

CHAPTER V

A NOBLE QUEEN: A ROMANCE OF INDIAN HISTORY

A Noble Queen (1878)¹ is the last of the historical novels written by Meadows Taylor. In it he deals with one of the famous historical figures, Chand Bibi. Taylor has tried to deal with the court life and romantic career of Chand Bibi, who is a very brave, courageous and efficient woman of the Nizam Dynasty, the daughter of Hussain Nizam Shah and wife of Adil shah. In spite of her being a woman, she helps her husband not only in political affairs but also in warfares. Her mettle is tested when her husband is assassinated and she has to shoulder the entire responsibility of running the state. She has to face a lot of internal as well as external problems while running the political affairs of her state. She even takes part in battle to silence her enemy. Such a woman is killed by her own men by a sheer misunderstanding as historical records show us.

Meadows Taylor has dealt with this very career of Chand Bibi in his novel The Noble Queen. Taylor's idealism can be seen as it is reflected in this novel. The Noble Queen of the title is Chand Bibi. From this very title we can guess that the novelist wants to project Chand Bibi as a noble lady - highly glorifying title. She is perhaps the

first Indian woman born in a Muslim family and allowed to play her versatile role in political and country affairs of her state.

She is not portrayed as a flat character exhibiting her only aspect of a queen. On the contrary she is portrayed as a courageous, patient and efficient woman who can run her state like a brave warrior king. She has all the manly qualities in her which she displays while crushing several rebellions. She is married but is deeply involved in the political affairs in her dynasty. Occasionally she, even participates in the wars and thus helps her husband. It is after the assassination of her husband that her real personality as a queen blooms to its full capacity. However, she makes her nephew, Ibrahim sit on the throne of the Beejapoor and she runs the political affairs herself. She concentrates her entire attention on the political and military affairs of her state. The novelist after describing her appearance who has dressed herself, 'after the fashion of a man', gives detailed account of her personality:

She , for it was the Dowager Queen Chand, sat her horse with the most perfect grace and mastery of it often fiery spirit and her costume, though simple, was suitable to her high rank. On her head she wore a light steel morion, round which a white muslin scarf of the finest texture was bound as a

sort of turban, and a handkerchief of the faintest rose colour, with borders of narrow gold tinsel, was tied over the crown and below the chin, so that the face, except the eyes, was concealed. Her tunic, worn high to the throat, was of white cloth of gold of the richest texture, and her breast was crossed by a baldrick of broad gold lace, which was confined at the waist by another white muslin scarf, the gold brocaded ends of which hung down at her right side (p.118-19).

She is projected as a woman in the guise of a man or a manly woman whose very appearance is 'strikingly chaste and elegant'.

Chand Bibi is also portrayed as a woman of understanding and compromise for running the political affairs smoothly. She masters Persian and Arabic languages. She speaks Turkish and Toorki. she also learns the vernacular languages of Beejapoor and Ahmednangger, Kannada and Marathi. In addition she has several other accomplishments. She knows drawing and painting, she is keenly interested in playing musical instruments like 'Vina'. She sings many Persian 'ghuzals' and many pathetic Hindu Ballads in a delightful voice. Therefore she is a many-sided personality, a versatile, genius blended of masculine vigour and feminine elegance. Like most Taylor women, she is childless-most enduring careerist.

Chand's husband, Ali Adil Shah died in 1580, he was sixteen years older than her and she was hardly twenty five when he died. According to his will his nephew Ibrahim becomes the heir and ascending the throne, changes the entire political environment and thereby the career of Chand Bibi. Taylor writes :

The king left no male heir, but by his will appointed his nephew Ibrahim, son of his brother Thamasha to succeed him, and the Queen Dowager as his guardian and Regent of the Beejapoor kingdom, then, except the Moghul Empire of Delhy, the largest Mussalman power in India; and thus the Queen's independent political life began. Heretofore she appears to have led a joyous and peaceful existence without care." (p.128).

Therefore she starts taking part in every activity of the state. This displays her tremendous capacity of handling the problems related to various spheres-ranging from literature to politics and from domestic problems to the general. She herself is keen on doing her work and she accomplishes it with astonishing ease and confidence. She gives political training to the young King by making him sit in the court when the transaction of public business is going on. He is asked to watch everything and listen to all what the courtiers and ^{the} public speak. The young King Ibrahim watches the conspiracy hatched by the nobleman like Kishwar

Khan which brings a lot of misery and frustration to the Queen. Even then the Queen survives all these conspiracies and rebellions and comes out as a successful ruler. Showing her as a person possessing all the extraordinary qualities of Chand Bibi, Taylor comments :

