

# Martial woman/chaste woman in Bollywood historical films – Padmaavat (2018) and Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi (2019)

Terhi Hannula

## Abstract

Bollywood films have been a powerful tool to build the Indian nation, and historical Bollywood films reproduce the dominant ideology of the time of their making. As in the general ideology of nationalism, gender figures as a specific social construct – muscular nationalism – which implies a gender binary of a martial man, guarding a chaste woman. Gender features strongly in the Hindu nationalistic ideology in recent Indian films. We see strong, female national heroes in films like *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019). However martial the female bodies in the films are, they still remain trapped in the construct of muscular nationalism, which posits women in the role of a chaste woman that is a symbol for the nation rather than an agent in herself.

Keywords: Indian cinema, gender, femininities, nationalism

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary popular Hindi cinema, also known by the nickname of Bollywood, there is a prominent trend to promote Hindu nationalism's vision of unifying the country under one religion (Hinduism), instead of the independence movement's version of nationalism, which envisioned India as a secular, pluralistic nation. Hindu nationalism has, especially since the Hindu nationalist party BJP has been leading the country

in the governments of 1998–2004 and from 2014 on, meant heightened communalism, religious conservatism and culture policing. The ideological rewriting of history to support ideas of a unified Hindu nation is crucial for Hindu nationalist politics today. This can be seen through analysis of two recent films: *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019).

As in nationalism more generally, gender in Hindu nationalism figures as a specific social construct – muscular nationalism – which implies a gender binary of a martial man and a chaste woman (Banerjee, *Muscular Nationalism 2*). Both *Padmaavat* and *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* portray strong, female national heroes. However martial the female bodies in the films are, they still remain trapped in the construct of muscular nationalism, which posits women in the role of a chaste woman that is a symbol for the nation rather than an agent in herself. This also plays into conservative religious Hinduism and it's of gender bias.

This paper will answer the question, what kind of nationalism *Padmaavat* and *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* promote through utilizing the historical genre, and how does gender, especially female chastity, figure in this idea of nationalism. I will first illustrate the concept of muscular nationalism as a framework for film analysis by discussing *Padmaavat* in terms of the chaste woman/martial man binary. Then I will turn to analyze *Manikarnika*, because in it the martial female body changes the dynamics of muscular nationalism, presenting challenges to this interpretive framework.

Popular films are imbued with ideology that often manifests in identity positions, such as gender, race and class. Historical films are about the ideology of the time of their making, even more so than they are about the historical moment they seek to describe. As Althusser has noted, ideology as a superstructure is necessary to the existence of the economic and political base structure (Storey 56–63). Products of popular culture, like films, are an arena of struggle where the authority to define our social reality is decided. This is made apparent by the fact that the product itself “constructs the realities it appears only to describe” (Storey 69). As McClintock (70–71) has argued, spectacle – such as film – is an important way in which nations today circulate and experience national cohesion.

Gender was one of the first identity positions that was extensively critically analyzed in film from an ideological perspective. Feminist film theory analyzed the genre of melodrama in classical Hollywood

(Thornham), which is often seen as a central generic influence on Hindi cinema (Vasudevan). As in the classical Hollywood melodrama, also in *Manikarnika* and *Padmaavat* the portrayal of femininity both recognizes and discusses women's subaltern experience in patriarchy, simultaneously containing and controlling it, acting as patriarchy's "safety valve" (Mulvey, cited in Thornham 48).

