

The Queen of Mewar

by [R. M. Burgess](#) (July 2020)



Untitled, Amrita Sher-Gil, 1928

Canto 1

Maharani Padmini, Queen of Mewar,

Loved at the court and in the bazaar.

She prized common folk though a princess born,

Privilege and baubles, she did scorn.

Named for a lotus, she had that flower's grace,
Scion of a noble warrior race.

They said that she had complexion so clear,
No mark or blemish, flawless, sheer,
Her skin so translucent, when water she sipped,
One could see as down her throat it slipped.

She was the king of Singhal's exquisite daughter,
Rajas, rulers, princes, sought her.

Her allure was famed throughout the land.

But it was the Rawal of Mewar who won her hand.

She was married in a sari of red and gold,
And tales of her beauty were told and retold.

Canto 2

Maharani Padmini, Queen of Mewar,

Loved at the court and in the bazaar.

She looked divine, but her will was like steel,

She would die, but she would never kneel.

On Delhi's throne sat Khilji the oppressor,

A slave he was born, now a slave king's successor.
A bloodthirsty tyrant, known for pillage and rape,
A murderous savage, a creature of hate.

Said he to Kafur, his vicious henchman,
"Why have these Rajputs escaped our attention?
They have lands that yield taxes, they're not very far,
And I've heard of Padmini, Queen of Mewar."

So that balmy summer did Delhi invade,
It's borders were breached, Mewar was betrayed.
"My queen," said the Rawal, "this time it's war.
You must retire to the innermost keep of Chittor."

He turned to go, but she stopped him short,
"I hear you plan on leaving the fort.
That your strategy for this campaign,
Is to face the hordes on the open plain.

"Their armies outnumber us five to one,
Such a clash in the field cannot be won.
We'll improve our chances with a defensive tack,

Use the walls of the fort to blunt their attack.

“Stay with me, my love, in the fort of Chittor,
In here we can hold out for a year and more!
I’m a Rajput woman, by your side I’ll fight,
We’ll stand together, guard our birthright.

“Let them besiege us, we’ll weather the storm,
We’ll trust in our Gods, all the *poojas* perform.
Their armies will starve, once they run out of food,
They’ll return to Delhi, calling us shrewd.”

Canto 3

Maharani Padmini, Queen of Mewar,
Loved by the people, near and far.
Adroit and adept, brave and bold,
Brahma made her and broke the mold!

The Rawal put his arms around his lovely bride,
And with his face in her tresses, he sadly replied,
“The lands outside with our people are filled,

If I don't defend them, most will be killed.

"Khilji's a madman, his rule an ordeal,

His Hindu massacres are only too real.

A few young and healthy may flee from his path,

But the old and the crippled will feel his wrath.

"My men I will gather, we'll face the host,

Our loins are girded, but first and foremost,

Every woman and child, I charge to your care,

Comfort them, nurture them, don't let them despair."

"You give me," she said, "a thankless task.

But my ladies and I, we'll do as you ask.

However, if we lose the battle,

I tell you now, we won't be chattel."

Her words were but a thin disguise,

He understood, they brought tears to his eyes.

"No thought," he said, "could be more dire,

Than the image of you entering the fire."

Ratan rallied his men, prayed to his Gods.

Then the Rajputs rode out facing fearful odds,

The Rawal turned in his saddle, toward the walls of Chittor,

That seemed higher and stronger than ever before.

“My darling,” he murmured, “my goddess, my life,

I’m the luckiest man to have you for my wife.

Forgive me for asking for this sacrifice,

Our *dharma* demands such a steep price!”

Canto 4

Maharani Padmini, Queen of Mewar,

A conjugal dream, a wife beyond par.

Bid farewell to her husband, a picture of sweetness,

Brushed a tear away, revealing no weakness.

Delhi’s armies the horizon did fill,

Every Rajput riding forward felt a brief chill.

The queen from the walls watched them ride to the fray,

Hoping and praying they could carry the day.

The terrified villagers fleeing the spot,
Blessed the Rawal for the respite he bought.
"He fights to save us, no matter the cost,
Without his brave action, our lives would be lost."

