characters as her speakers and witnesses. The Rani’s keenly administrative response to this context is noteworthy here, as she tells Dewan Bande Rao — “It is so clear to me that they have, by hanging that man, duly provided all those disaffected troops with the hero they have been waiting for these past months. If they do not find some solution quickly, or at least try to make amends, they will soon have not just one Mangal Pandey but a hundred in their midst!” (Misra 295). Thus with the departure of Ellis, the arrival of Captain Skene and the gradual surfacing of the social currents of the Uprising, the Rani now begins to be portrayed in a different light — where her farsightedness and understanding of people and situations gains priority.

The description of the outbreak at Meerut and Delhi is provided while relating how unaffected Jhansi had remained through all this upheaval. It is Moropant Tambe, the
father of Lakshmibai, who is first informed by Nanasahib and Tanita Tope about the
details of the proposed Rising, saying—“...go now and inform my sister Rani
Lakshmibai, of these fortuitous events. So far, we have not involved her in our fight
against the British because she has had her own concerns to deal with. But now the time
is ripe for us to unite, both in spirit and in arms” (Misra 301). Unlike the mainstream
belief, therefore, in Misra’s narrative it is from Moropant that Lakshmibai learns about
the fall of Delhi and the proceedings of the Rising. On having heard about the plight of
Bahadur Shah Zafar forced to give shelter to the rebels, her note of disapproval finds
expression as she says—“what could an old man like him, a poet and a dreamer, hope to
contribute to the plans of such a murderous army, Baba!” (Misra 303). In applying such
epithets before the people later celebrated as the first freedom fighters of India, Misra
problematises the question of gaze by blending the missing threads of probable history
with the logical capability of a contemporary creative writer.

Even in this period of turmoil, Misra portrays Lakshmibai standing “at the shrine of
Mahalakshmi” and praying for Ellis’s “safe return to England” (Misra 304). The dilemma
of an individual in power is revealed as the Rani is “torn between wanting to pledge blind
allegiance to anyone who may help unseat the British at Calcutta and needing at any cost
(even if that were her own) to maintain the peace of her land” (Misra 305). She is shown
to be distanced from even her father who was now all in favour of the Uprising and as the
rebels arrive at Jhansi, her first reply to Gul Mohammed, the guard, is: “I will not be
threatened by such ruffians. What good reason do we have to even commune with these
murderous brutes?” (Misra 310). However, finally, she is compelled to spare them
money, arms and horses on the "condition attached that they are never to return here" (Misra 311).

As per Misra's portrayal, Lakshmi Bai provides shelter to the English women and children against the wishes of her father and others "partly with Robert's memory in mind" (Misra 315). On being forced from all corners, she finally writes to Captain Skene — "My people are straining at their perception of my disloyalty to our own fight for justice", and urges him not to leave the women there any longer for she could not ensure their safety even within the fort (Misra 321). She thus arranges for a meeting with Risaldar Khan of the rebel troops and pleads him to ensure a safe passage for the English women and children to Datia, to which the latter agrees. However, what follows is the slaughter at Jhokan Bagh where the rebels kill all the English women and children along with the two Englishmen who accompanied them. As Lakshmi Bai looked upon the scenario, her shock and terror leading to a complete dissociation of the self is described thus: "Lakshmi Bai heard a scream as she looked out the massacred bodies strewn on the distant ground...she could hear that bestial desperate wailing, realizing with sudden terror that the voice was her own, emerging involuntarily from her gullet as though it had somehow got separated from the rest of her body" (Misra 329).

In Misra's novel, as she moves through the various historical details, the political leaders of the Uprising, including Nana Sahib, are not projected to have been responsible for the inhuman slaughters of women and children. Even with respect to Kanpur, Nana Sahib is portrayed to have been innocent of the happenings at Satichaura Ghat and Bibighar —
both being his attempts at helping the women and children but both devastated by the fury of the unruly sepoys who did not abide by his orders. The “retribution” led by General Neill, therefore, becomes an act based on primary injustice on the part of the Indian sepoys. Nevertheless, the figureheads like Lakshmibai and Nanasahib who come to be misunderstood in the light of these events, thus, emerge to be tragic in bearing the burden of the crime they did not commit and even then fighting against injustice till the end of their lives.

