



The Context

Quarterly e journal of language, literary and cultural studies

Publication details and instructions for authors:

<http://www.magnuspublishing.com>

This is an Open Access Journal distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License

[CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

The Royal Matriarch of Basavaraj Naikar's *The Queen of Kittur*

Dr J Pamela

Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English,
Kasthurba College for Women, Villianur, Pondicherry. TN, India.

Published online: 01 May 2015

Article Number: TCissn.2349-4948/2.2a040

To cite this article: Pamela, J. "The Royal Matriarch of Basavaraj Naikar's *The Queen of Kittur*". The Context, 2.2 (2015): 127-134. Web.

© 2015 Pamela J; licensee Magnus Publishing.

The electronic version of this article is available at:

<http://www.magnuspublishing.com/thecontext/2349-4948-40.pdf>

Abstract

Basavaraj Naikar's *The Queen of Kittur* (2009) is recent addition to recreation of the glorious past in which royal women have lived rich. Naikar's book is a tribute to Indian history. Naikar, through well-researched historical facts, attempts at portraying the life of one of the Indian nationalist queens, Rani Chennamma of Kittur of South India, who fought against the British insurgency in frequent encounters with the troops of the British East India Company in 1824.

Keywords: *royalty, women, history, matriarchy*

The Royal Matriarch of Basavaraj Naikar's *The Queen of Kittur*

Dr J Pamela

Royalty has always been a significant aspect of India. Kings and Queens have existed since time immemorial. They have ruled, fought, deliberated, won and sometimes failed. Their lives have always been an enigma to the common man. Yet, history has contributed magnanimously towards enlightening the contemporary reader about their grandiose lives, the power that they wielded over their subjects and the initiative that they could provide to their subordinates.

Many royal women from India have proved their mettle in the political scenario as history has recorded. Several Indian English novels have recreated the glorious past in which these royal women have lived. Vimala Raina's *Ambapali* (1962), A.S. Panchapakesa Ayyar's *The Legions Thunder Past* (1947), *Baladitya: A Historical Romance of Ancient India* (1930), Shehana Dasgupta's *Razia: The People's Queen* (2001), Jyoti Jafa's *Nurjahan: A Historical Novel* (1978), T.N. Murari's *Taj: A Story of Mughal India* (1985), G.D. Khosla's *The Last Mughal* (1986), Bhagwan S. Gidwani's *The Sword of Tipu Sultan* (1976), S. Gopalan's *Old Tanjore: An Historical Novel* (1938), Manorama Ramakrishna Modak's *Single Is the Wheel* (1978) and Manohar Malgonkar's *The Devil's Wind: Nana Saheb's Story* (1972) are a few examples. These royal women have led kingdoms; some have held the reins, while some others have shown the way to the ones on the throne. A few others have brought down kingdoms and rulers too. Basavaraj Naikar's *The Queen of Kittur* (2009) is yet another addition to this rich tribute to Indian history.

Naikar, through well-researched historical facts, attempts at portraying the life of one of the Indian nationalist queens, Rani Chennamma of Kittur of South India, who fought against the British insurgency in frequent encounters with the troops of the British East India Company in 1824. The publisher's blurb hails her as "the earliest Queen who rebelled against the British rulers thirty-three years before Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi came into the scene". In his Preface to *The Queen of Kittur*, Naikar traces his historical novel to the genuine sources of historical fiction—monographs, letters and official records of the East India Company, folk songs and even oral information – that were available to him(viii). What makes the narrative impressive is the fact that Naikar, with complete authorial caution, desists from glorification of the rebel queen when in truth she is curbed by the superior force of the British army even after a successful upheaval. This is exactly the dual role that Naikar has donned -- one as a historian and the other as a novelist -- which he has carried off with élan. Incidentally R. G. Collingwood points out in his *The Idea of History* the difference between the historian's work and the novelist's work:

The novelist has a single task only: to construct a coherent picture, one that makes sense. The historian has a double task: he has both to do this, and to construct a picture of things as they really were and of events as they really happened (246).