I base my analysis on a specific gendered framework that underlies nationalist ideology: muscular nationalism. Muscular nationalism is a term coined by Sikata Banerjee, and it refers to a gender binary of a martial man guarding a chaste woman, that, she argues, is at the basis of all types of nationalist ideology (Banerjee, *Muscular Nationalism* 2). Banerjee draws on political scientists such as Benedict Anderson, George Mosse, Joane Nagel, Anne McClintock and Cynthia Enloe to develop her argument on how the binary of "us" (in the nation) and "others" (enemies and people of other nationalities) is rooted in the gender binary. This gender binary is very much at work in Bollywood historical films. Especially in war, which both *Manikarnika* and *Padmaavat* depict, this binary is at its most visible and also most rigid: the martial heroes need the chaste women not only to support their war effort but to act as symbolic markers of "our" nation, marking the borders of the imagined nation with chaste female bodies. Nagel argues that men are motivated to fight in wars because their masculinity becomes linked with the rationale of war that is being displayed in masculine terms: as courage, duty, honour and freedom (Nagel 251–2). She sees women more adrift from the nation, because they occupy different, less active roles in the nationalist economy: that of symbolic mother of the nation, of purity to be shamed, and in supporting roles as nationalist activists (Nagel 252–6, 261). Mosse describes a normative masculine stereotype: harmonious, strong, military, muscular, aggressive but moderately so, skilled in war, rational and controlled, honest, pure and healthy (Mosse 3–16). Mosse's insight is that these gendered traits closely correspond with traits of a strong nation. So, the national "self" of muscular nationalism is masculine, and femininity plays a part of the "body" of the nation to be protected by masculine agents. In the case of India the body of the nation is visualized as *Bharat Mata*, "Mother India". The idealized woman as an icon or symbol of the Indian nation has a long history and different bodily manifestations from the raging image of goddess Kali igniting patriotic fervor to the mother identified with the Indian soil in the classic film *Mother India* (1957) (Sen).

Quite a few recent Bollywood period films have celebrated strong female historical figures as feminine symbols for a Hindu nation. Directed by Radha Krishna Jagarlamudi together with the film's leading actress Kangana Ranaut, *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019), portrays the Rani (Hindi for Queen) Lakshmibai (1828–1858) of the Indian princely state of Jhansi. The Rani of Jhansi took part in the Indian rebellion of 1857 against the British colonial rule, reportedly riding into battle with a child strapped to her back. The Rani of Jhansi is a towering, albeit somewhat legendary figure in Indian popular historiography, celebrated as a national war hero and an ideal female nationalist. Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Padmaavat* (2018) is based on a similarly legendary (Hindu) Rajput ruler of the fortress of Chittor, which was attacked by the Muslim sultan Alauddin Khilji. According to an epic poem on the incident, in the face of certain defeat the Queen of the Rajput fort, Padmavati, committed a heroic *jauhar*, self-immolation in fire, together with all the women in the fortress. Both of these figures, Rani of Jhansi and queen Padmavati, have a longstanding tradition of veneration among Hindu nationalists (Banerjee, *Make Me a Man!*).

## 2. Female chastity and the nation in *Padmaavat*

*Padmaavat* is a story of Muslim sultan Alauddin Khilji (alternative spelling being Khalji) of the Delhi sultanate invading India from the North, Chittor's king Ratan Singh of Rajput origin and his wife queen Padmavati. Sultan Alauddin sets his eyes on Padmavati and wants to possess her, and a battle ensues between the sultanate and Chittor, leading eventually to the defeat of Chittor.

*Padmaavat* is shot in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's typical directorial style with gorgeous movie sets, lavish costumes and impeccable aesthetics. As film critic Bilal Qureshi describes: "In Bhansali's cinema, saris flow across burning oil lamps, beautifully dressed women walk into flames, and temples shake amid thunderstorms as swirling cameras dance to folk compositions. Operatic, gorgeous, and always infused with something invariably 'Indian'" (48). *Padmaavat* is no exception to these stylistics of Bhansali. The film's glamorous folk-influenced costumes, regal sets and film scores emphasize a specifically Indian style, and Bhansali has in interviews spoken for Hindu values (e.g. Qureshi 48). However, *Padmaavat*'s ideological content renounces Indian ideas of secularism with its apparent Islamophobia and reactionary notions of

female honor and purity. This has evoked aversion in critics such as Bilal Qureshi and Amy Kazmin and had Ajay Gehlawat draw a comparison to fascist aesthetics (Qureshi; Kazmin; Gehlawat).

The Muslim sultan in the film is based on a historical person, Alauddin Khalji (r. 1296–1316), who ruled as an emperor of the Khalji dynasty of Delhi Sultanate in the Indian subcontinent. His reign was credited for defending South Asia from Mongol invasion and for several administrative reforms, usually towards building a more centralized government. The portrayal of Alauddin Khalji in the film, however, is a stereotypical Muslim villain of Hindi popular films. He is a “ruthless, lustful savage, who looks unkempt and wild, a screen stereotype of a barbaric Muslim” (Roy 20). He abuses women to satisfy his sexual desires, is arrogant and greedy for power, cheats his wife in her knowing, destroys historical records that don’t mention him, treacherously kills the Rajput king arranging him to be shot in the back, and is obsessed with queen Padmavati. He’s a violent and hypermasculine beast. This is an image that can be seen associated with racially marginalized people (hooks xiii) and colonized populations (Henry 189), and in India today this marginalized position is often reserved for Muslims. The Muslim stereotype of Alauddin derives from Hindu nationalistic sentiment, but its origins are in orientalism and the British colonial rule. As Roy argues:

The depiction of Alauddin on screen bears the marks of colonial stereotyping of Muslim rulers of India as “oriental despots”. [--] This colonial stereotyping was endorsed by early nationalists with pre-existing biases, who embellished and used these categories to glorify Hindu heroes (and heroines) from the past by contrasting them with the inferior “Other.” (22).

