

Representation of Padmavati and the Recurring Image of an 'Ideal Woman'

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Abstract

The paper entitled, "Representation of Padmavati and the Recurring Image of an 'Ideal Woman'" with the representation of Padmavati in the epic titled *Padmavat* by Jayasi and *Padmaavat*, a film adaptation of the epic directed by Bhansali. It also focuses on how people view her today. She is represented as an ideal woman, who sacrificed her own life to preserve her chastity and thereby the honour of her own community. She is attributed all ideal qualities that is expected in a woman. Her adherence to these qualities construed by the patriarchal society and her act of "Jauhar" made her rise to the level of a goddess. However, these qualities are not the mere construction of a community or era alone. It has been existing since time immemorial. There has been a tendency to stereotype women as meek, gentle, submissive etc. since the time of Manu which has found its way into popular myths and legends. The story of Padmavati also borrows this same image of an ideal woman and her glorification.

Keyword: Ideal Woman, Malik Muhammad Jayasi, Padmavati, Patriarchy

Introduction

The paper deals with the representation of Padmavati in the epic titled *Padmavat* by Jayasi and *Padmaavat*, an adaptation of the epic directed by Bhansali. It also focuses on how people view her today. She is represented as an ideal woman, who sacrificed her own life to

preserve her chastity and thereby the honor of her own community. She is attributed all ideal qualities that is expected in a woman. She is known for her incomparable beauty, wit, intelligence, chastity and loyalty. Her adherence to these qualities construed by the patriarchal society and her act of jauhar made her rise to the level of a goddess. However, these qualities are not the mere construction of a community or era alone. It has been existing since time immemorial. Since the time of Manu we can see a tendency to stereotype women as meek, gentle, submissive etc. which has found its way into popular myths and legends. This can be seen in the legend of Sita and Sanyogita. The story of Padmavati also borrows this same image of an ideal woman and her glorification.

This study helps in revealing the hidden ideologies behind the seemingly innocent representation of a Rajput queen in the literary genre and film. Every myth or a legend is not an innocent tale created by the people of that community but it is heavily laden with ideology. Women in many legends and myths are objectified by men. By propagating such ideas about women that they desire, men succeed in constructing an essence for them.

Padmavati was the queen of Mewar and the wife of Ratan Sen, the Rajput ruler of Chittor Fort. For Rajputs, she is like a demigod who is thought to be extremely beautiful, pious, and virtuous and an epitome of honour and self-respect. In short, she is seen as the personification of all the ideal qualities that men expect in a woman and a society attributes to a woman (even what the society expects of women today). Though there is no actual historical evidence to the authenticity of her existence, many, even today, believe that she had really existed and is not merely a legendary character or part of a myth. Her act of 'jauhar' is seen as a heroic act. She is even revered for conforming to the patriarchal norms of her society.

The Padmavati legend appears in many texts across centuries and the most notable among them is the work *Padmavat* (1540 C) by the Sufi composer Malik Muhammad Jayasi.

The legend assumes different versions in the works of different authors and in different context. In all these legends she's praised as an extremely pious and virtuous woman.

Malik Muhammad Jayasi was an Indian Sufi poet who wrote in Awadi which was a language of the common folk during the 15th century. He also wrote in Persian Nasta'liq, which is a traditionally predominant style in Persian calligraphy. 'Jayasi' is actually a nisba, meaning an adjective indicating a person's place of origin, ancestry or tribal affiliation. In the case of Jayasi, he was associated with Jayas which is situated in the present day Uttar Pradesh, which used to be an important Sufi center of medieval India. The dates of his birth and death are not clear but many say that he lived during the reign of Sher Shah as there is a eulogy to Sher Shah Suri in *Padmavat*, with which it begins. He had lost the sight of one eye and the hearing of one ear as a result of small pox. This disfigured his face.

Ramya Sreenivasan states that he attained the status of a Sufi Pir after his death as a result of the legends written about him. The legends claimed that he practiced meditation and that he had the power to change form and the power to bestow blessings such as children. Jayasi made use of Sufi traditions by incorporating state, politics and society in his works. He wrote twenty five works among which the most important one is said to be *Padmavat* (1540). His other works include *Akhiri Kalam* (1529), *Akhravat*, *Kanhavat* etc.

