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Book review – The Last Prince of Bengal by Lyn Innes

Diya Gupta

For those familiar with Bengal's colonial past, it can be a little surprising that the last prince of Bengal in this book isn't Siraj ud Daulah, the Nawab under whom Bengal was lost to the East India Company in 1757 during the Battle of Plassey. This date marks a turning point in Indian history: from Bengal, the East India Company went on to expand its dominion over most of the subcontinent. Exactly 100 years later, the 1857 Sepoy Uprising marked the end of Company rule and the beginning of the British Raj, with India being directly governed by Britain. And it took another 90 years after that for India to gain independence.

Siraj ud Daulah, of course, was the last pre-colonial Nawab of Bengal; Lyn Innes's memoir excavates the rich, textured and tragic history of Mansour Ali Khan, or the final Nawab Nazim, who ruled over Bengal between 1838 and 1880 while the British were in power in India. Siraj ud Daulah had been betrayed by Mir Jafar – his military general – to the British, resulting in the former's execution. Mir Jafar was then installed by Robert Clive of the East India Company as the Nawab Nazim, as Innes notes (p. 14), and it is this genealogy that she traces. Mansour Ali Khan is Innes's great-grandfather.

Innes recalls memories of a childhood spent in Australia, especially a dreaded bus journey where, despite her fair skin and blue eyes, another child mocked her – 'How's the black princess?' (p. 5). It leads Innes to question what blackness really was in that context – 'a generic term of disparagement that applied to anyone who wasn't white.' (p. 6) Being perceived as 'black' while so young marks Innes's first recognition of her Indian heritage and the birth of her desire to discover more. She finds out that her great-grandmother was Sarah Vennell, an English hotel chambermaid who had been married to Mansour Ali Khan.

Part I of the book examines the relationship forged between the Nawab and Sarah against the backdrop of the colonial political world in which they met, and largely draws upon official historical sources. Part II considers the story of their youngest son, Innes's grandfather, and marks a turn towards the personal in the recovery of memories, memoirs and family photograph albums. Innes is skilful in demonstrating the intricacies of the Nawab's relationship with colonial authorities. When the Sepoy Mutiny or Uprising broke out in 1857, for instance, the Nawab chose to support the British. Innes's explanation of this is highly plausible – the Nawab 'did not see the sepoys and peasants as "his own people"' (p. 33) but identified, like other Indian princes, with landowners whose property rights had been guaranteed by the East India Company. Yet, as Innes goes on to highlight, British treatment of the Nawab was shot through with racial bias and blatant greed – 'Yes, he could be acknowledged as a royal prince, but since he was Indian (and Muslim), he could not be regarded as having the status of European royalty.' (p. 42)

Innes then traces Mansour Ali Khan's journey to England to make claims for compensation: British administrators were wresting control over the finances of his considerable estate. I found newspaper reports quoted here to be fascinating testaments to the cultural encounters that ensued. The *Leeds Mercury*, for instance, reported on the Nawab and his sons when they attended the Derby races – 'These dusky Orientals, clad in gorgeous silken vestments, and glittering with gold and jewels, formed a strange contrast to the occupants of the carriages around them.' (p. 56) Such extracts lend a note of immediacy to the memoir, foregrounding the opulent spectacle that the Nawab and his family presented to English eyes, but also cementing their status as Indian royalty. However, despite all the media attention, along with joining forces with exiled rulers such as Maharaja

Duleep Singh from Punjab, the Nawab's attempts to restore his rights and hereditary stipend failed. He returned to Bengal in ill health and died of cholera there in 1884. With his death, Innes notes that the title of Nawab Nazim of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa was discontinued.

The intertwining of Sarah Vennell's life story along with the Nawab's, and the birth of her children, reveals how the complexities of gender, class, religion, race and privilege cut across each other. Sarah's tale, like Mansour Ali Khan's, is ultimately a tragic one. At the age of seventeen, from a hotel chambermaid she suddenly became a princess; but at twenty-seven, her four children – Miriam, Vaheedoonissa, Syed and Nusrat – were separated from her, as was her husband, who had taken another English wife. Sarah was refused access to her sons when they returned to England from India after the Nawab's death, and Innes paints a moving picture of her long battle for custody, which she eventually won.

