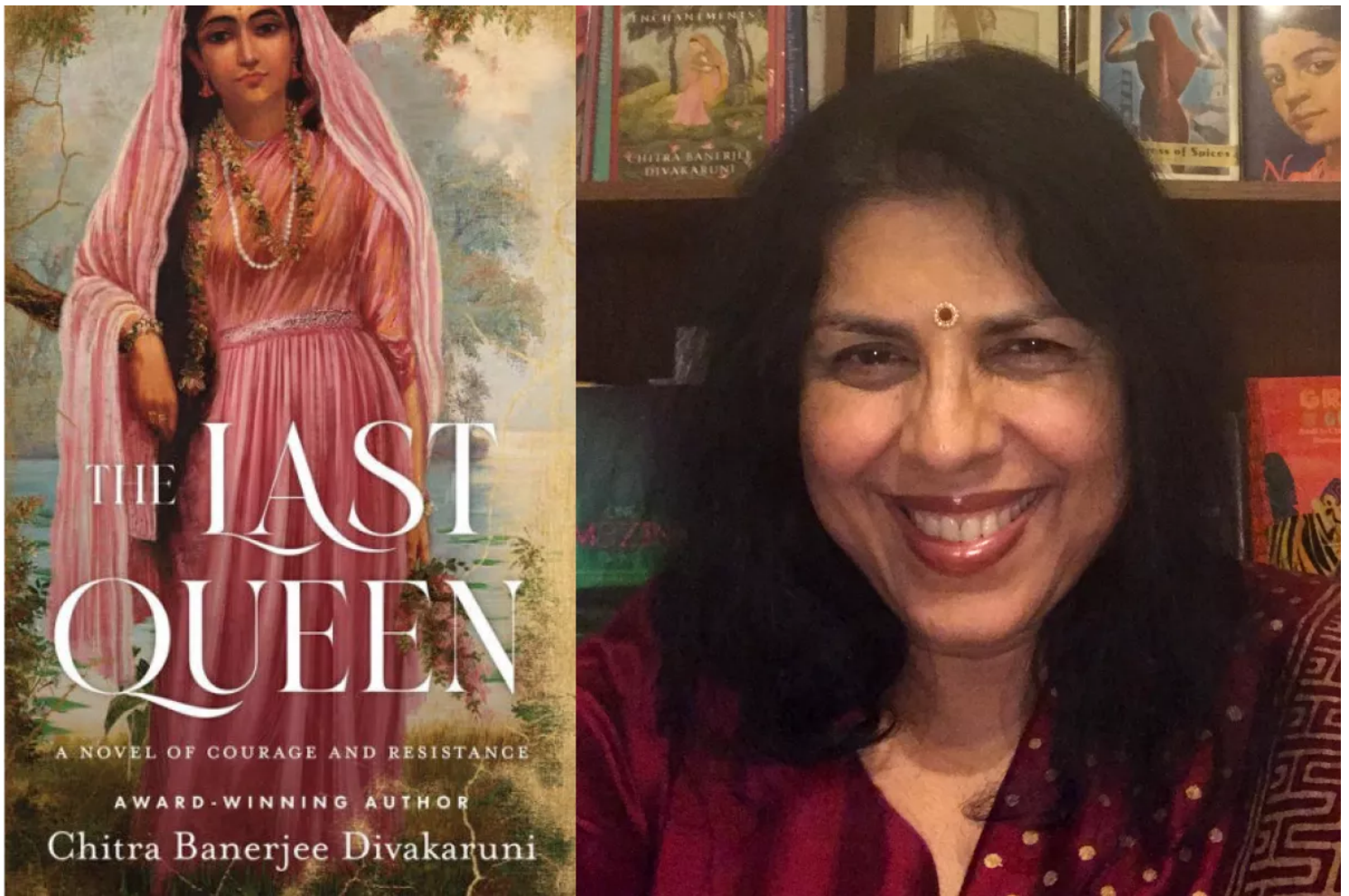




BOOKS

In her new novel, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
rediscovers India's long lost queen



Chitra Divakaruni and her latest book, "The Last Queen." (Courtesy photo by Murthy Divarakuni)

In her new historical novel 'The Last Queen,' Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes about the life of Rani Jindan, the last queen of the Punjab region of India in the 1800s

BY DEAN NELSON

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There was something about the face on the screen that made her do it.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the celebrated Indian novelist who will be in San Diego Oct. 13 and 14, saw the regal face, the dignity, the courage, and immediately knew that this woman had a story, and that she was the one who needed to tell it.

“It hit me like a thunderbolt,” she said. “I couldn’t stop thinking about her. It was as if she was calling out to me.”

The face was that of Rani Jindan Kaur — she was popularly known as Rani Jindan, the last queen of the Punjab region of India in the 1800s. Divakaruni was in Kolkata at an arts festival to promote her book “Before We Visit the Goddess,” and walked into the auditorium as a presenter was describing a famous diamond worn by this queen.