The turn of the tide at Jhansi is projected as Lakshmibai receives a letter from Major Erskine in response to her own which warns about examining “the conduct of everyone involved in the mutiny and massacre before dealing with them accordingly” and from where she learns to have become “a marked woman in British eyes” who had “viciously massacred a helpless group of women and children under false promises of refuge in Jhansi fort” (Misra 357). It was only consequentially that Lakshmibai had the “royal standard” of Jhansi “hooked onto the flagstaff by the palace sentries”, thereby reassuring her people about the stability of administration in the state as a responsible queen (Misra 359). It is from this point that she begins to raise an army for her own state, including women, and maintains regular correspondence with Nanasahib and Tantia Tope.

In this situation General Rose reaches Jhansi to find them actively resisting foreign suppression and the justification provided by Lakshmibai in the novel says – “Jhansi was blameless when it gave refuge to their people. They have responded to our kindness with blame and suspicion and now cannot expect us to open our doors to them again. And, if it
is Jhansi that they want, tell them they will have to take on its rani first” (Misra 365). The cause of Jhansi is thus justified in being a party to the Uprising and Misra very elaborately paints the historicity of the event trying to reflect the diversity of causes which were merged together under the unified banner of anti-imperialist resistance in 1857.

All this while, Misra portrays Ellis in England eagerly awaiting news from India and petrified at the mention of the Uprising – that which he had been apprehensive about right from his visit to Meerut before leaving India in 1857. He speculates the situation in Jhansi and the condition of Lakshmibai. On reading about the massacre at Jhokan Bagh, he knows that the blame would fall entirely on Lakshmibai and “prayed” that she would “somehow be spared the wrath and the vengeance of his people” (Misra 332). He is portrayed as an onlooker who reminisces the times past and grieves his inability to relate to the reports of the present scenario from India: “Those names, those childish names now chilled Ellis’s blood. How did once laughing children ever grow into murderers? Little Mani and her friends, Nana and Tantia. Now murderers, mutineers of the worst sort” (Misra 363). He eventually decides to travel back to India after hearing of the death of Rani Lakshmibai.

After the fierce battle at Jhansi and the defeat due to lack of proper communication from Tantia Tope who was supposed to assist Jhansi with his troops, the conflict and contradiction within Lakshmibai the Rani, who has to keep up her courage and Lakshmibai the individual, apprehensive of what was to follow finds expression as the
author observes — “What a burden to be acclaimed for qualities of courage that had not even been tested. She almost smiled at the irony of it. How had it ever come to be that she was so hailed for valour and yet so fearful; so loved and yet so alone…” (Misra 376). Soon she is compelled to leave Jhansi with Damodar Rao, Sundar and Kashi while Jhalkaribai is entrusted with the responsibility of disguising as the queen to mislead the English troops.

Jhansi is devastated and Lakshmibai joins Nanasahib and Tantia Tope at Kalpi to continue the battle against foreign encroachment. That the novel is authored by a female pen emerges distinctly as even in such times of immense danger, glimpses of domestic life behind the camps and maternal warmth are woven into the text with careful finesse – as for instance, in the mention of Damodar who “solemnly saluted her [the Rani] and refused to bestow the requested kiss” before she left for the battle (Misra 385). The failure of Tantia Tope in communicating effectively in the battlefield is repeatedly stressed upon through various occurrences and despite the unison in cause and action, the difference of Lakshmibai as an individual is maintained all through, especially when she sits near her dying mare Sarangi, reflecting – “What was war but the loss of loved ones? And in the name of those abstruse things that Nana and Tantia seemed so keen on – pride and territory and titles” (Misra 390). This marks a stage in the course of the narrative where the reader may clearly discern the process of the author allotting subjectivity to Lakshmibai in retrospect, for the experience of war and loss relates directly with the present times, transcending the historic specificity of the event contextualized.
After the taking over of Gwalior, amidst the celebratory symbolic coronation organized by Nanasahib, the fact that even the people of Gwalior idolized their spirit of resistance in Rani Lakshmibai, is portrayed as the omniscient narrator observes – “It was as though the Gwalior troops had waited long for an inspiring figure of resistance and finally found one in the fearless figure of the rani of Jhansi, her small son strapped behind her back” (Misra 392). In creating a visual of Lakshmibai thus with her son strapped behind her back, it is the image of the mother as also that of the queen rising to fight single-handedly against oppression that is celebrated – the child symbolizing her responsibility as also the meaning of her existence. This is perhaps the area where Lakshmibai merges with the popular image and the conceptualization of the nation as the mother.