The story of Rani Padmavati has different versions, some in which she was defeated in sword fight by Ratan Sen that made her marry him and some others which say that it was her talking parrot Hiranman that led to their union. The common elements in all these stories are that she was a woman of extraordinary beauty and that she committed the act of Jauhar in order to preserve her chastity. This act gave her a goddess like stature among the Rajputs.

There is no evidence of the existence of Padmavati in Chittor when it was besieged and there's no reference in history that it was the desire for a woman that played an important role in Khilji's interest in conquering the fortress. She can be seen as a mere literary artifact

as she is placed at the center of a story of love and sacrifice. Hence we can say that any depiction of Padmavati cannot be seen as distortion of history as there is no evidence to her existence. She is hence a figment of poetic imagination and is free to be reshaped in the hands of different creators.

Padmavat was hence told and retold over the centuries and across lands. In each retelling some aspects of the story was changed and the key characters including Padmavati. Padmavati, over the years, has been recast as adhering strictly to codes of conduct applied to elite Rajput women. Allegations made against the film are thus rooted in the expectation, by those familiar with the Rajput or early Hindu nationalist adaptations. They would never accept a Padmavati who displays any sort of sexuality. In all the different versions written about her and the siege of Chittor, she is portrayed as a meek, gentle, pious, loyal and chaste woman who subscribes to all the patriarchal norms of the Rajput society.

Creating, Repeating and Re-asserting the “ideal”

This chapter looks into the representation of Padmavati with emphasis on the epic *Padmavat* by Malik Muhammad Jayasi, the film *Padmaavat* directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. She is not an innocent creation of Jayasi, but her image is a recurring one of an ‘ideal woman’ that existed in India since ancient times. I would also like to study who Padmavati is to the Rajput community and to trace her journey from being a figment of a poet’s imagination to a goddess among Rajputs.

The central characters of Jayasi’s epic are Padmavati, RatanSen, who is her husband and AlauddinKhilji, the ‘lustful’ Sultan of Delhi who was so obsessed with the description of Padmavati’s beauty that he wanted to possess her. There are several historical documents to prove the existence of Ratansen and Khilji whereas the first record of Padmavati was the epic by Jayasi, titled as *Padmavat*, and several writers and historians after him appropriated this version and included it as part of history, through its largely unreliable. Alauddin Khilji is

said to be one of the most powerful rulers of the Delhi Sultanate and was the second ruler of Khilji Dynasty after Jalal-ud-din Khilji. The Khilji Dynasty is said to have lasted from 1290 to 1320 approximately. According to historical records, he was on a ruthless mission to expand his kingdom and that Rajputana was one of his main targets.

Ratan Sen, also known by the names Ratnasimha or Rawal Ratan Sen was the ruler of the Mewar kingdom. Being a member of Rawal branch of Guhila dynasty, he ruled Chittor fort from 1302-1303 when he was defeated by Alauddin Khilji. According to Jayasi's version of the tale, which is often seen as a true tale, Padmavati is said to have been born between 13th and 14th century in Simhala to Gandharvasena and Champavati. She is seen as an ideal woman with ethereal beauty.

The earliest known work that talks about this is an epic by Malik Muhammad Jayasi titled *Padmavat*, written in 1540 CE, which belongs to the genre Sufi 'premakhyan'. It was written in Awadhi. Such tales feature a hero king's quest for union with supreme truth and transcendent beauty. Jayasi's text is a mixture of legend, history and mythology. It is based on Delhi Sultan Alauddin Khilji's siege of Chittor in 1303.

In this work, Padmavati is the daughter of King Gandharvsen of Singhal Kingdom and Champavati. Her friendship with a talking parrot named HIRAMAN was disapproved by her father and he ordered it to be killed. It flew away in order to escape and was captured by a bird catcher who gifted the parrot to Ratansen, the Rajput ruler of Chittor fort. Ratansen, moved by the description, became a yogi, leaving behind his wife Nagmati, and set out on a quest to Sinhala. It was after great difficulties and tests which question his love for her was he able to marry Padmavati. However, his duty as a king beckoned him and he came back to Chittor along with Padmavati. Ratansen tried to build peace between Nagmati, his first wife, and Padmavati.