This colonial stereotype has been picked up by later Hindu nationalists, who have used it to propagate the superiority of the Hindu religion.

Banerjee has divided the depictions of Muslims in Hindi popular film into “good” Muslims and “bad” Muslims, but also notes that a Muslim male body can never serve as the national self of Indian muscular nationalism (Banerjee, *Gender, Nation and Popular Film in India*, 76–7). The portrayal of Alauddin as a bad Muslim, an absolute evil villain, serves a Hindu ideology that has challenged the

traditionally secular society in India especially since the Hindu nationalist BJP has been in power from 2014 on. One strategy to exclude some male bodies from the nationalistic ideal has been effeminization, where certain bodies considered manly and muscular are seen as “natural” exemplifiers and rulers of the nation and “others” of the nation such as homosexuals or Jews are feminized (Mosse 68–70). Effeminization has also been used in screen depictions of Muslim rulers of India<sup>1</sup>. Alauddin is also effeminized, despite his simultaneous hypermasculinity, through the depiction of a homosexual relationship to his Egyptian eunuch slave Malik Kafur.

The final scene of the film shows how Alauddin, after invading the Hindu Rajput kingdom and killing the virtuous hero of the film, the king, barges into the Chittor fort in pursuit of the goal of his conquest, queen Padmavati, a fabled beauty. Padmavati, however, in the face of a certain defeat gathers all the women and children of the fort to perform a form of ritual mass suicide, *jauhar*. In the climax of the film, beautiful shots full of pathos depict the queen and the women walking into a raging fire in their bridal costumes, literally closing the door to the sultan’s face and thus denying him of his final prize, Padmavati’s body. They would rather die to stay chaste and pure than be tainted by enemy hands.

This final scene, at an ideological level, exemplifies muscular nationalism. As noted, muscular nationalism conflates masculinity and nationalism, and centres the gendered binary of a martial man and a chaste woman. Banerjee argues, that the

“focus on the purity and chastity of female bodies stems from their role as border guards. By border guards, I mean the notion that the boundaries separating “we the people” from “them” are represented by chaste women’s bodies” (*Gender, Nation and Popular Film in India* 10).

Thus, *Padmaavat*’s female bodies committing suicide to preserve their chastity are border guards in this construct. The female body is the symbol of the nation that is conflated with actual female bodies. The martial man, the self of the nation in the film is the virtuous, protective Hindu husband that guards the

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. portrayal of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb who sews prayer caps in *Tanhaji – The Unsung Warrior* (2020).

female body and especially its chastity, in the extreme case by going to war. And the “other” of the nation, here as typically in Hindu nationalism, is the Muslim “other”, the sultan. What makes this such a textbook example is that the reason for Alauddin’s conquest is specifically articulated as the desire to sexually possess the female body, the queen. “Everything precious belongs only to Alauddin”, as Alauddin is portrayed saying in the beginning of the film.

The practice of *jauhar* also combines historical fact and tendentious fiction. *Jauhar* is a practice of female mass self-immolation in fire, that has been practised among noble Rajput women. Rajputs are a North Indian community that ruled over a cluster of princely states, and take pride in their martial past and “paramount bravery” (Harlan 102). Today, they are connected to Hindu nationalism and seen as the exemplary Hindu warrior class. *Jauhar* means a practice at a last stand of war, where women immolate themselves in fire to escape capture, slavery and rape in the hands of enemy, after which the men march against the enemy to die honorably in battle rather than surrender. The historicity of the *jauhar* in Chittor fort at 1303 is based on Rajput traditional belief and an epic poem by Malik Muhammad Jayasi, and it has been argued that queen Padmavati probably never existed outside this Rajput myth (Roy 17; Weinberger-Thomas 122, 249 n. 77). However, *jauhars* and the bravery of queen Padmavati are important for Rajput identity, and three different cases of *jauhar* (of which this was the first) in Chittor fort are still commemorated in the city of Chittorgarh in a yearly *jauhar mela*, a *jauhar* festival.