Few in England know that the contemporary of our Queen Elizabeth in the Dekhan Kingdoms was a woman of equal ability, of equal political talent, of equal, though in different sense, education and accomplishments, who ruled over a realm as large, a population as large, and as intelligent and as rich as England; a woman who, surrounded by jealous enemies, preserved by her own personal valour and endurance her kingdom from destruction and partition; who, through all temptations and exercise of absolute power, was at once simple, generous, frank and merciful as she was chaste, virtuous, religious and charitable - one who, among all the women of India, stands out as a jewel without flaw and beyond price. (P.133)

She is now an ideal woman of all virtues and no vices. A strikingly elegant and chaste woman is ironically a widow. And as a result, she has stopped wearing colourful clothes. Without them, she is extremely impressive as a ruler. However, as an administrator of a state she is proved stronger and ^{more} capable than her husband or for that matter, any

other man. There is, however, no exaggeration when he sketches her so. Because Taylor knows the story of Chand Bibi very well through Brigg's translations which he mentions in the introductions to the novel. He further describes how she exhibits her 'ease, strength and confidence', when she sits on the horse and rides. About her skill in horse-riding Taylor writes :

The Queen's seat was perfect, not even that of the most practised cavalier could have excelled it. She was seemingly part of the horse itself, while the animal appeared to feel the light weight he bore only as a pleasure to urge him to those bounds and caracoles in his Royal mistress delighted. It was not often that the Queen could enjoy a morning ride over the downs with true zest, but the freshness of the air, the gallant company around her, the Royal falconers, the gaily caparisoned carts, on which sat the hunting leopards and the crowd of beaters, grooms, macebearers, and others who followed the Royal cavalcade, were for the time truly inspiriting. (P.119).

Such an efficient, brave, good -natured, well-behaved and learned Chand Bibi, however, has to face a lot of problems at home and abroad. We see her all the time disturbed by her

courtiers of different bent of mind. Some do not like Chand Bibi's increasing popularity and are quite jealous. They are seeking for an opportunity to dethrone her. They even try to poison the ears of her young nephew, Ibrahim, by feeding him with false news. Ibrahim once or twice falls a victim to the conspiracies of the courtiers like Kishwar Khan but there are loyalist courtiers too. They help the Queen to come out of her domestic as well as political problems. With the help of such good Samaritans, she steers through clearly. Even then there is a great threat to her life. Hyat Khan, the Kotwal, asks her to go away from the court so that he can teach a lesson to the rebels like Yacoot. But the calm and sober Queen says:

Ah! Khan, .. that would be the sure way to begin bloodshed. No, I will remain as I am; I have no fear. (P. 160)

It is her courage and fearlessness that makes her face every challenge in life. This the pardoning of others mistakes, makes her a real 'noble' Queen. Among the Abyssinians, she stands like a rock and fights till the last. She, therefore, outwits all her enemies with her might. But every now and then she gets nervous and frustrated. When she is tired, she is in nostalgia for Beejapoor, and goes to Ahmednagar and visits Beejapoor and Ahmednagar alternatively. In this attempt once she is captured by the rebel knight, Kishwar Khan in 1582, when she is near Satara. There she is imprisoned by the enemy. Her army, however, comes to her

rescue and she is released from her imprisonment. She very ruthlessly crushes the rebels of Adilshah. In 1584 she goes to Ahmednagar. When she comes to know about the chaotic and confused state of political affair at her home, she becomes very restless and rushes to Beejapoor. Exactly at the same time the Moghul army headed by Murad attacks Ahmednagar in her absence. Chand Bibi helps the Nizams and defeats the Moghuls. While doing so, she works hard day and night. The big walls of the fort are repaired during the night. Ultimately they are defeated. This leaves a lasting memory on their mind. The 'Chand' reaches the climax, when the Nizam is tremendously pleased with her performance. It is here that she receives the title of 'Chand Sultana'.

The humiliated and insulted Moghul army makes preparations for a renewed attack on the Nizam. In order to take revenge of the earlier defeat they once again attack Ahmednagar. This time, too, Chand Bibi defeats the Moghuls. The Moghuls, however, continue their attack till they succeed. Chand Bibi's very wise suggestion of making compromise, unfortunately, falls on the deaf ears. The aggrieved Nizams assassinate her on the spot.

The image of 'Chand' in 'Urdu', the moon, finally sets, and with it the empire which she builds with such vigour, also sinks symbolically. Taylor's ideal, heroic character of Chand Bibi remains as an unparalleled imaginary power which every Romance writer, in one character or the other, tries to create.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All the references to pages in the chapter are to Taylor's A Noble Queen : A Romance of Indian History (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1986.)