Meanwhile, Ratansen banished Raghav Chetan, a deceitful Brahmin courtier for misconduct, who later seek shelter at Delhi sulthan Alauddin Khilji's court and took revenge on Ratan Sen by informing Khilji about the unparalleled beauty of Padmavati, which triggered in him a desire to attain Padmavati. Khilji decided to lay siege on Chittor and demand for Padmavati. However, Ratansen refused and instead offered him a tribute which Khilji rejected. As the siege continued, Ratansen invited Khilji to his court in order to negotiate and make peace. There, Khilji managed to get a glimpse of Padmavati (her mirror reflection), which intensified his need to get her as his own. As he was about to leave, Ratansen goes to see him off where Khilji cunningly kidnaps the Rajput king takes him to Delhi.

Padmavati requested help from Gora and Badal, who along with the other warriors of the fort, dressed up as Padmavati and her companions and went to Delhi in palanquins. In a fight that ensued, Gora loses his life and Badal manages to return to Chittor with Ratansen. Consequently he died in a battle fought against Devpal, who had also become enamored by her beauty and had proposed to marry her in his absence. Khilji laid siege to Chittor to obtain Padmavati and knowing what's in store for her, she and her companions commit Jauhar, defeating Khilji's aim and protecting their honor. When Khilji finally conquered the fortress, he found nothing but ashes of Padmavati. The Rajput men too died valiantly, fighting on the battlefield.

Literary representations of Khilji in Jayasi's version and in other variants are not the actual historical representation of the Sultan. He, in real, was a gifted statesman who strengthened the treasury of Delhi Sultanate, expanded the frontiers of his Kingdom and protected North India from the expanding Mongol domain. As for Padmavati, there is no concrete historical evidence present to prove her existence, as already mentioned above.

Padmavat can be seen as a tale which celebrates a Rajput queen's willingness to die rather than to give herself over to a tyrant sultan who coveted her. She is represented as the epitome of beauty and purity by Jayasi. "No such was e'er seen upon the earth. The Apsaras (first leaned to) gaze with unwinking eyes (through gazing at her). For her did Yogins, Yatins and Sannyasins undergo austerities" (Jayasi41). However the fact that she was willing to sacrifice her life in order to preserve her own chastity and the honour of the country raised her to the position of a goddess among Hindus and Rajputs. A halo of honour is given to her supreme sacrifice. She is known for her beauty, valor, chastity, loyalty and heroism. She is represented by Jayasi as an ideal woman and an ideal wife who is subservient to the patriarchal norms of the Rajput community. She embodies bravery and virtue which define the Rajputs. Padmavati also symbolizes wisdom in the epic. Though Alauddin Khilji took on to harsh measures to possess her, she remained steadfast and brave until the very end. She did not give in to any of the 'traps' set by Khilji nor did she give in to King Devpal's attempts to possess her. She is depicted as an actualization of the ultimate male fantasy of feminine beauty and grace, and an epitome of perfection on which the male fantasy sustains itself. She is not an ordinary woman but a woman who is praised for her virtues and qualities which parallels that of goddesses. Her representation seeks to portray her as the perfect model of Indian Womanhood.

Padmavat was told and retold over the centuries and across the land. In each retelling the story as well as the characters underwent alterations. One of the most recent adaptations of it was by Sanjay Leela Bhansali who directed the movie *Padmaavat* (2018), based on Jayasi's epic. The movie does not feature Hiranman, the talking parrot and Raghav Chetan is banished from the palace for peeping into the chamber of the newly wed Padmavati and Ratan Sen. The movie demonizes the Muslim sultan Khilji and presented him in a diabolic light. This again promotes the idea of upholding the Hindu values and beliefs of the nation

against that of Islam which is presented in a negative light. In the movie, there is no reference to Devpal and the clash is between Khilji and Ratan Sen where Ratan is presented as an ideal Rajput ruler, following the values and morals of his religion and custom whereas Khilji is presented as an evil ruler, who betrays even the closest of his kin for his own welfare and selfish motives. He's also presented as a womanizer which again shows the vilification practiced by a major community like Hindus on Muslims. The movie puts together every single stereotype of Muslims in India, amplifies it, and presents it as art. There is also a reference to Khilji's homosexual orientation which is depicted through his relation with Malik Kafur. In the movie "Padmaavat", the queen herself takes up the responsibility of rescuing her husband and travels to Delhi in order to rescue him from Khilji's imprisonment, while in the epic it was Gora and Badal alone who dress as Padmini women, along with other Rajput warriors who attack Khilji's army and saves their king. The movie valorizes the act of Jauhar which is seen as an act of liberation. It can be seen as a glorification of Sati.

