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FEMALE HEROISM IN BASAVARAJ NAIKAR'S *THE QUEEN OF KITTUR*

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Basavaraj Naikar's *The Queen of Kittur* is a novel of historical monument that largely depicts the female heroism of Rani Chennama. The novel delineates the heroic life of Rani Chenamma of Kittur Kingdom in South India and her encounter with the East India Company rulers in 1824. She happens to be the earliest Queen who rebelled against the British rulers thirty-three years before Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi came on the scene. After the death of her husband, Raja Mallasarja, she acted as the Regent Rani and guided the destiny of Kittur kingdom with the help and cooperation of several countries like Sardar Gurusiddappa and loyal servants like Amatur Ballapa and Sangoli Rayanna. She had a direct encounter with J.M. Thackeray, the Collector of Dharwad, and killed him in the first battle with the East Indian Company. She became the powerful ruler of kingdom of Kittur and rebelled against the Company Sarkar that wanted to conquer entire India. In the words of R.C. Chulki who reviewed the Queen of Kittur: *The Queen of Kittur* is a highly absorbing historical novel in which the author has neither distorted the facts nor exaggerated them. Neither has he suppressed the truth, nor has he sacrificed it for the sake of convenience" (IBC, 13). The novel truly reflects the colonial conflict between female heroism of Rani Chenamma and the East India company. It is also a portrayal of internal and external conflicts. It is also a depiction of historical war in which heroes and traitors equally played their part. Quite interestingly, the novel is deeply rooted in the change of allegiance from the Peshwas to the Company Sarkar. The people of Kittur never accepted the authority of the British. They fully supported the Queen after Raja Mallasarja departed them. They adopted a child since they had no issue. Rani Chennamma called a meeting of all the courtiers the day after Sawai Mallasarja II was crowned as the legal successor of Kittur Kingdom much against the interests of East India Company. The Queen took over the mantle of administration even though Sawai Mallasarja was enthroned as the adopted young prince. She sounded something threatening to kingdom of Kittur in her address of confidential meeting:

Gentlemen, you all know that dark clouds have gathered upon the kingdom of Kittur. Sawai Mallasarja is still a slip of a boy. I, therefore, have to act as his guardian and virtually manage everything. But a mere woman that I am, I cannot go ahead without your help and cooperation." (The Queen of Kittur, 100)

Political Agent Thackeray did not believe in the legality of the adoption case. He proclaimed that adoption of the boy was illegal and therefore it was not approved by the higher authorities. In fact, the matter of having adopted the boy and being crowned as the prince made matters worse for the English. The prince, as the Company Sarkar claimed, is no legal heir for Kittur, the Kingdom belongs

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to the company according to the Doctrine of Lapse. But the citizens of Kittur have approved of the adoption and they looked upon him as their new king.

The dismissal of Diwan and others from the Kingdom of Kittur really infuriated the Queen. Her eyes grew fiery and she burst out.

“What right has he to dismiss our servants. It’s none of his business. Gurusiddappa, you continue to be in your position as long as I am here.” (The Queen of Kittur, 119)

Rani Chennamma’s anger was surging beyond measure.

How could he remove any of you without consulting the members of our family? That’s Simply intolerable. (The Queen of Kittur, 120)

The misdeeds of Thackeray, dismissal of servants, posting of guards around the treasury and etc., have been appealed to Governor Elphinstone for immediate action. But shockingly, that appeal yielded no positive result. The Rani radiated the spirit of self-confidence, vibrancy and determination around her. The undeterred Spirit of Rani Chennamma is how Basavaraj Naikar depicted:

Gentlemen, as you know we have reached the end of our tether now. We have made all the preparations for the war which we shall declare at an opportune time. We cannot tolerate this slavery any longer as we have never been subjected to it in the past. We shall fight with the red-faced monkeys of Britain until the last drop of blood remains in us.” (The Queen of Kittur, 122)

Her undaunted personality was visible in an event when the palace treasury was to be broken. The auspicious occasion demanded the arrangements of *Navaratri* festival during *Dasara*. The Kittur royal court has a tradition of giving alms to *Jangamas* on that occasion. Now that the company lock fixed there by Thackeray was broken. The main steel door of the treasury hall was opened finally. The Queen was very happy to hear the news. The letters written by the British Political Agents to their bosses made things difficult for the Queen. On 18 October, 1824 Rani Chennamma called a meeting of all the *Sardars* and *officers* of the court. She gave an impassioned speech:

Dear brothers, Kittur is ours. We are masters of our own territory. The British say that the adoption is not valid because we did not take their permission. Where is it stipulated that we should take their permission for taking a son in adoption? The internal administration is ours. We are their friends. Adoption is our internal affair. Are these Britishers our kith and kin? Do they belong to our country? They do not know that the people of Kittur love freedom more than life. It is their self-respect. This sacred land of Kittur has been sanctified by the blood of thousands of martyrs who have fought for independence and held its banner of freedom flying high all these years. Patriotism, love of this sacred land and love of freedom flow in their veins. We will tell Mr.Thackeray and

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Mr. Chaplin that we will not submit to them. Whatever be the consequences. Kittur will fight to the last man on its soil. (The Queen of Kittur, 132)

The determined vigour to fight against the East India Company is revealed in the Queen's preparations for the war.

