

# Sutapa Basu's, 'Padmavati, The Queen Tells Her Own Story' as a Metafictional Work

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**Abstract:** *The chief characteristic of metafictional writing is its self-consciousness. When a writer, within the text, discusses his thought process or methods in writing the novel or if the reader is spoken to by the author or one of his characters; we can say or attribute the text as a metafictional work. Self-consciousness in writing is anything that draws attention to the fact that it is an invented reality; the conventions are exposed, laid bare. Realism follows a timeline: a sequence of events that move forward to a conclusion. It uses flashback scenes to explain the causes for events and emotions in the story. It asserts that the sequence of events can simply break down and Salman Rushdie is one of the many writers who has pushed this logic to its illogical conclusion.*

**Key Words:** *Metafiction, Queen Padmavati, Sacrifice, Fire, Self-consciousness.*

Edward Said observes, "Fiction is viewed not as an intervention into reality, nor as an addition to it... as was the case with classic realist fiction ..... but rather as an intervention in other fiction, or in other writing". (Orientalism) Given the assumption that fiction is ideas, that ideas go beyond familiar or presumed reality, and that material or conceptual invention is a by-product of ideas, then it follows that all invention derives from fiction. Once freed, fiction writers, and their readers can explore and expand the boundaries of the imagination, and in doing so, they help increase the potential and totality of human knowledge. Metafiction, according to Patricia Waugh is, a "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention, to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary text.(pg.2)

R.J.Hembree writes, "Fiction had drifted further away from fiction and nearer to historical imitation; it counterfeits the assumptions of reality and consequently, perhaps falsely, confirms its legitimacy. An objective of metafictional writers is to free fictions from the shackles of reality assumptions and interpretations."

I will take up Sutapa Basu's, 'Padmavati' The Queen Tells Her Own Story' as a study in metafiction. The book starts with a prologue describing a scene of 'jauhar' in its grisly and gory detail. The writer vividly describes the Kund, or sacrificial fire cavity, "The Queens, along with their ladies, maids and young girls, bathed and attired themselves from head to toe in gorgeous garments, jewels and ornaments. Married women bedecked themselves in their crimson-and gold wedding finery. Some women held baby girls in their arms who smiled beatifically, unaware of their fate. After offering veneration to the deity and consuming a sacred meal that included a drink of whey and basil mildly laced with marijuana, the women began to approach the cavern. Men lined the path hands folded, heads bowed in salutation to the Satis. Husbands and brothers, fathers and sons, unmindful of the rain, were each searching for a beloved face"(Pg.9) The reader is almost bewitched by the magic of Basu's mesmerizing portrayal. She chronicles the images as if she was a witness to the historical event. She writes, "The chief priest held up a flaming torch. Calling out, 'Jai! Ek Linghji Ki Jai,' he lit the pyre. Whoosh!! The hay, wood and butter sprang into a wavering pillar of fire. The priests ran pell-mell to the cave opening to escape the brute firestorm. The flames spread quickly, encircling the platform, sucking out whatever little air there was in the cave. The women clutched at their throats, desperate mouths agape. Shriill screams echoing down the tunnel were abruptly choked off. Some mothers smothered their children to save them from the agony of burning. A few girl infants escaped the laps of mothers who were already alight. Tiny limbs spewing flames, they ran around, shrieking at their unexpected torment." (Pg.10)

The story then begins with Mrinalini Rao, a senior journalist at a national newspaper, 'The Daily Express' visiting Chittorgarh, at the insistence of her boss who is based in Chandigarh. She has been assigned the task of unravelling facts about Padmavati. "Mrinalini was the senior reporter with the broadsheet and Mr Pratap Sisodiya was its Chief of Bureau. Usually, he was quite amenable to her suggestions about stories worth following up or rejecting.

But when the controversy over the film on Padmini, the Rajput Queen, blew up, he was like the proverbial bull aggravated by a red shirt. The more he read of people commenting that Padmini was only a figment of a poet's imagination with no place in the annals of history, the more he snorted and pawed the dust." (Pg.14) Mrinalini meets a local girl, named Uma at the Chittor Fort. The girl offers Mrinalini a tour of the Chittor Fort and narrate the story of Queen Padmavati, known for her extraordinary beauty and the skills of a warrior. Uma starts an engaging and engrossing story of Princess Padmavati who belonged to the paradise island kingdom of Singhaldweep.