In Misra’s narrative, much space is thus given to establish the playful bond the Rani shared with her son Damodar and her concern towards him. Her devotion towards her land is expressed finally with her death at the battle of Kotah-ki-Sarai as she fell to the ground and “could see drops scatter to the ground...like rubies glittering in the dust. As though that were their place; blood and earth, earth and blood, the two belonging together as much as a pair of lovers destined to bring each other anguish”, followed by the final mythological simile where she is said to have been “like poor tormented Ganga-devi who sacrificed her life so her children could live” (Misra 399). By the use of this image, Rani Lakshmibai – the historical figure is re-incarnated as what she stands to symbolize to the Indian nation even 150 years after the event, and gradually the individual Mani invoked in the course of the narrative fades away into oblivion.
Misra’s historical epic of Rani Lakshmibai concludes ambiguously with an Epilogue as Robert Ellis arrives at Jhansi after having received the news of the death of “the Rebel Queen” (Misra 404). It is here that through Ellis’s reports gathered from the local people Misra re-establishes the legend of the Rani, who as her people believed, did not die in the battle at all. Ellis observes that “only the British seemed convinced that Rani Lakshmibai had taken a mortal wound in battle” while her own people believed “it had not been Rani Lakshmibai’s funeral at all” (Misra 408). The immortality of the spirit as also the self is rekindled as the people of Jhansi tell Ellis – “Our rani-sahiba lives...of course, she must wear a burkha and live the anonymous life of a Muslim woman, mind, for you never know if the British generals might still want their revenge. But she is in a city not that far from here. And, sometimes...she returns to her beloved Jhansi, cloaked and veiled...to see how we fare, to share still in the joys and sorrows of her people” (Misra 409).

Unity with the Prologue is achieved as Ellis spots a woman in burkha at the market with “a certain familiar tilt of the head” and as she turns to “walk away from him”, disappearing into the crowd (Misra 410-11). The narrative of Lakshmibai and Ellis thus concludes on a note of pathos where two worlds may still have rediscovered each other and yet did not -- which not only authenticates the possibility of such a parallel narrative of intrigue in those times of bloodshed and violence but also in retaining an ambiguous stance, adheres to historicity – of the two nations as well as the individual lives.

Explaining her stance in the novel, Misra writes in the Author’s Note – “...in placing a love story – albeit unspoken and unfulfilled – at the core of the book, I was concerned
that I would be upsetting those Indian sentiments that have been carefully schooled into seeing Rani Lakshmibai as virtuous and valiant and no more...I had to find the woman behind the warrior and, as various serendipitous events unfolded during the creative process, I convinced myself that the spirit of Rani Lakshmibai was hovering benevolently around me somewhere" (Misra vii). This statement clearly provides a glimpse of the mind of the creative writer which enables her to represent a character or an event as perceived by the subjective self.

The representations of the Uprising of 1857 from the Indian point of view thus explored provide an idea of the manner in which the historicity of the event gradually came to create an impact on creative artists across languages and genres and the pattern in which it came to be inextricably linked with the consciousness of Indianness. Variously focused and projected, the Uprising, even after the passage of 150 years, therefore, stands to embody the very spirit of establishing one’s existence through active resistance of Imperialist domination. These creative representations offer contrapuntal readings of this historical event by ushering in the scope for alternative discourse amidst the rigid disciplinarian and date-bound conclusive approaches generally adopted by the historiographers. By contemporizing the spirit of resistance as the question of an individual’s right to existence and interrogating hegemonic notions of loyalty through regret over mishaps and massacres, it is perhaps through such re-readings and representations of history that humankind gradually stands empowered to overcome the parochialism of partial perception – a condition essential in fostering the development of
a nation as tolerant and accommodative in the pervading present scenario of a global diaspora.

* Translations used are mine unless specified.

Notes:

1. Discussed in Chapter 7 – *Representation of 1857 in Films*.

2. Discussed in Chapter 4 - *Non-fictional accounts of the Rising from the Indian point of view*.


4. See Chapter 4.

5. Discussed in Chapter 3 - *Non-fictional accounts of the Rising from the English point of view*.

6. The image of the commemorative stamp issued in her name has been included in Chapter 8.

7. See Chapter 4.


10. Ibid.
11. In Shyam Benegal’s Junoon, however, the narrative voice is throughout ascribed to the third person omniscient narrator/the camera perhaps to maintain an objective distance, and thereby, a neutral standpoint.

12. Many of these characters have been left untouched in Shyam Benegal’s film, perhaps, in order to maintain compactness.

13. In Ruskin Bond’s novel, the white pigeons are employed as a motif to describe the return of the Englishmen to Shahjahanpur who “come flying like white pigeons which, when disturbed, fly away, and circle, and come down to rest again. White pigeons from the hills!” (Bond 88).

14. A different reading of this event is offered by Christina Rossetti’s poem ‘In the Round Tower at Jhansi 1857’, discussed in Chapter 5.