Ratan told his captains, "With the first charge we make,
We must cut down their standards, their lines we must break.
They outnumber us greatly, but if they feel doubt,
We can turn first reverses into a rout."

The Rajputs charged, showing no fear.
They struck the front line with sword and spear.
The shock of the assault opened a breach,
And enabled the Mewaris the standards to reach.

The first Delhi standard by the Rawal was downed.
The Rajputs cheered, the muslims gave ground.
The carnage was terrible, with blood, sweat and gore.
And behind the lines, Khilji shouted and swore.

"Throw in the Pathans," to his general he said,
"Those wild Afghan tribesmen always cause dread."

Once the Rajputs lose heart, panic will spread,
And we'll end their incursion with great bloodshed."

General Kafur so ordered, the Afghans did launch,
But the Rajput vanguard proved much too staunch.
The Rawal himself cut down their flag,
It fell to the ground and was trampled like a rag.

Canto 5

Maharani Padmini, Queen of Mewar,
Lines of worry, her forehead did mar.
She tied knots on her *pallu* in her personal retreat,
Entreating *Kalika* for a Delhi defeat.

Khilji called his favorite slave to his side.
"Talat, you must stem this Rajput tide.
See the Rawal rampaging, his helm like a crown,
With a well-aimed arrow, you must take him down."

The arrow flew true, the target it found.
Its force felled the Rawal from his horse to the ground.

He struggled to rise, his wound to downplay,
But when he failed, his men gave way to dismay.

The Rajputs were bereft, their grit was shattered,
Left leaderless, the vanguard was slaughtered.
Retreat turned to chaos as the timorous fled,
The pride of Mewar was soon scattered or dead.

The Rawal knew they had lost, it was the bitterest pill,
The vultures wheeled, their cries were shrill.
Khilji approached, laughing at Kafur's joke,
And from high in his saddle to Ratan he spoke.

"Your wife's a famed beauty, a woman I crave,
I'll take her to Delhi, make her my slave.
In my harem she'll receive every comfort and care,
For once she's a muslim, my bed she will share."

How the Rawal wished for some strength in his arm!
To raise his sword, to do Khilji harm!
Blood rose in his throat, but he swallowed it back,
And made one last verbal attack.

"I am Ratan Singh Guhila, my Gods are just,
With my dying prayer, I curse your lust!
On this field of battle, your evil has won,
But know this you monster, you will be undone.

"For history will judge you for the ogre you are.
A murderer, whose soul is as black as tar.
You'll die like a dog; when you hear your death knell,
You'll see the blazing fires of hell!"

Canto 6

Maharani Padmini, Queen of Mewar,
A treasure of the realm, a shining star.
She saw a black raven, heard the bird's caw,
The ill omen chilled her, there was flesh in its claw.

Into the queen's chamber came the cavalier,
Went down on his knee, put down his spear.
His helm was split, his buckler was crack'd,
Sweaty, bloody, but spirit intact.

"My queen," he began, but his voice broke,
He could not go on, on his grief he did choke.
Padmini leaned forward, wiped blood from his brow,
Marked her forehead, made a silent vow.

"I'm ashamed," said the warrior, "to be here alive.
My king sent me to you, I had to survive.
Your love sustains him in his death throes,
Leaving you is his one regret as he goes."

"You are my husband's kinsman," she said.
"You stood by his side, your blood you have shed.
I swear to you now, though grieved, I'll fight,
I'll defend Chittor, I'll do what's right.
I'll dry my eyes, I'll hide my tears,
I'll exhort our people, conceal my fears.

"Get cauldrons to the ramparts, fill them with oil,
Gather the wood, set them to boil!
We'll prepare our walls the foes to repel,
And give the beast a taste of hell."

The enemy surrounded them all through the night,
The lookouts watched, to report at first light,
“We are besieged, O queen, can’t keep them at bay,
With the numbers we have for more than a day.”

“I will not hear such defeatist talk!
I’ll stand with you here to absorb the first shock!
The fort is strong, the walls are high,
Every man we lose, ten foemen must die.”

Canto 7

Maharani Padmini, Queen of Mewar,
Transformed herself to a woman of war,
A sword at her hip, a rose in her hair,
She inspired her men with her confident air.