“The topic at the moment was the jewel, but I was struck by who was wearing the jewel,” Divakaruni said. “I set aside the book I was working on and immediately began working on telling this woman’s story.”

Telling women’s stories — particularly those who are unseen or misunderstood — has been Divakaruni’s strength as a writer. She wrote short stories, then novels, then novels that explored Indian mythology and retold that country’s ancient epics, and now has written her first historical novel, “The Last Queen.”

Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, a professor emeritus from San Diego State University’s Department of Women’s Studies, said that Divakaruni’s emphasis on women as main characters sets her apart from many novelists.

“She writes about love and desire and sexuality and rights — all with women protagonists looking for agency,” Ahmed-Ghosh said. “Her writing resonates with

immigrants especially, but she also tells the stories of strong women who aren't stereotypes."

"The Last Queen" is in a genre that is a departure for Divakaruni.

"I never saw myself as a historical novelist," she said. "But her story captivated me."

Rani Jindan was the royal kennel keeper, who caught the attention of the king, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, a powerful Sikh ruler trying to keep the British from taking over the region. They married and had a son who was 5 when the king died, which elevated her into a place of power.

"We know about the father and the son, but she is largely absent in the historical accounts," Divakaruni said. "She's the invisible space between them, and I wanted to do something about that. I wanted to paint in this space."

The British viewed Rani Jindan as a threat to their colonization plans, Divakaruni said, so they tried to push her to the corners. They published lies about her, put her in prison, and took her young son away so that he could be raised in England.

The book tells of the son returning to India, reuniting with his mother, and the common people of Punjab rallying around her.

"She was fallible, as all heroes are," Divakaruni said, "and I don't shy away from those flaws, but it was her authenticity and strength that drew people to her. She never gave up."

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF



THE FOREST *of* ENCHANTMENTS
CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
is writing at the very
top of her game'

WILLIAM
DALRYMPLE

the LAST
QUEEN

The cover of the Indian edition of "The Last Queen," by Chitra Divakaruni. (Courtesy photo)

And while her other novels set in India have received positive reviews and been made into movies, reviews in India for "The Last Queen" are the best she has ever received. The Times of India, which usually reserves its top honors for books by writers who live in India, gave it their highest award.

"I think the people of India recognize that there was more to her story than they were told," Divakaruni said. "She was lost and now she was found."

Researching Rani Jindan's story during the pandemic was both a blessing and a curse. It was a curse because Divakaruni could not travel to the specific places from the queen's history to experience and touch and smell and observe. It was a blessing because the talented librarians at the University of Houston, where she teaches, were able to produce paintings and photos from the queen's era that made Divakaruni see as they really were.

"The photos and art preserved the original atmosphere," she said. "In-person would have been re-created and maybe even touristy."

But this book is not just for those interested in history, she insists.

"Her story can teach us a lot today," she said. "The British could finally defeat her because no one came to her aid. Much like in the U.S., we only protect our factions, and not our country. It's a sad but timely lesson."

Given England's history with colonizing India, Divakaruni said she had mixed feelings when she heard about Queen Elizabeth's death last month.

“I had nothing against her personally, but she was in a position of cultural power and she could have addressed England’s history with India,” Divakaruni said. “If she had said something about the system she inherited, that would have made a difference.”

Writing “The Last Queen” changed Divakaruni as a writer. It forced her into learning more about colonization and de-colonization, which is the topic of her next historical novel, “Independence,” about the partition of India and Pakistan. It explores what independence means for women and for a country. Her evolution has made her more attentive to what it means for her to be a writer.

“I want to be an instrument for whatever story comes through me,” she said. “This particular story came to me as if a force told me to write it, and I could not dishonor that voice.”

Did Rani Jindan encourage Divakaruni during the writing process?

“No,” she said with her characteristic laugh. “She gave me the first push and then said, ‘You’re on your own, baby.’”

Local appearances

- All of her appearances in San Diego are open to the public. She’ll be at San Diego State University Oct. 13 in a talk titled “Unsilenced: Women’s Voices In Indian and Diasporic Literature.”

The event is sponsored by the school’s Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, the Department of English and Comparative Literature, the Department of Women’s Studies, the Women’s Resource Center, and the Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Resource Center. A reception will be held at 3:30 p.m. at the APIDA Center, and an author talk is at 5 p.m. at the Student Services West. Free.

- On Oct. 14, she will be at Point Loma Nazarene University at 1:30 p.m. in Colt Hall for a discussion of her book. That event is sponsored by PLNU’s Department of

Literature, Journalism, Languages and Writing. Free.

- She'll be at Warwick's bookstore Oct. 14 at 7:30 p.m. Free, but reservations required. warwicks.com/event/divakaruni-2022

Dean Nelson is the founder and director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University and the founder and host of the annual Writer's Symposium By The Sea.

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