In being both the novelist and the historian, the author has challenged the “British-authored accounts of events of Indian history” which, as M.A. Jeyaraju criticises in his “A Critical Survey of Indian English Historical Fiction”, are “deliberately distorted” (3). The author has also had another objective in taking up the task of recording history in the form of fiction. As he says in his Preface, though he was impressed by Tom Gibson’s fictionalising Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi’s life in his *A Soldier of India*, the indelible mark of an “outsider’s point of view” had a disconcerting effect on him (vii). Thus his attempt at fictionalising the life of the patriotic and heroic Rani Chennamma is admirable.

Even as the titular queen is introduced in the novel, she appears as the fearless and just warrior challenging the King of Kittur, Raja Mallasarja, himself. When Raja Mallasarja meets Chennamma for the first time, he is impressed. Like two expert hunters, they claim a dead tiger. The tiger struck by Chennamma’s arrow is a sight worthy to behold for a king. Sadashiva Wodeyar explains in his *Rani Chennamma*, the reasons for the King’s second marriage with Chennamma. Drawing answers from legends in the form of poems and folk-songs, Sadashiva Wodeyar in his *Rani Chennamma* states that in spite of a first Rani, Rudramma, well-educated and trained in the art of warfare, Raja Mallasarja married Chennamma for he “was overcome by her beauty and courage, and lost his heart to her” (28).

The political scenario was nevertheless tense. Raja Mallasarja himself was under the Peshwa dominion. In 1802, when Raja Mallasarja chanced to meet Lord Wellesley, he makes a subtle suggestion regarding the declaration of autonomy of a tributary prince to him. In spite of his slavish activities he only ends up making enemies with the Peshwas as well as Wellesley.

Rani Chennamma is well-known for her equanimous interest in all religions and beneficial nature towards all kinds of people. When Saidansab of Amatur approaches her with a requisition for donation towards renovating a mosque, he is discouraged by courtiers. But Rani Chennamma is graceful enough to give away money from her own purse and disapproves of the courtiers’ opinion that Muslims have always been enemies of Hindus. She opines “Mussalmans are also the subjects of our kingdom. Our unwillingness to help them will be tantamount to grave injustice” (47). She also justifies her stance thus: “We cannot generalise from a few isolated cases and hate the entire community of Mussalmans” (48). With a ten thousand weighing heavy along with the Queen’s love for her subjects, Saidansab tearfully says that she is like a mother to all of them (49). The communal harmony that the Queen can bring in by her simple gesture is example to her competence. Raja Mallasarja is a futile ruler. Neither his judgement nor his decisions are surefooted. Unsure of the outcome of his meeting with Bajirao, the Peshwa, he leaves for Edur and then to Pune only to be imprisoned there in Shaniwar Wada and to fall ill fatally. After his death and the crowning of his son Sivalingarudrasarja, Rani Chennamma stands as a symbol of royal integrity and generosity. Though young Sivalingarudrasarja is crowned and she makes her son Prince Sivabasavaraja, his senior and thus the rightful heir to the throne, to take the oath of *bhairava kankana*, to play only guard of security to the newly anointed king. The oath which the Queen believes with all her heart reads thus: “I shall not long for any kind of power or privileges. I shall be the bodyguard of my younger brother, Raja Sivalingarudrasarja. I am ever ready to lay down my life whenever there is danger for

our kingdom” (64). The courtiers and the townsfolk appreciate the Queen for having been selfless and for having carried out the dead king’s wishes.

The new king, Raja Sivalingarudrasarja is also a misguided royalty. Complaints like the *jangamas* and other priests not getting enough alms and the soldiers not getting enough grains for their sustenance from the palace begin pouring in. When the loyal Diwan Gurusiddappa finds all this disconcerting and wants to retire, Rani Chennamma disapproves of his decision. Her persuasive talents strengthen the kingdom to a large extent.