In the movie, like that of the epic, she is represented as an extremely beautiful, chaste and loyal woman. She is shown as a woman of beauty as well as a woman of rational thought and intelligence. In spite of her ability to think critically over matters, she remains submissive to patriarchy and the ideas of customs and traditions that the elite Rajputs community promotes. She is shown as a woman who is capable of hunting, during which she meets Ratan Sen. Her intelligence and knowledge is so much so that even the Brahmin scholar of Chittor fort is impressed by it. She is shown as a brave, clever and a woman who is capable of taking logical decisions. This can be seen when Padmavati takes it upon herself to rescue her husband and travels to Delhi in order to save him from the clutches of Alauddin Khilji. She is also shown as a woman of perseverance who in spite of unfavourable circumstances, never gives up hope and encourages her husband to put on a good fight. She is highly religious and pious. She believes in the loyalty to her husband is wary of other men who try to seek her

affections. One such man is Raghav Chetan who is shown to have a small obsession over the queen. The Sultan of Delhi, Alauddin Khilji, is obsessed by her and is in a mad pursuit to possess her throughout the movie. Though she's aware of this, she never yields to him even though the lives of her own husband and everyone in Chittor are in danger. Even when Khilji visited Chittor, she only let him see her own reflection. She led the other women of Chittor when the men were out fighting against Khilji's army and when Ratan Sen and his army were defeated, Padmavati decided to preserve the honor not just of herself, but of her husband and her community through the act of Jauhar. A large Jauharkund was prepared, and she, followed by the other women of Chittor, jumped into the pit. This act is the most apt example which shows her she was extremely chaste and that she preserved her honor.

Historians claim that Padmavati was born around 1500s but this time is two hundred years away from the timeline of Khilji. Hence it is only appropriate to say that Padmavati is nothing but a figment of Jayasi's imagination to which many other historians and professors in India agree. Some others believe that she was the Rajput queen during 13-14 century. Even the works considered to be the most reliable sources of history of medieval times written by Ziauddin Banari, Feroz Shah and Amir Khusrau do not mention anything about Padmavati.

Today, Padmavati image is one that is shackled in the confines of patriarchy. Padmavati appears to be a mere prop in a scene occupied by kings and courtiers and has lost her autonomous voice. It was this Padmavati who was deified and even remains to be so. She is seen as the embodiment of Hindu values, valor, bravery and purity. She has been molded as a figure adhering strictly to codes on conduct applied to elite Rajput women. Her heroic act serves as an inspiration to many activists even today. Uproars against the film were thus rooted in these expectations of Padmavati. This row shows that Padmavati's portrayal is based on the Hindu nation's notion of a dutiful, chaste, Hindu woman who succumbs to patriarchal controls and only exercises her agency within their bounds. Many even today have

their beliefs strongly fixed in her as a goddess. The reason behind this is the glorification of her act of self-immolation. Many view this as a symbol of her purity and justify it without critically questioning it. She is praised by Rajput community as she serves the interest of their patriarchal values and by being subservient to its customs and traditions. She never questioned them and remained silent. This was what men expected an ideal woman to be – beautiful, wise but at the same time to obey without questioning. Hence she was received with much respect and reverence from both men and women of Rajput community. Even though her existence remains largely questionable, they promoted the legend of Padmavati through many literary works and kept her alive through the centuries. She exists not as a legend but as a historical figure today in the minds of many Hindus. This image has a solid or fixed nature which ought not to be disturbed. This was the reason for the uprisals and oppositions that arose during the release of the film *Padmaavat*. Rajputs and Hindus did not want their belief to be distorted in the hands of the filmmaker.

This motif of a divine love intruded by an evil enemy is one that runs throughout the history of Indian history and mythology. However, the women of the defeated stay loyal to their husbands and by doing so become the epitome of chastity and loyalty and are praised as supernatural beings. The story of Sanyogita and that of Sita is strikingly similar to that of Padmavati.