There are three steps through which the *jauhar* of queen Padmavati conflates female chastity with the nation. Firstly, the Indian nation is equated with a Hindu identity. Secondly, preservation of chastity of the Hindu female body is equated with the honor and virtue of the Hindu nation. And thirdly, Padmavati’s suicide combining victimhood and feminine power becomes to symbolize the motherland or Mother Goddess. During the Indian nationalist movement against the British rule, a gender code emerged that assigned the preservation of the inner values and spirituality of India on the sphere of the home and on women. According to Roy the “preservation of women’s honour, or rather chastity, became a patriotic project” (19). As Prasad argues about the films making a national difference, “it is women’s appearance that becomes the mark of distinction” (91). Woman/man binary in Bollywood films became to be cast

spatially on the dichotomy of the home/world or the inner/outer. Women in the private sphere must uphold Indian identity and thus, the integrity of the nation. Somaaya et al. call this ideal woman the “conscience of the hero” (10). She is “chaste, modest, submissive, self-sacrificing, and virtuous” (Kasbekar 291). As a wife (or a wife-candidate in a romantic plot), she is perfectly chaste and sexually pure. As a mother, she upholds the home as the private sphere and a spiritual location, which no colonial/Western influence can tarnish (Virdi 65). Padmavati’s image is not the image of the woman that Jeffords explores in Hollywood war films: women “back home”, or the feminine as passive, submissive and fearful (510). Contrary to this kind of femininity, she adheres more closely to the Rajput code of honor in battle and can be seen as a display of female bravery. However, Padmavati’s character, bravery and personal sacrifice become “safety valved” into Hindu nationalist ideology where a female body is the location for national virtue, and must be preserved from the enemy through death if all else fails.

To take a broader look into the connection between femininity and nationalism in *Padmaavat*, we will take a look at the categories that Anthias and Yuval-Davis have proposed of women’s roles in nationalism, which are:

1. Biological reproducers of the population
2. Reproducers of group boundaries, through restrictions on whom to marry and have sex with
3. Ideological reproducers of national culture and traditions
4. Signifiers of national difference or symbols of the nation
5. Participants in political or military national struggles (7).

In *Padmaavat* we see female characters filling the first four roles. Some of the women who commit jauhar with her are pregnant and have their children with them, and are clearly fulfilling the function of female reproduction. Group boundaries are clear in the image of the queen, who can marry a Hindu king of a foreign kingdom, but cannot be seen associated with a Muslim man. Queen Padmavati is also shown in the film to keep traditions alive, conducting the daily worship that is the wife’s task in a Hindu household and



celebrating the Hindu festival Holi properly together with her husband. She signifies the national difference through the *jauhar* plot, where her figure is shown dressed in bridal costume, standing in front of Hindu temple sculptures and tridents that are a common symbol of Hinduism.

Padmavati, however, never participates in military activities. The next film under discussion, *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019), shows a woman who also is a political and military actor, fulfilling the fifth role proposed by Anthias and Yuval-Davis. Following is a discussion of how the construction of muscular nationalism changes in a film where the martial hero is a female.

### 3. Muscular nationalism in *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi*

#### 3.1. Martial woman

*Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* is a fiercely patriotic drama illustrating the popular story of a historical Rani (Queen) of the princely state of Jhansi and her battle against the British who strive to annex Jhansi. In the film her character is called Manikarnika in her youth, but as Rani of Jhansi she is renamed Lakshmibai.

The shooting and production of the film was dominated by the presence of the lead actress Kangana Ranaut, who is known in the industry for her strong statements and being a new kind of feminist female star that can carry a film on her shoulders. The titular character in *Manikarnika* is a clear centrepoint of the film, to the extent of giving the impression of Ranaut being “present in almost every frame” (Joshi 2019). The historical Rani of Jhansi fought the British colonial rule during the Indian rebellion of 1857. Her husband, the Maharaja of Jhansi, had adopted a son just before his death, but the British refused to acknowledge the child as a successor and Rani Lakshmibai as the regent, so she started to fight the British.