From the safety of a raised platform,
Khilji stroked his beard, watched his army form.
The men perspired as they waited to storm,
For the morning desert wind was warm.

“Talat,” he said to his favorite slave,
“If they see their king’s state, they will be less brave.
Take a spike, crowned with his head,
To show them that he is truly dead.”

The gruesome sight brought a gasp from the wall,
Padmini, for a breath, was caught up in its thrall.
“Make sure there’s pitch in a cauldron,” she said,
“Heated and simmering, hot and red.”

The two best archers in the fort she brought,
And asked if the slave was in bowshot.
They were hardened warriors, assured and keen,
And answered with confidence, “Yes, my queen.”

“With one flaming arrow, light my husband’s pyre,
With another set the beast’s servant afire.
Our funerals invoke the God of Flames,
But to our foes, *Agni* just burns and maims.

The archers sent the arrows in ballistic flight,
Talat fell from his horse, his body alight.

He died in agony, a screaming banshee,
While the Rawal gained *moksha*, his soul set free.

Khilji saw the flames, and shrieked his lament,
His favorite's death was deep torment,
With gestures wild, and a strident call,
He sent his men toward the wall.

Canto 8

Maharani Padmini, Queen of Mewar,
Dauntless, fearless, an icon of yore.
A lady, a symbol, the epitome of duty,
An undying legend of valor and beauty.

For two long months, did Khilji assail,
He took heavy losses, still could not prevail.
He bullied and blustered, raved and ranted,
Threatened his men to get what he wanted.

The men of Chittor were doughty and tough,
But there were fewer each day, and then not enough.

“My queen,” said her captain, “it pains me to say,
I fear the morrow will be our last day.
We’ll never forsake you, on that please depend,
The men are all yours to the bitter end.”

Padmini blanched, but she knew he was right.
She’d known from the start, it was a hopeless fight.
“Please move the women and children,” she asked,
“To the innermost keep, for it will fall last.”

Once there, she asked for sandalwood,
And built a pyre where the flagstaff stood.
“Ladies and young ones, I beg your leave,
As your queen it’s my duty your cares to relieve.
I’m ashamed and feel the burden of guilt,
For I’ve failed to protect the lives you’ve built.”

Her first lady sobbed, “When you were a child,
We played together, laughed and smiled.
I know we’ve reached the end of the road,
But why must you choose this most painful mode?
A slit wrist or poison with much less pain,

Will your honor preserve, your name maintain.”

“My body’s a prize, alive or dead,
Displayed, dishonored, it would shame us,” she said.
“My warriors died heroes, they’ve showed noblesse,
And as their queen, I can do no less.
When beast gets here, his teeth he will gnash,
For the remains of *jauhar* will be nothing but ash.”

A little child no more than five,
Gazed at Padmini with her big oval eyes,
“Highness, I’m frightened, what must I do?
Where you are going, can I come too?”

She took the girl into her embrace,
“My darling, how I wish I could keep you safe!
Your innocence must melt the hardest heart!
Surely it should some mercy impart?
So hide, my child; when they come to this place,
Seek out a soldier with a kind face.”

With more wood came her ladies, their arms did strain,

All other women were in their train.

The huge pyre they built o'er the courtyard spread,

"You'll not go alone, O Queen," they said.

To maintain morale, she had resolved,

To remain smiling, but into tears she dissolved.

"My sisters," she said in the quietest voice,

"I do not command, you must make your own choice.

As I bid you farewell, I bless you, each one,

For while the battle we've lost, the future we've won."

Padmini was first into the pyre,

Her ethereal body was untouched by fire.

The flames enwrapped her like a groom clasps a bride,

Then her lustrous soul skyward did glide.

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R. M. Burgess grew up in Madison, Wisconsin, but following itinerant parental careers was educated in India and England before completing graduate work at Cornell. As a successful professional researcher, Burgess writes academic articles for a living but is passionate about poetry and fiction.

Burgess published four fantasy novels in the New Eartha Series before adding romantic fiction to his portfolio. His novel *Flawed Perfection – A Love Story* was published in 2019, with its sequel *Roxy Reid – Five Weeks in New York*, appearing in 2020. All his books are available on his author [site](#).

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