In spite of Rani Chennamma’s stronghold in the administration of the kingdom, Raja Sivalingarudrasarja wishes to join hands with the East India Company to put down the surging native rulers. In spite of Rani Chennamma’s love for the entire mankind, she still believes that “British are the common enemies of all Indians” (72). Nonetheless, as a responsible administrator, she advises the young king to be careful in his decisions. But the immature ruler pays heed to the warnings of neither the queen nor the courtiers. The battle where he sides with the Company is victorious for the latter, while Kittur faces irreparable damages. The Queen’s only son Sivabasavaraja is killed. Even in the face of loss, her patriotic vigour does not fail to exhibit itself, for, the queen is satisfied that her son has lived up to the *bhairava kankana* and has laid down his life for the kingdom (75). The author succeeds in portraying a selfless royal matriarch who puts the welfare of her kingdom first.

Naikar faithfully follows the course of history that he records the native kings with all their foibles. Hence he puts it clearly that the end of the Fourth Maratha War marks another decadent stage in the history of Kittur. The kingdom loses its state of being independent and comes under British power. Meanwhile, Raja Sivalingarudrasarja’s meeting with the Political Agent Thackeray turns fatal. He is poisoned and fails to recover. The queen immediately arranges to find a fitting successor to the childless king. But the adoption has to be approved by the British and the king is wise enough amidst his sickness to draft a letter of confirmation of the heir and also one seeking Thackeray’s permission to adopt.

After the death of Raja Sivalingarudrasarja on 11 September 1824, the young king Raja Sivalingappa (renamed as Sawai Mallasarja II) is crowned with the late king’s letter seeking permission reaching Thackeray at the same time. A displeased Thackeray forces open the kingdom’s treasury and seals it. He also begins usurping parts of the kingdom. These incidents embolden the native rulers to strengthen their unity and stop being callous to the infringement of the foreign rulers into their internal affairs. Rani Chennamma takes charge and orders the native soldiers to open the treasury and keep it under tight security. The wise Queen is well aware that this will incur the wrath of the Company. So foreseeing a direct confrontation with the rulers, Rani Chennamma orders soldiers from every part of the kingdom to be war ready. The Queen’s word is followed like a code and soldiers begin gathering at the capital. The author is able to project a warrior queen who has the ability to lead.

News of the gathering war clouds inside the native kingdom does not fail to reach the British. Thackeray’s attempts at trying to cover them fail miserably. In a bold venture, the Kitturians, who were lying await, make a timely attack and capture the Company’s horse artillery, with 100 horsemen, their wives and children and 36 cannons. When

taken to the Queen's presence, she is surprised at the sight of women and children. She orders the men to be imprisoned but insists that the women and children be treated with decorum and mercy.

When Thackeray comes to know of the Queen's magnanimity towards women and children, he is surprised and pleased. He hopes to impress the kind hearted Rani Chennamma at a meeting where he plans to talk her into surrendering. But his message is rejected owing to the taboo of the royal household that does not permit a white audience with a queen. Thackeray is enraged at the grit of a native female ruler. The author records not only history but also native customs which are part of the Indian perspective.

The 23 of October 1824 marks a turning point in the history of Kittur. The battle between the Kittur troops and the East India Company's men ends with the killing of the political agent Thackeray under orders from Rani Chennamma. Amatur Balappa shoots him and Habsi Ram severs his head (163). This victory does not put the Queen at rest. She also receives information of the Company's gathering more troops. When she meets the High Pontiff of the Kallumath Monastery whom she reveres, he appreciates her bravery and thoughtfulness, but also warns her thus: "this is not the final victory. You will have to be more alert in future. . ." (179).

In her next meeting at the Durbar Hall with all the Sardars of the kingdom, Rani Chennamma pays a generous ear to the opinion of the experienced warriors and administrators and finally concludes, "If all our native kings join together we can fight the Company *sarkar* very easily" (181). The Queen's war-wise strategies seem to bear fruit. They continue to make the Company's representatives hesitant and confused. Her decision on 25 October 1824 to send a small unit of their army to guard the ferry on the Malaprabha River near Mugutkhan-Hubballi was a defence against the Company soldiers from entering Kittur by crossing it. As an after-thought she also asks them to sink all the boats in the river-side. She also orders a small platoon to patrol the road between Mugutkhan-Hubballi and Kittur to keep watch on any intrusion through road. The Queen's keen eye to detail needs appreciation as the Company's representative I.I.O. Donoghue, Assistant Quartermaster General of the Army orders exactly the same course of action that the queen had foreseen. The Queen is dauntless and sends her warning through her lawyer, Mr. Srinivasarao to the Acting Political Agent, Mr. Eden, and again through Vakil Rachappa with an option to cross at Yenagi, only for transportation purpose (207). Eden is unable to stop admiring the able queen.