The Rani in the film is a martial hero leading her troops to battle against the British troops. In the end credits of the film, the historical commander of the British troops at the time, Sir Hugh Rose, is quoted as having said: “Rani Laxmi Bai had been the most dangerous of all rebel leaders, best and bravest of all, only man among mutineers” (*Sir Hugh Rose and the Central Indian Campaign*, 1858). The Rani is constructed from the very beginning of the film as an exceptional woman possessing martial prowess and moral strength and leadership. She also performs superhero-like action stunts. In her introductory scene she

is shown shooting a jumping tiger in the air with a bow, saving the village children and livestock from its attacks. During a scene where she is approached with the request of marriage, she shows her swordsmanship fighting off three men and jumping on top of horses and an elephant preparing the audience to accept Jhansi's later need of her strength. She is portrayed as a nationalist from the start, being brought up with the principle "Give your motherland [*matrubhoomi*] unconditional love". This notion of nationalism for a unified Hindu motherland is anachronistic, given the realities of the time with separate princely states competing with each other (Singh 10). In the battle scenes of the end of the film she destroys British cannons located strategically in front of a Hindu temple in an attack, instead of agreeing to fire cannons at the temple. In similar manner she is shown preserving both Hindu and national values throughout the film.

The character of Rani Lakshmbai brings attention to the question of how much women are represented in films – as in do they have screen time, or if they can appear as protagonists or agents of events – and the question of how women are represented. The queen is a strong and central female character, who nevertheless is represented within the construction of muscular nationalism that allows women only a very specific kind of agency.

As a masculinized female the Rani reverses gender roles, and takes the place of a man in the biggest part of the film. In their marriage, the Maharaja is effeminized and Lakshmbai shows the masculine strength that the film posits as necessary to rule a kingdom and fight in the national struggle. But one can argue that the contents of the masculine and feminine roles themselves stay intact and that the reversal is an exception to the rule. During their marriage the exceptional reversal of roles is shown as necessary because of the exceptional circumstances of the colonial oppression by the British. Once widowed, Rani Lakshmbai leads the state, and takes on the traits of masculine Hinduism, which are martial prowess, bravery, bodily strength and the ability to be organized (Banerjee, *Make Me a Man!* 52). As Banerjee has shown, "extraordinary women could also embody these traits of masculine Hinduism. One example is Lakshmbai, the Rani [--] of Jhansi [--]. But the Rani could claim this warrior status only by erasing all visible markers of herself as a woman" (52).

Banerjee goes on to describe her simple dress as Hindu nationalism's ideologists imagined it, but the same erasure of feminine markers can be seen in the costuming and visual depiction of the Rani. Although showing courage, patriotism and swordsmanship from a young age, Lakshmibai wears light coloured and colourful clothes, elaborate jewellery, and flowing hairstyles while her husband still lives. Her interest in swordsmanship and leadership are shown as a play that continues in her husband's discretion. She sheds the feminine attire after her husband's death, wearing dark coloured clothing and simple jewellery, her hair in a tight bun. In battle, she dons similar saffron coloured robes that belong to celibate Hindu holy men, transfiguring into one of Hindu nationalism's ideal feminine images, a celibate female warrior (62, 64). This celibate female warrior is an exceptional individual. According to Banerjee,

in this narrative of ascetic, masculine Hinduism within the nation, women can negotiate a space if they are willing to *temporarily* take on masculine attributes, that is, to erase outer markers of their femininity and return willingly to their roles as wife and mother once danger to the motherland is over. (62.)

This prerequisite for momentariness applies to the Rani in *Manikarnika*. She is shown as an exceptional woman, who in exceptional circumstances of British rule and specifically the dispute over regency has the masculine qualities needed to rise to the task. However, if the threat of the British rule had not shaken the princely state and the *matrubhoomi*, the motherland, she would have stayed in her feminine roles as a wife and a mother. The Rani would have willingly returned to the motherly role, had she not been killed in battle, since she is first and foremost a mother and a regent, as we will see in the following discussion.

In *Manikarnika* Rani Lakshmibai is constructed as a martial woman through a process of masculinization of her appearance and taking on such traits as strength, martial skill, and leadership. However, she still needs to prove that this position is not thwarted by signs of female sexuality.

