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Beauty Through the Ages: Rajput Historical Memory and Honor as they Relate
to the Modern Controversies Surrounding *Padmavat*

Introduction:

All of the ways we choose to remember the past, which historical figures and events we honor and which we condemn or forget, help shape the current perception of our collective identity in the present. India in particular has an extensive, vivid history replete with tradition, conflict, innovation and beauty. It is no surprise, then, that many Indians today draw inspiration and a distinctive cultural identity from the past. In the recent Bollywood film *Padmavaat*, director Sanjay Leela Bhansali blends historical figures and fictional characters into a cinematically stunning, lavishly problematic film about a beautiful queen played by Deepika Padukone and an insatiable conqueror played by Ranveer Singh. Before analyzing the specific issues and controversies present in *Padmavaat*, I will begin by outlining the ways in which historical memory contributes to contemporary perceptions of national identity delve into some of the ways in which history is exaggerated or recast in order shape modern politics.

The Significance of Historical Memory:

In a recently published article in *The Hindu* entitled, *A Brief History of Time*, author Keerthik Sasidharan aptly observes that “Indians derive their self-conceptions of who they are from a variety of strong and weak commitments towards different social institutions that arose in a variety of historical contexts” (Sasidharan, 2018). Therefore, since issues of

historical memory are crucial to contemporary identity, there is so much at stake in terms which depictions of the past are thought of historical fact and which are regarded as legends.

In her book *The Last Hindu Emperor: Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200-2000* Cynthia Talbot examines how and why the reputations and historical interpretations of certain Kings have been appropriated for nationalist causes. The book centers primarily around the 12th century Rajput King Prithviraja III, whose numerous acts of valor and archery prowess are the subject of many Indian folk legends. Although many historians contend that many of the stories about Prithviraj Chauhan's life are exaggerated or untrue, they are still part of the former ruler's modern day image or "popular memory" (Talbot, 3).

At a monument honoring Prithviraj, which is located in a park in Ajmer, Rajasthan, there is an inscription at the base praising Prithviraj's heroic displays of patriotism and sacrifice while defending India from foreign invaders. At first glance, the statue of Prithviraj could seem like a benevolent tribute to a brave leader, however Talbot points out that those familiar with medieval Indian history will understand that the foreign invaders alluded to in the inscription are Muslims. The monument has more nationalist undertones when you consider that 9.07% of Rajasthani people are Muslim (Rajasthan Religious Census, 2011). Moreover, since 1952 Rajasthan has elected only two Muslim MPs to the Lok Sabha (Times of India, 2014). Talbot succinctly explains the monument and its present-day symbolism, noting that "Prithviraj has been cast as a representative of the Hindu people in their age-old struggle against foreign oppression since the late nineteenth century, when Indians first began to conceive of themselves as a nation under colonial rule" (Talbot, 1). As I will explain further, Prithviraj is far from the only historical figure who has been subject to modern embellishment or misrepresentation by those with contemporary political aims.

The Story of Padmavat:

The queen depicted in Bhansali's highly controversial film *Padmavat* is Rajput Queen Padmavati, who is based on Rani Padumawati, a character from a 16th century poem of the same name by Malik Muhammad Jayasi. The main storyline is similar in both the poem and the film. Queen Padmavati and her husband Maharaja Ratan Singh are presiding over their prosperous kingdom in Chittor, when they catch one of their subjects, Raghav Chetan engaged in an unseemly activity (black sorcery in the poem, being a peeping tom in the film). Ratan Singh decides to banish Raghav from the kingdom, leading Raghav to travel to Delhi and into the domain of the fierce ruler Sultan Alauddin Khilji. Raghav tells Khilji about the captivating beauty of Queen Padmavati, sparking a dangerous flame of lustful desire within the Sultan that prompts him to set off to Chittor in pursuit of the Queen. Khilji invades Chittor in a siege lasting many months and causing innumerable fatalities. Finally, Khilji is able to capture Ratan Singh and take him as prisoner. Khilji uses the captured King as leverage in order to be able to meet Padmavati. Padmavati agrees on the condition that she will be allowed to see her husband and, along with a considerably sized Rajput army, travels to Delhi to meet Khilji. After Ratan Singh is freed, the battle between the Rajputs and Khilji's army begins, and the conflict between Khilji and Singh culminates in a violent, dishonorable crescendo leaving Singh dead. Khilji and his army storm into Chittor, ready to pillage the kingdom. With the invaders approaching and perceiving no alternative, all of the Rajput women, led by queen Padmavati, perform Jauhar- or mass suicide- by jumping into an enormous fire.