Prithviraj Chauhan was the ruler of Ajmer who fell in love with Sanyogita, the daughter of a rival king Jaichand. Sanyogita was known for her ethereal beauty. Jaichand upon hearing about young love blooming between the couple arranged a ‘swayamvar’ for his daughter which Prithviraj was banned from attending. As a result, Prithviraj abducted her and took her to Delhi as his wife. This led to a divide between Kannauj ruled by Jaichand and Delhi. Muhammad Ghori of Afghanistan, who wanted to establish his rule in India, took advantage of this situation. While Chauhan was obsessed with his new wife, Ghori attacked

Bhatinda, the border of Prithviraj's kingdom. Prithviraj attacked Ghori and defeated him at the first battle of Tarain. However, he returned the very next year and defeated and him. Sanyogita certain of defeat committed Jauhar.

This legend is similar to the Padmavati legend in many aspects. The love between Prithviraj and Sanyogita is hailed and she is a woman who is praised and known for her bewitching beauty. An evil Muslim ruler who invades and competes with a Rajput ruler is another striking similarity between both the tales. Sanyogita, as the legend states, did not want to accept defeat and be source of pleasure in the hands of a lusty Muslim invader and hence gave in to self-immolation, like Padmavati. She like Padmavati was a Rajput queen who preserved her honor and chastity against a Muslim ruler who coveted her.

With this, we can strike a similarity to the legend of Sita, who was coveted by Ravana. Sita is an avatar of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess. She is the central female character in Ramayana. She marries Rama and she accompanies him in his exile. There exist many versions to the story. Ravana falls in love with Sita's beauty and therefore abducts her in order to win her, but in vain. After she's rescued with the help of Hanuman, Rama asks her to undergo 'Agni Pariksha' to prove her chastity in which she triumphs. Sita is known for her unconditional bond of love with her husband Rama. She is celebrated for her beauty and feminine qualities which enchanted Ravana, the enemy of Rama. She is referred to as 'golden skinned' and 'doe eyed' in Ramayana. She is praised for her dedication to her husband, her patience, loyalty and her purity. She can be considered as an ideal example of woman and possesses all the qualities of what a "good" Indian woman ought to be. She remained courageous and patient during her 'vanvas' with Rama and during her imprisonment in Lanka. She is held sacred by all generations of Hindus. All these aspects make her character strikingly similar to Padmavati and *Padmavat* can be seen as a tale inspired by this.

This tendency to essentialize women had its origin as early as the time of Manu. *Manusmriti* can be seen to be solely responsible for the derogatory position accorded to women in the post Vedic period. Women were seen as the guardians of dharma and as the custodian and transmitters of patriarchal values. Women are presented as vile and dependent creatures who require protection and guidance from men. In the text, an unmarried menstruating woman is seen as a threat to the social equilibrium and a source of religious pollution. *Manusmriti* talks about the rites and duties to be performed by married women. She is always expected to be subservient to her husband. As Sreyashi Ghosh quotes *Manusmriti*:

. . . she should obey him when he is alive and not be unfaithful to him when he is dead. . . . Though he may be bereft of virtue, given to lust and totally devoid of good qualities, a good woman should always worship her husband like a god. . . . a woman will be exalted in heaven by the mere fact that she has obediently served her husband. . . . After her husband is dead, she may voluntarily emaciate her body by eating pure flower, roots, and fruits; but she must never mention even the name of another man. . . . she should remain . . . celibate until her death. . . . A woman who controls her mind, speech, and body and is never unfaithful; to her husband attains the world of her husband, and virtuous people call her a 'good woman'.

Manu said that women should focus on her roles as a wife and a mother and should be kept under the control of the men. These views were accepted by the Indian society and it became a part of their psyche. They believed in these roles of a woman and promoted these through their myths, legends and literature. Hence we can say that the image of Padmavati as an ideal woman was not an innocent creation of Jayasi, rather it is only a reflection of the beliefs and values that the society attributed to a woman. She is defined as a 'Padmini' woman.

Rare sort of women. Most beautiful, pious, graceful. Serves her parents and emits 'lotus' like smell. She has round body and face. Her nose, ear, lips are small. They walk like goose. Such women are impressive and can mesmerize Gandharv, Kinnar and even enemies. Rani Padmavati was the perfect example of Padmini women. (Pandey)

From the above description we can see that she is seen as an ideal woman who possesses all characteristics such as religiosity, beauty, and is submissive. Throughout the epic, there are several detailed and long descriptions about her physical appearance and other worldly beauty. Through this description we get an idea that the Padmini women are seen as the most ideal of all women and their beauty is glorified. Her qualities and virtues are hence not essential to her, but it is only a construct of the male dominated society, which is attributed to her.

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