### 3.2. Trapped in feminine positions

However masculinized the heroine of *Manikarnika* is, she is nevertheless trapped in feminine positions, carrying the burden of being the chaste woman of muscular nationalism. There are five positions through which the film characterizes her as a proper, chaste female:

1. Symbol of the nation's freedom
2. Celibate "bride of the cause"
3. Upholder of the nation's morals
4. An ideal mother
5. A regent ruling in her son's stead

As a symbol of the nation's freedom the queen is often equated with the goddess of Hinduism, in her fierce form as Durga or Kali. The scene where she single-handedly slays dozens of Brits invading the palace preventing them to get to her adopted son, happens in front of a statue of the goddess Durga, and her blood-stained face in a low-angle shot in front of the statue's face becomes equated with the goddess. As noted before, the fierce goddess demanding the oppressor's blood is one interpretation of Indian nation as "Mother India" (Sen 32–34). The very sight of Rani Lakshmibai inspires her own people, and even another princely state's soldiers, to fight for the nation. The national cause is also consistently referred to as liberating the *matrubhoomi*, the "motherland", a symbolic Mother India.

As "bride of the cause", the Rani has renounced worldly pleasures. She is the celibate warrior-monk delineated in the nationalist writings of e.g. Swami Vivekananda – celibate because feminine sexuality is a threat to muscular Hindu nationalism (Banerjee, *Make Me a Man!* 62–66). In the film it is unimaginable that she would get involved with any man after her husband's death and even more so after she has started the battle against the British. She renounces every possible pleasure for the cause of the motherland, asking her people to give their metal objects to be forged into weapons, beginning by giving away her own jewellery.

As an upholder of the nation's morals she is never seen to harm children, women or animals in the film, even ordering innocent English women and children to be kept safe when some of the rebelling

soldiers take them as prisoners. This is a conscious rewriting of history in the film, since the famous massacre of Jhansi of 60 British men, women and children is a recorded event, it only remains disputable in terms of historical fact if the Rani ordered it or was merely unable to prevent it (Singh 14–5). In another scene she saves a calf from the Brits who attempt to steal it from the locals to consume it as veal steaks. This, of course, also taps into Hinduism's cow veneration and makes her double the hero.

Rani Lakshmibai is shown as first and foremost a mother. Her rule over Jhansi is coded as a mother's (or mother goddess') rule over a family. It is intersected with images of her actual motherhood, for example when she is shown attending matters of the state with the child in her lap. As a mother she is also a regent, ruling in her son's stead. She first takes the throne with the boy child in her lap. She doesn't claim the throne for herself, but for her son and for the abstract *matrubhoomi*. If the heir would die, her claim to the throne would also cease. This leads one character to state: "The prince is Jhansi's only hope" in a precarious situation where the British are about to invade the fortress of Jhansi.

The following scene, where she escapes on a horse with the prince tied to her back during the battle over Jhansi, is a subject of continuous retelling in the legend of the Rani of Jhansi. However, the film underlines her Hindu feminine virtue in the scene. In the scene shots of her riding away are cut together with shots of her arrival in Jhansi as a bride in a litter. Thus, her escape is put in the context of the personal, of being a wife and a mother, recognizing the infant prince as the real ruler. The allusion to a cowardly escape from Jhansi by a monarch is avoided by refusal to show the scene in the political context. She is not the monarch, her son is, and she is the feminine figure protecting her child and, therefore, the nation.

Sjoberg has shown that even today female soldiers' motivation to join military struggles is shown in personal terms as opposed to political motivations of male soldiers – for example, female soldiers are seen to avenge the death of a husband or a son (61–4). Sjoberg argues that women fighters must meet double standards: "physical standards of manliness along with the social standards of femininity" (65–6). This thinking is seen in the character of Rani Lakshmibai. At first sight she looks like an equal or even above the men in the film. But however much she shows martial prowess swordfighting with men in her youth or as a general of war leading battle troops, she still needs to meet the standards of womanly virtue in order to

succeed. She has to stay chaste, pure, maintain the spirituality of the home like a good Hindu wife, and erase any signs of feminine sexuality from her image. Even other markers of feminine status become erased, for example when the Rani petitions her subjects to forge metal objects into weapons and all the objects that we see given away for the cause are cooking utensils and jewellery.