When the news of Rani Chennamma's bravery reaches Governor Elphinstone, he decides to quell the insurgency. The publication of the Doctrine of Lapse, the proclamation that the State of Kittur lapsed to the Company in consequence to the extinction of the Desai family was ordered by the Governor. This "infamous law struck at the very foundation of Indian heritage", says Jeyaraju in his "Rehabilitation of an Indian Nationalist Hero in Basavaraj Naikar's Novel *The Sun Behind the Cloud*". He points to Naikar's ability to capitalize on history – issueless native rulers forced to seek permission for adoption and their anger at being turned down. The deadline for the surrender of the Kitturians is also set as 20 November 1824. This displeases the queen, yet her maternal instinct takes over in her decision to release the pining wives and children of the Company soldiers (218). But in the case of two political assistants who

were captured, the queen, “with a dignity unusual in a woman” (224), decides to retain them until the Company agrees to their demand for independent statehood.

The queen’s unbending nature is not looked upon kindly by the Governor or his associates, Munroe and Chaplin. They decide to annexe Kittur by force. Native rulers like Patwardhan of Sangli, Gopal Rao, the Chief of Jamakhandi and the chief of Mudhol were ready to send forces to the British camp against the rebellious queen. A battering train is also stationed to hit the Kittur fort’s gate.

Kittur is surrounded by Company’s troops as well as those of other Indian states. The queen is fully aware of the status of her kingdom. Her determination shames those unconvinced warriors. On the other hand, the kingdom is also not devoid of those traitors. Sivabasappa, the chief security officer, in a clandestine meeting with Chaplin exposes all the defence strategies of the kingdom to the Company’s officer in return for a reward that they promise. Chaplin orders the declaration of Martial Law in the country with the intention of cowing down the rebellious kingdom. To the contrary it only makes them more passionate about their kingdom and the Queen-mother’s sovereignty.

The first day of war finds the sudden eruption of gunfire on each other with loss of lives on both sides. The queen is cornered into releasing the political prisoners. But this does not improve the relationship between the two sides. The thirst for blood of the Company soldiers is matched by the native soldiers too, though the latter had only their old-fashioned swords to match the quicker guns of the former.

By the second day the soldiers are disheartened in many ways. The Queen had been harbouring much hope on the King of Kolhapur. The enemies having guessed this had closed all avenues for the King who was stationed at a helpless distance. To crown all this, traitors from inside had sabotaged the cannons of the kingdom. Those powerful guns were all that the warriors relied upon. The queen is pained at the treachery of one of her own which was going to claim much damage. At the most crucial moment, the magazines of Kittur were maimed into silence. That evening the unmistakable sound of the battering train ramming the strong gates of Kittur fort is heard. The final war was fatal to Kittur and the Queen knew it (260).

Soon after the main gates are felled down, the battle intensifies. Much life is lost. Yet Kittur’s doom could not be averted. So the senior courtiers implore to Rani Chennamma to leave the palace and escape to safety along with her two daughters-in-law. But Rani Chennamma refuses gallantly and declares thus: “I am not a coward, though born as a woman. I am the wife of Raja Mallasarja. I shall be with all of you here. Whatever happens to you will happen to me “(263). One cannot fail to admire the mettle of a woman under purda to be so assertive. Naikar succeeds in his portrayal of a royal matriarch who is assertive as well as loving.