Sutapa Basu writes, "A land that entices you into such a magical spell that you wonder how you existed without experiencing such a paradise.....Ponds, lakes, lagoons abounded all over, speckled by temples and monasteries springing up on their banks. Devotees swarmed them, meditating, praying and offering obeisance to the gods. Hymns and chants to the Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva resonated in their precincts. Picturesque hamlets and villages reflected in the serene pools and rivers...Unique, too, were the inhabitants of Singhaldweep. Men were tall, strong with striking features, almost god-like in appearance. Women were like flowers; supple of body, graceful and well-endowed. Their moon-like faces showed off dark, coquettish eyes while black clouds of hair fell from head to knees. They spoke in the sweet tone of koels and cuckoos. Each one seemed to belong to a breed of padminis". (Pg.29) Padmavati lived there with her parents, King Gandharva Sena and Queen Champavati. She spent most of her time with her best friend Ambika and Ginni (a Hiranman parrot). "They called themselves 'Singhas' after their national emblem, the lion".(pg.30) Sutapa Basu keeps the reader engrossed with her weaving of words, she writes, "Gandharva Sena began to bring up his daughter like the son he would never have. From an early age, Padmavati's days were filled with lessons; training in use of weapons, warfare, horse riding, elephant battles and statecraft as well as classes in studying the ancient Vedas, painting, sculpture and literary arts". (pg.33) As the story progresses we know that the King and Queen are looking for a prospective husband for their daughter. But, he should be as capable as Padmavati. ".....I doubt if there exists a man who is worthy of my Padmavati. Who can hold a torch to her knowledge, her principles and her abilities? The king would retort irritably". (Pg.37) When he could not find one, "the King broached his dearest wish to his Council that Princess Padmavati be made the Crown Princess" (Pg.37). But, there was dissent among the courtiers. The elderly Chief Minister suggested, ".....Why don't we get the Princess married to a suitable man....?" And as the King vigorously shook his head, he hastened to add, "And invite him to be the Crown Prince? Then Princess Padmavati will become the Crown Princess, just as your Majesty desires. After you, both will rule Singhaldweep together." (Pg.37)

Ratan Singh, son of Samar Singh from Mewar registered himself for a contest in order to marry the Princess. After a long duet, and a tough fight, Ratan Singh saw his opponent. "With both hands, the Champion tugged off the face mask. Misty, dark tresses unravelled falling like a cloak all the way to the ankles. Amidst this dark cloud was a bewitching face. Milky white skin, large dark eyes tilting at corners fringed by thick lashes, a patrician nose above finely-etched lips with an endearing pout in the centre. Ratan Singh blinked, then blinked again. Was the sweat in his eyes making him so delirious that he was seeing mirages?" (Pg.87) So, after the Prince won the Princess's hand, a royal wedding took place and Padmavati was now the fifteenth wife of Ratan Singh. The couple continued to live in the palace for months. It was like a prolonged honeymoon until a message arrived from Chittor. It informed Ratan Singh of an invasion from a foreign invader and that he must return as soon as possible. Padmavati insisted on accompanying her husband because she was his better half. "It was now a month since Ratan Singh had announced that he had to leave for Chittor. Two messages, both urgent, had led to this decision. One was from the Mantri of Chittor informing him of the demise of his father, Rawal Samar Singh and telling him that he had to return to be anointed as the next Rawal. Besides, there was news that Alauddin Khalji had captured Gujarat and was now marching on to Ranthambore. Chittor's turn would come soon and it was imperative that the new Rawal return to defend his kingdom. The other one was a frantic missive from his senior queen, Prabhavati, about rebel Mewari chiefs plotting to take over the Rawaldom in his absence and thus depriving Ratan Singh's teenage son, Kunwar Vir Bhan, of his inheritance." (Pg.119) However, Padmavati's life took a turn for the worst when she came to the rough, arid and culturally backward Kingdom of Mewar with her husband. Unlike her own kingdom, the people of Bharatdesh were backward in thinking, they did not treat women as equals, they were suspicious of her beauty, and despite her attempt of being friendly, she was treated as a foreigner who was there to usurp the position of Ratan Singh's first wife, Prabhavati. But, Padmavati did not give up and worked hard at being accepted. She was a fearless, undaunting spirit and took up the task of empowering women in the villages. She helped them sought out their problems and advising them in their daily lives. Her mother-in-law was very fond of her and called her Banni. She was looked down by other women in the palace. Padmavati was cursed by the Senior Queen because she brought ill luck to the kingdom. And towards the end, we find she was reduced to being the object of desire of the Sultan of Hindustan, Alauddin Khalji, making her the reason behind the bloody battle of Mewar which took away most of its men's lives and forced women to jump into the fire. (Kasturi Patra in Books Pop Culture Read. January 30,2018)

The Sultan wins the battle, but the fortress he captures is empty. There is nothing to possess. The story follows the legend, even though the approach is more contemporary emphasizing women's education, their training in military

and public administration. Padmavati is the ideal combination of beauty and brains. She voices her opinions and fights the battle as an equal to her husband.

The story is a typical example of metafiction. The fate of the protagonist is predetermined. We as readers are free to praise them or criticize them. But we cannot change what they intend to do. We forget that what we are trying to stop has already occurred in history or myth or both. The narrative must suspend disbelief. Patricia Waugh writes, “Metafiction exposes the conventions of realism, and in varying degrees, realistic convention supply the control in metafictional texts, the norm or background against which the strategies can foreground themselves.” (Pg.18) The chief characteristic of metafictional writing is its self-consciousness. Sutapa Basu must be applauded for this uphill task. She has as a writer, within the text, discussed the thought process or methods as if the reader is spoken to by Basu herself or her characters. Realism follows a timeline: a sequence of events that move forward to a logical conclusion. The author uses flashback scenes to explain motivation or causes for events and emotions in the story. An artist’s version of history and mythology.

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