A further problematic construct in the film is feminized masculinity. The reason for the strong British influence over the kingdom is explained in the film to be the effeminacy of the king. He wears women's bangles – bracelets – as a mark of his enslavement to the British. In a scene preceding his death the king forces the queen to prove her swordsmanship by fighting him, resulting in the breaking of the bracelets. He tells the Rani: “When I see the wicked British roaming freely in my Jhansi, I feel less of a man. Manu, free Jhansi of her shackles, too.” Quoting one review of the film: “something worn by women is already established as a symbol of enslavement and defeat” (Abraham). Femininity in the form of the effeminized king is inferior to masculinity. The young Manikarnika's marriage to the king is arranged by the male courtiers in the beginning of the film explicitly because she is seen as possessing masculine quality: a “brave girl” who has “qualities of a great soldier”.

So, firstly the Rani as a martial woman is still also a chaste woman, curiously embodying both the martial man and the chaste woman of muscular nationalism in one person. And secondly, femininity in the film is through the effeminization of the king and the chastity required of the Rani constructed as secondary to masculinity. Only through embracing masculinity the Rani can become a proper nationalist, but femininity itself is constructed to be in need of masculine protector.

#### 4. Conclusions

*Padmaavat* and *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* both portray female protagonists, who at first sight seem to celebrate femininity's equal position and influence in society, through emphasizing strong feminine historical figures. However, in both films the femininity remains rigidly subaltern to the hegemonic traits of masculinity, which simultaneously constitute the traits of proper nationalism: strong, military, muscular, rational and controlled. Femininity in this construct remains an ideal spiritual abstraction of the nation. In

*Padmaavat*, this discourse is apparent in the three main characters, who stand for the chaste female, the martial male and the other of the nation (the Muslim enemy). *Manikarnika* turns the roles of this dynamic into a different configuration, showing an emasculated male who is in need of a strong, martial female to protect his kingdom. The queen in *Manikarnika* is a female fighter, capable of horrific violence, and a symbol, chaste embodiment of Goddess. Even with its display of a martial woman, *Manikarnika* doesn't move outside of the dynamic of muscular nationalism and social standards of femininity. The ending of *Manikarnika* showcases the film's inability to escape muscular nationalism: in the end, the Rani dies in battle against the British, and she chooses to set herself to fire to avoid capture and the British display of her mutilated body as a deterrent for other revolutionaries. So, similarly to queen Padmavati, she also self-immolates herself to stay pure, rather than let the enemy get to her body. The female body's chastity has to be protected even in death. While she is consumed by flames, the camera slowly pans to a bird-eye view to show that the fire forms Hinduism's sacred Aum-syllable, as a final confirmation that the proper nationalism in the movie is conflated with Hinduism.

Both movies, *Padmaavat* and *Manikarnika*, sparked controversy even before their release. One might expect that this was feminist protests against the problematic patriarchal discourses or the glorification of *jauhar*. But on the contrary, it was Hindu fundamentalists protesting against potential insults towards the heroines of the films, who are venerated in right-wing Hinduism. In *Padmaavat*, they protested against a hint of romantic connection between the queen Padmavati and a Muslim. Rajput fundamentalists complained, that a "Muslim emperor looking at Padmavati's mirror reflection tarnishes her honour" (Roy 23). In *Manikarnika*'s case, they warned, "if the film, in any way, insults the queen of Jhansi, the Hindu society will not forgive [the lead actress Kangana Ranaut]" (PTI). If *jauhar*, female honor suicide, is still idealized as a female moral code, what does it mean for the lives of women in the nation? Or if being seen by another man than her husband is seen as tarnishing a woman's honor? What moral code would this translate to in the lives of women today? These controversies highlight the discursive power that Hindu nationalist thinking wields in India, and how it effectuates reactionary attitudes towards gender or downright misogyny. On a more general level, it also underlines the importance of the so called

superstructure – cultural products of art and popular culture – in shaping the base structure of politics and economic power relations (Althusser, quoted in Storey 56).

Returning to the genre of historical films, there might be a further twist to the gendered construction of nationalism. It is the implication that femininity itself belongs in the past. McClintock argues that in nationalism,

Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic 'body' of national tradition (inert, backward-looking, and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity. (66.)

Rani of Jhansi can be given the agency that she has in the film, *because* she is a historical figure, in some sense a museumized icon, not a living female leader. In other words, the images of Rani of Jhansi or queen Padmavati are not different from the image of the Goddess – all are idealized images of feminine power and abstract symbols for the nation, that come before modernity and “forward-thrusting” progress. The actual agency in the nation belongs to men – the politicians, the filmmakers, the “fathers” of the family and the nation.

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