Rajput Identity:

Rajputs inhabited several kingdoms in north, west and central India and are primarily considered to be of the Kshatriya, or warrior class. In *Padmavaat*, the most significant theme is that of honor, an indispensable Rajput value that should be protected at all costs. However, there are many other distinctive Rajput characteristics that have endured for hundreds of years. One scholar who had a considerable influence on Rajput identity is Colonel James Tod, a former official of the East India Company who resided in Rajasthan from 1799 to 1825. In his work *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, Tod interprets Rajasthani history from a western perspective. Tod was also heavily influenced by medieval Indo-Persian history. However, a few historical inaccuracies are present in Tod's work. There are many instances wherein Tod referred to Prithviraj Chauhan as the "last Hindu Emperor" despite the fact that "this designation is manifestly untrue: another Hindu King from Prithviraj's own era was at least as powerful, and numerous other Hindu rulers flourished in South India and elsewhere subsequent to Prithviraj's time" (Talbot, 3). Moreover, much of Tod's historical reference about Prithviraj Chauhan came from the epic poem *Prthviraj Raso*, which was written by Chand Bardai, a court poet to the king. In the poem, Bardai "appears an active participant in the events narrated" which lead Tod to consider "the epic to be a valuable eyewitness account of Prithviraj's twelfth-century reign (Talbot, 15). *Prthviraj Raso* presents a highly idealized version of not only Prithviraj as a ruler, but of Rajput culture and history in general.

There are several factors I would like to consider in re-examining the way that both Bardai and Tod wrote about Prithviraj Chauhan and the Rajputs as a whole. Firstly, if Bardai was the court poet to the King, then he would be highly disinclined to write anything negative or even critical about any Rajput ruler. He would strive to depict as flattering and honorable an image of the King as possible, so as to leave behind a pristine reputation, or else Bardai, might have potentially faced personal consequences. Furthermore, James Tod's portrayal of the Rajputs has been described as "notably sympathetic" (Talbot, 15). In *Administrator*

Scholars and the Writing of History in Early British India: A Review Article, author James Lee calls attention to scholar James Freitag's observation that Tod had a "psychological relationship" with his subjects, "which argues that Tod identified much more with a highly romanticized understanding of the Rajputs' distant forebears, with whom he believed that he, and all northern Europeans shared 'a common ancestry' than he did with the Rajputs of his own time" (Lee, 829). In my opinion, Tod was a biased source who, in attempting to glorify Rajput history actually ended up distorting it.

There is a gendered dimension to the Rajput value of honor. Although crucial for men to behave honorably, Rajput value standards were especially harsh on women, for whom honor was inextricably attached with purity. This is demonstrated very clearly in chapter 6 of *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*. In chapter 6, Tod mentions a woman named Padmini, calling attention to the fact that her name was "a title bestowed only on the superlatively fair" (Tod, 307). Tod asserts that the motivation of Alauddin Khilji's attack on the kingdom of Chittor was his desire to possess the beautiful Padmini. When Chittor is captured and there is no hope of salvation, all of the women commit Jauhar by fire, "leaving them to find security from dishonour in the devouring element" (Tod, 311).

Tod's depictions of both Prithviraj Chauhan and Rani Padmini (Padmavati) has turned both figures into nationalist symbols. Although it's important to mention that some historians have doubts as to whether Rani Padmavati ever actually existed, both her and Prithviraj have had considerable influence on Rajput identity, and around them has coalesced a kind of collective patriotism. As expressed by Cynthia Talbot, "It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of James Tod in shaping modern views of the Rajputs and their region" (Talbot, 15).