The narrative then moves on to Syed and Nusrat's time at Oxford, and Nusrat's marriage to an English governess, Elsie Algar. Eventually, Nusrat and Elsie sailed to Jamaica in 1908 as the Prince and Princess Meerza, and then shifted to bohemian Paris to begin life as artists in 1910. Innes notes how they became part of the city's cosmopolitan world, never realising that political troubles in Eastern Europe would affect Paris and catalyse the First World War. Innes's use of life-writing sources here represents Nusrat as a 'charming, easy-going man' (p. 162), loving music and passing this passion on to his three children. In the post-war years, Elsie, on the other hand, took up writing for a living under the pen name Elizabeth Marc to supplement Nusrat's dwindling royal allowance, and the family started referring to itself under the Anglicised surname Mostyn.

When the Mostyns decided to migrate to Australia to try their hand at farming, they came up against the country's racial prejudice against 'Asiatics'. Innes explores this at some length, quoting from Elsie's letters to the Australian High Commission in London, where she falsely claimed that Nusrat's royal lineage was Persian – 'Anthropologists class Persians as European and not "coloured" and the Prince looks like an ordinary English country gentleman, very fair skin, blue eyes.' (p. 191) I learnt with interest here that Mir Jafar, to whom Mansoor Ali Khan traced his lineage, was of Iraqi descent.

The appeals worked: in 1925, the Nawabzada Nusrat Ali Mirza became the ordinary Mr Norman Allan Mostyn, to 'escape the burden of his title,' (p. 192) and sailed to Australia with his son Savile. His diminished royal pension was transferred there, and he was to be joined by his wife and daughter after a couple of years. Innes describes Nusrat and Savile's third-class passenger experience with imaginative depth and detail: 'Never before could father and son have spent so much time so close to one another – hour after hour lying at night in the bunk beds in their tiny cabin. I imagine them sometimes talking about what Myriam and Elsie might be doing, sometimes about what they would do when they got to Sydney, and where they would buy their farm. And sometimes perhaps they just lay silently listening to one another, breathing or turning restlessly in their narrow beds.' (p.195) The memoir is particularly rich at these moments, when Innes pauses and allows her readers to inhabit the emotional worlds of her characters at a vital turning point in their lives.

Elsie and Myriam joining Nusrat and Savile at their Australian farm, Myalla, proved rather disastrous for the marriage. Elsie wrote to a fellow author – 'When I arrived things were just as bad as they could be and the man was absolutely intolerable. He is a little better, but very far from his old self. Very nervy and difficult to do with.' (p. 207) By 1929, Elsie had taken on a lover, the Scotsman Ian Troup, and Nusrat (or Norman, as he was now known) moved out. Innes describes a series of complicated romantic entanglements within the family here – Ian and Myriam, Elsie's daughter, married in 1934, for example. Nusrat, we

are told, lived in 'quiet anonymity' (p. 218) with his new wife Hilda in Sydney until his death, while Elsie shifted to a new farmland property, Tyar.

Innes notes how, even in death, 'Norman/Nusrat was compelled to take on a fictional, inflated persona.' (p. 220) The newspaper erroneously proclaimed him to be a cousin of the Shah of Persia, similar to the Persian identity that Elsie had once tried to claim for him in securing his passage to Australia. The memoir draws to a close with Innes's observations on Indian independence, the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947, and the ensuing divisions among Mansour Ali Khan's relatives, some of whom remained in India while others moved to Pakistan. In the epilogue, Innes reflects on her own 'composite identity' (p. 228) and her meeting with Syed Reza Ali Meerza in India, claiming descent from Mir Jafar. Syed welcomed Innes as his sister.

The Last Prince of Bengal is a highly evocative memoir, navigating the complicated lives of Indian royalty and its decline against the context of the British Empire, Indian independence and Partition, and the Australian outback. In the process, it carefully examines the long roots of racial prejudice and what our identities – plural, messy and often surprising – might mean today.