By 8 o’clock in the morning of 5 December 1824, the C troops had taken charge of the Kittur fort and the Union Jack is hoisted after the Nandi Dwaja of Kittur is pulled down. Rani Chennamma is a prisoner in her own palace. She does not care for her life for she knows that it is ephemeral. After witnessing the destruction of the glory of the kingdom which she had led successfully, she wonders about the strange course of Destiny. But as is characteristic of the strong-willed queen, the “speculation about the

changing directions of Destiny seemed to give her a new strength of stoic resignation” (271).

The Queen is destined to face further humiliations. She signs documents involving the legal formalities of annexation with a heavy heart. Next, she is transported to Dharwad, along with the other women. The native women are said to mourn her “metaphorical death”, “the exodus of the Rani” and the fort is said to appear like “a fiery hell” in her absence (275). From Dharwad, the queen and her daughters-in-law are taken to Bailahongala and put in the Bailahongala Fort as prisoners (277). The philosophical bent of mind that the Queen possesses is highly appreciable.

After the first few days in prison, the Queen tries to revive herself by busying herself with prayers. Meanwhile her loyal servant Rayanna was secretly gathering a rebel army to retrieve Kittur from the Company. Under the guise of a *jangama*, he meets the queen inside the prison. She is impressed with his plan and happier about the loyalty and love of her subordinate. The young Ranis Virravva and Janakibai derived strength from the royal matriarch, Rani Chennamma. After the latter’s untimely death owing to ill-health, the former, a spirited young girl, matched the queen in patriotism. She secretly funds the rebels of Kittur with money and jewels to continue fighting for the kingdom and finally retrieving it. Unfortunately, the plot is exposed and the Company decides to discourage any such upheavals and so puts her up with a distant relative, who is later instructed to poison her to death, in fear that her mere presence will create political problems to the Company.

The ailing Queen Chennamma has doubts about the death of the young queen, yet, her making enquiries about it is out of her limits. So she merely mourns her death. However, she abstains from taking food and gradually grows weak. On 2 February 1829, she is found dead on her bed. She is mourned properly by the people of Kittur. Even the Company gives her a ceremonious burial by firing a few guns and cannons “in honour of the late queen, who had given such a tough fight to the Company government. They offered her military salute to the accompaniment of band music” (304). The brave queen deserves these honours. She owes it to her integrity to her kingdom and the strength that she exudes. She provides security to her citizens as well as to her young daughters-in-law. An inspiring characteristic is her decisiveness. She is undaunted by the British show of power. Even when kings hesitated, she did not. Her subordinates respected her and were ready to go further with her. To her enemies too, she is an enigma. They are pathetic when they fear her mere living presence.

The novel highlights the theme of honour, glory, patriotism, loyalty, betrayal and defeat in the royal kingdom of Kittur. Rani Chennamma stands as the symbol of the Indian struggle for Independence in South India. She represents female heroism and stands as a model to the entire womankind. Naikar’s historical novel faithfully depicts history from the native point of view which retains the uniqueness of the Indian cultural ethos. It is a novel attempt at depicting the life of a strong-willed queen who has been a challenge to the famed East India Company, and who nevertheless has to succumb to situations. The development of her as a royal matriarch par excellence as well as her extinction in a very dignified way is done at its best at the hands of an able writer like Naikar that even as she fades away from history the Queen of Kittur does not lose her heroic propensity.

Works Cited

Collingwood, R. G. *The Idea of History: With Lectures 1926-28*. 1946. Rev. Ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.

Jeyaraju, M.A. "A Critical Survey of Indian English Historical Fiction". *Gandhigram Literary Review*.1:1(2012): 1-34. Print.

Jeyaraju, M. A. "Rehabilitation of an Indian Nationalist Hero in Basavaraj Naikar's Novel *The Sun Behind the Cloud*." *Indian Journal of Post-Colonial Literatures* 8 (2007): 36-46. Print.

Naikar, Basavaraj. *The Queen of Kittur*. New Delhi: Authorspress, 2009. Print.

Wodeyar, Sadashiva. *Rani Chennamma*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1977. Print.

Dr J Pamela
pamelajeyaraju@gmail.com