Controversies and Protests Surrounding Bhansali's *Padmavaat*:

Director Sanjay Leela Bhansali is perhaps best known to modern audiences for his recent historical-fantasy epics *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* (2013) and *Bajirao Mastani* (2015). While both of these films faced criticism, it was a far cry from the level of outrage generated by *Padmavaat*. While the release date was originally scheduled to be December 1st, 2017, it wasn't until January 25th 2018 that *Padmavaat* actually hit theatres.

Bhansali began shooting *Padmavaat* in late 2016 and was immediately met with resistance from the Rajput caste group Shri Rajput Karni Sena. Members of Karni Sena contended that the film depicts Rani Padmavati in an improper way, particularly in an alleged dream sequence between Padmavati and Khilji. While Khilji is certainly portrayed in the film as lustful, and without morals, Bhansali released a statement on January 15th 2018 stating, among other things, that “The film does not have and never had a dream sequence between Alauddin Khilji and Rani Padmavati”.

While filming at the Jaigarh Fort in late January 2017, Bhansali was assaulted by members of Karni Sena. While the director was escorted away, the protestors smashed cameras and other film equipment while chanting “Karni Sena Zinadabaad”. In March of 2017 there was another attack on the set of *Padmavaat* about 35 km away from Kolhapur, Maharashtra. After shooting had finished for the day, unidentified vandals snuck onto the set with petrol bombs and lit the venue on fire, destroying costumes, jewellery and props (FirstPost, 2017).

In November of 2017, Rajput Karni Sena called for a nationwide ban on the film, citing that *Padmavaat* “distorts historical facts” (New Indian Express, 2017). After their demands were not met, Rajput Karni Sena protested in a particularly disturbing way; the group threatened to cut off Deepika Padukone's nose. This unusually harsh punishment stems from a story in the *Ramayana* wherein Lakshman cuts off Shurpanakha's nose.

Gender Analysis of *Padmavaat* Controversies and Rajput Honor

The threat made to Padukone acutely demonstrates the hypocritical nature of the concept of “honor” that Rajput Karni Sena was trying to enforce. The threat, which was made by senior member Mahipal Singh Makrana and re-printed in the Hindustan times, was as follows:

"Rajput Karni Sena is fighting to protect the image of women being portrayed in the films. We never raise a hand on women but if need be, we will do to Deepika what Lakshman did to Shurpanakha for violating the rules and culture of India”

In my opinion, the irony in Makarna’s statement is palpable, as he is threatening to act extremely dishonorably in order to protect Rajput honor. **(Note: I realize that Rajput Karni Sena is an extremist group and does not represent mainstream views. I just wanted to demonstrate how the concept of honor can be twisted in order to support one’s own agenda).** The removal of a woman’s nose is not only cruel, but specifically intended to rob a woman of her beauty. In every version of *Padmavaat*, the author always mentions her stunning looks- Queen Padmavati’s beauty is by far her most appreciated quality.

One interpretation of the *Ramayana* story cited in the threat- the story of Lakshman, Rama and Shurpanakha- is that Shurpanakha was punished for her lustful behaviour towards Rama and Lakshman. Although there are many versions of the story, Shurpanakha’s looks are almost always mentioned- in most versions she is “not conventionally attractive”, while in a few versions she is either a very beautiful woman or an ugly woman in a beautiful disguise. Either way, it is clear that the honor a woman deserves is heavily dependent on how she looks and how she conducts herself.

In Bhansali’s *Padmavaat*, there was a great deal of controversy surround the song *Ghoomar*, in which Queen Padmavati dances for her husband Maharaja Ratan Singh and his

first wife, Rani Nagmati. Some, including Dilip Singh Judeo, member of the Chhattisgarh royal family, have contended that “none of the Rajput maharanis has ever danced in front of anyone...” (Free Press Journal, 2017). When *Ghoomar* was originally shot, the costume worn by Deepika Padukone showed part of her midriff. When the film was reviewed by The Central Board of Film Certification, one of the changes suggested was “Modifications to the song Ghoomar, to make the depiction befitting to the character being portrayed” (Hindustan Times, 2018). In the film’s final cut, there is another layer of clothing that has been digitally edited onto Padukone as she dances. While this edit might appear insignificant, in my opinion it reinforces the Rajput value of modesty, which is also linked to other values such as propriety and honor. It is especially important that the Queen be portrayed as modest and virtuous, because she represents the whole kingdom. In my opinion, this cultural emphasis on honor and virtue also explains why many contemporary Rajputs were outraged at the possibility of a dream sequence between Alauddin Khilji and Queen Padmavati, despite the fact that the scene never actually existed.