My dear brothers, I am thankful to your loyalty and patriotism. First, I would like to declare that Sardar Avardi Virappa be appointed as commander-in-chief of our army. Now, all the *Sardars, Subhedars, Killedars, dalavis* and *Chaubaris* of Kittur should be properly instructed about their duties. Similarly, all the *Shetsannadis* of our villages should be asked to rush to the city of Kittur. We should also request the king Rajaram of Kolhapur to send a contingent of his army to Kittur to help us against the British. (The Queen of Kittur 136)

When the commander confirmed the news of company soldiers having erected their tents two miles away from Kittur towards the western side, the Rani grew very serious and sensed the severity of possible attack:

Commander sir, the time for action is fast approaching. Now we have no time even to worry. Place sentries at all the vantage points and keep ready for action. (The Queen of Kittur, 138-139)

When the company Sarkar mailed the later to Rani Chennamma to surrender the kingdom to the company govt and get satisfied with an *inam* of eleven villages, the queen ordered Sardar Gurusiddappa to send the message that she was not willing to accept Thackeray's terms. Then, Thackeray beckoned to many officers of Kittur, but they walked away from there without caring for him or for any company officers. Vengeance began to take shape in him. He began to plan the course of action and method of attack. Rani Chennamma addressed her followers:

My dear brothers of Kittur, I have called this confidential meeting to discuss our aims and plans of the battle that's likely to start any movement. As you all know, Thackeray's army has already camped near Kemmanamaradi. He seems to have made up his mind to destroy our kingdom. But we have also taken a decision to fight against the company government until the last drop of blood remains in our body. (*The Queen of Kittur*, 154)

Rani Chennamma rode between the files of the soldiers and received their salute. After the salute, the Queen stood on an elevated earthen platform. Commander Virappa and the body guards stood behind her. She drew the sword from its sheath and held it high in the air. The blade of the sword flashed in the light of the morning sun. An unyielding Rani Chennamma speaks in an elevated voice:

Today is the decisive day in the history of Kittur Kingdom. It is left to you to bring victory and glory to your motherland. You must all teach an unforgettable lesson to Thackeray and his soldiers. (The Queen of Kittur, 158)

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The Kittur guards stood defiant and did not open the gate. Soon they grew more alert in their duty. Growing impatient, Thackeray ordered Captain Black to get the other two mortar-guns and have them parked here in front of the gate. Captain Black rode back to the tent near the hillock called Kemmanamaradi where the army had camped. The heat of the tropical sun was mounting slowly. Their guns were all greased with the fat of cows. Thackeray ordered Sewell to get ready with the entire artillery and cavalry a few yards away from the main gate and be ready to attack if necessary.

As frequent messages yielded no responses from the queen of Kittur, Thackeray was dismayed to see several thousands of Kittur soldiers rushed out on horseback with their swords raised high. It was so unexpected that Thackeray did not know how to cope with the situation. The gallant soldiers began to hack them to pieces. Very soon, Captain Black and Lieutenant Deightan were hacked to death. There was a din of confusion. The shouts and cheers of Kittur soldiers were interspersed with the wailing, screaming and moaning of the company soldiers whose arms or legs or other limbs were hacked and mangled indiscriminately. Rani Chennamma rode her horse and directed the Kittur Soldiers to shoot at the company soldiers below a terrible anger surged within Thackeray when he saw the Rani riding her stallion on the rampart of the fort. Rani Chennamma was observing Mr. Thackeray from the top. Amatur Balappa, an expert shooter, held his gun at Thackeray. Then, Thackeray pointed the gun at the Rani. The Rani saw all this and ordered Amatur to shoot him. He lost no time and triggered the gun. Within no time, the bullet hit the chest of Thackeray who fell down on the plank of the palanquin with a jerk. Rani Chennamma felt extremely happy. Soon, the valiant soldiers of Kittur began to cheer and shout "Victory to Kittur, Victory to Rani Chennamma". The sun was setting in the western horizon and darkness was creeping everywhere. But the cheers of the Kittur soldiers were being echoed in the corridors of the fort. They captured nearly forty soldiers belonging to company native infantry and European artillery, and led them to the fort and locked them in the dark dungeons. That evening Rani Chennamma called a meeting at all the important *officers, Sardars and Desais* who were in a jubilant mood after the killing of Thackeray. Rani ordered Diwan Gurusiddhappa to address the assembly by enlisting those who betrayed them:

Dear patriots and gallants of Kittur, you have shown unprecedented heroism in Killing and chasing away the British soldiers. But we are very sorry to know that some of our own people have worked us by carrying tales and secret information to Mr. Thackeray and his company. Diwan Kannur Malappa, Kannur Virappa and Sardar Mallappasetty are the traitors who, in spite of eating the salt of Kittur, have betrayed us to the *firangis*. It is up to you now to decide what punishment is to be given to these traitors . (The Queen of Kittur, 165)

Much to the shock, The Queen of Kittur faced the conflict not just from the external but also from the internal besides espionage acts from her own servants. The greatest quality of

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Chennamma was that she was a great patriot and heroic in her struggle which is shown in her speeches. She said to the warriors of Kittur: “The Kittur kingdom is yours and you are the kingdom. Is there anything more honorable than a heroic death on the battlefield? (232). “Our choice is only between freedom and heroic death on the battlefield (246), “please remember that I am not a coward, though born a woman..... Whatever happens to you will happen to me (263). Thus, she is depicted as the greatest war heroine whose name will shine like a star among the great queens of India.” (IBC-13)

In conclusion, I reckon that Basavaraj Naikar has closely viewed and minutely re-written from the Indian point of view by portraying the greatness of Rani Chennamma who symbolized the female heroism of India and remained a role-model to the entire womankind. As a creative writer, Naikar has infused blood and life into the characters whose major roles have been historically dealt with. The novelist has not only immortalized Rani Chennamma, the Queen of Kittur but also immortalized the typical Kannada locale, language, color and atmosphere quite effectively. The Queen of Kittur is exemplified in the themes of honor and glory, self-respect and self-rule, patriotism and freedom, betrayal and defeat of the royal family of Kittur Kingdom. The novel is, undoubtedly, a lasting historical contribution to Indian English literature.

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