

Cub of Punjab

A poignant fictional take on Duleep Singh

Vineetha Mokkil

THE EXILE plucks a life rife with tragedy from the annals of history and gives it fictional form. The novel is woven around Duleep Singh, youngest son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The 'lion-hearted' father dazzled Hindustan with his might; the son, who inherited the throne at the age of five was duped of his kingdom and condemned to a life of permanent exile.

In the author's note to the novel, Sarna clarifies that *The Exile* is an attempt to capture the emotionally charged essence of Duleep Singh's life. Dissatisfied with the 'cold, bare-boned approach of history, the author decided to turn to fiction to do the last Maharaja of Punjab justice.

The story unfolds through a series of first person accounts. Duleep Singh looks back at his childhood — the annexation of his kingdom by the British, separation from his mother as he is taken under British guardianship and converted to Christianity, a voyage to England at 16 to masquerade as a country squire.

RoyalRub

The Exile

Navtej Sarna

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British to destroy his influence on his subjects. His kingdom was plundered by Queen Victoria and her henchmen. "Mrs Fagin. That is what I once called her (Queen Victoria). The biggest pick-pocket of them all... Stolen kingdoms, stolen jewels. Smuggled away to her by her loyal viceroys, men like Dalhousie, with immaculate records and panegyrics," writes a bitter, wizened Duleep Singh.

Other voices that populate the pages of *The Exile* include that of Maharani Jindan, Duleep Singh's indomitable mother; Mangla, the queen's favourite slave girl; Dr John Login who was appointed Superintendent of Duleep Singh after the annexation of Punjab; Arur Singh, the Maharaja's devoted servant who followed him to Paris and Moscow and Lady Login who exerted a strong influence on Duleep Singh during his childhood.

Mangla's descriptions capture Lahore's splendour as well as its downfall with life-like clarity. John Login, meticulous servant of the empire, gives vent to imperial anxieties. Maharani Jindan, helpless in the face of history's power play, sticks by her son's side, spurring him into ineffective spurts of rebellion.

What emerges from this tapestry of voices is the inside story of the machinations of British imperialism in the 19th century, as well as the naïveté of Indian rulers and their lack of prudence.

The Maharaja is battered by history in many cruel ways. He is forced to measure himself against the larger than life image of his legendary father, he is left to the mercy of the colonial masters who have robbed him of kingdom and faith.

The Exile plumbs the depths of the king's fractured psyche as it traces his search for a sense of belonging. The narrative competently fleshes out crucial moments in his life — the separation between the boy king and his mother, the brief solace he finds in marriage to an Abyssinian girl, epiphanies of loss and failed rebellions, the last, empty days that he spends as a pauper in Paris.

A sensitive exploration of the pangs of exile, the novel is rich in poignant moments though lacking in any new revelations.

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