Depiction of Jauhar in *Padmavaat*:

At the very end of the film, after Maharaja Ratan Singh has been killed and Khilji’s army starts advancing towards the kingdom, Queen Padmavati makes a passionate speech to all the Rajput women in the kingdom. She stoically states that even though the war has been lost, there is one final trophy to be claimed- the bodies of the women in the kingdom. Not a single woman will be spared from violation by the invaders. Queen Padmavati explains that all of the Rajput women, herself included, must commit Jauhar by delivering one of the most striking dialogues in the entire film; “The invaders who enter the kingdom and crave for our

bodies will not touch even our shadows” (subtitle translation from Hindi). The scene that follows is incredibly emotional and cinematic. Queen Padmavati blesses all of the women and then leaves some of them to stall Khilji, who is desperately trying to enter the kingdom. After the fire pit is prepared, the women shout “Jai Bhavani!” as Queen Padmavati leads all of the women—the young, the old, and even a pregnant woman—into the flames.

Jauhar was practiced by high-caste Hindu women, who, when faced with attack from an outside force, would self-immolate in order to prevent themselves from being raped or taken slave. Through Jauhar, Rajputs would “conserve their cultural pride and honor” (Pariona, 2016). In *Padmavaat*, there are only women present during the Jauhar scene, which gives the impression that the massive self-sacrifice was a choice made completely by women for the sake of preserving their individual and collective honor. However, historical accounts of Jauhar explain that the practice was typically performed at night with Brahmin priests present. While the priests chanted Vedic mantras, the women—attired in their wedding dresses and clutching their children—would burn alive. The morning after Jauhar another ritual called Saka would take place. For this ritual, the men would bathe and wear saffron clothing before smearing the ashes from the Jauhar ritual on their forehead and putting a tulsi leaf in their mouth. Following Saka, the men would “sally out either to annihilate their enemies or be annihilated by them” (Ancient Origins, 2015).

The way Bhansali chose to depict Jauhar in *Padmavaat* was not historically accurate. By presenting a highly aestheticized, climactic Jauhar scene Bhansali appropriated and romanticized a violent and tragic ritual practice for his own creative purpose. The end result is harmful and regressive because by focusing only on the preservation of honor the scene downplays the brutal reality of hundreds of women and children being burned alive. The depiction of such an act in a positive way sends the message that if a woman’s honor is threatened, it is better for her to die than to be defiled. At the end of the film, there is a

message thanking Queen Padmavati for her brave sacrifice. The text proclaims that Padmavati's Jauhar was both the biggest defeat in Alauddin Khilji's life and Chittor's greatest victory. Instead of depicting Jauhar as the violent, mass-tragedy that it was, Bhansali chose to glorify this out-dated, gruesome tradition.

Conclusion:

The rise of women's services such as anti-harassment phone lines, task forces and increasing awareness about issues such as gender-based violence and child marriage means India is striving towards a more progressive, egalitarian future. However, such progress is hindered when modern values and standards of behaviour continue to be shaped by oppressive historical norms, like the all-consuming preservation of one's honor at any cost. There was very little British control in Rajputana compared to many other parts of India. As a result, Rajput history, morals and culture developed in a particularly distinctive and autonomous fashion. While there are many contemporary Rajasthanis- and Indians in general- who look to the past for guidance and identity, I think it's important to examine exactly what we remember and how we remember it. In the case of a film like *Padmavaat*, all of the controversy stirred up by the film and the protests surrounding it actually added to its popularity- I know of more than one person (myself included) who saw the film just to see what all the fuss was about. While most of the controversy and delays the film faced while still in production was due to issues surrounding the historical representation of Rajput royalty, I wish Bhansali had used *Padmavaat* not only to glorify the past, but to critique it as well. It is 2018, after all.

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