



'MIXED FEELINGS': A REVIEW OF *THE JADU HOUSE: INTIMATE HISTORIES OF ANGLO-INDIA* BY LAURA ROYCHOWDHURY
(LONDON: RANDOM HOUSE, 2000).

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What matter who's speaking? It may strike some of you as odd that I've opened a review about *The Jadu House*, a book that claims to tell the 'forgotten' story of Anglo-Indians, with a quote from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. However, the Beckett citation, famously cited by Michel Foucault in his seminal essay, 'What is an Author?' is pertinent to the major questions raised by Roychowdhury's book. Does it matter whether a Cambridge-educated Englishwoman tells the story of the Anglo-Indians of Kharagphur? Should the Kharagphur Anglo-Indians tell their own story? Is it possible for these people, or any subjugated people, to tell their own story? These are not easy questions to answer, and I don't intend to resolve them in this review. However, the politics of speaking, writing and re-writing haunt *The Jadu House*. And I shall return these questions throughout this article. But why is the book titled *The Jadu House*? In colonial Kharagphur, the local Masonic Lodge was commonly called a 'Jadu House'. The Masons supposedly communicated through secret, arcane codes, and Roychowdhury contends that colonial India was saturated with a set of equally mysterious behavioural codes — 'this behaviour means you are British, that means you are a Muslim or Hindu or Christian' (p.222).

Before examining the book's strengths and weaknesses, it is worth knowing that Laura Roychowdhury is the author of an exemplary doctoral dissertation on the Anglo-Indians of Kharagphur. Her thesis is arguably the best piece of scholarly writing devoted to Anglo-Indians. It is a sophisticated work, which draws on an impressive range of academic disciplines, including history, anthropology, continental philosophy and literary studies. Moreover, it makes a valuable

contribution to the scholarship on the Anglo-Indian community, demonstrating that old-fashioned empiricism and contemporary theoretical speculation can complement each other. It also demonstrates that one does not have to be an Anglo-Indian to write about Anglo-Indians in an informed and sympathetic manner.

However, the thesis is not for the general reader. Conversely, *The Jadu House* is highly readable; in fact, it's a veritable 'page-turner'. The book documents Roychowdhury's personal experiences while researching her thesis. These experiences form the narrative core of the book. Having recently completed a doctoral thesis on Anglo-Indians myself, I can vouch for the fact that academic research can be an all-consuming, even passionate affair. Unfortunately, for me, the only passionate entanglements I experienced while conducting my doctoral research were with books. Laura Roychowdhury, however, 'lucked out'. She found the love of her life, a Bengali student of sociology, Subhrasheel Roychowdhury.

The Jadu House is an intriguing book not least because it defies categorisation. It can be read as a work of popular anthropology, an old-fashioned travelogue, or even as a nostalgic Raj novel. On one level, the book is the 'secret' history of a doctoral thesis. However, it is not written in the dry, uninspiring prose that is a common feature of much academic writing. On the contrary, Roychowdhury has a novelist's eye for detail, and her book occasionally sparkles with a rare lyricism. Indeed, it often reads like a highbrow Raj romance, which in fact it is. For *The Jadu House*, more than anything else, is a love story. And, for its all its other shortcomings, the book largely succeeds as a love story. Unfortunately, the author claims that the primary purpose of the book is to give voice the marginalised and hitherto misunderstood Anglo-Indian community. And this is where the book fails miserably. Whereas her thesis is sober and sympathetic, *The Jadu House* is overly subjective and self-indulgent.

Roychowdhury is aware that her book often treads a fine line between insight and blindness, adulation and offence. It contains several self-reflexive passages that betray the author's moral anxieties about a range of issues. These passages indicate that she is conscious of how her project reinforces colonial prejudices, and inevitably redeploys colonial stereotypes (the book contains several colonial clichés: steamy railway rest-rooms, vivid, sensate descriptions of the rhythms and odours of the

East, an assortment of eccentric ‘natives’ and a healthy dose of illicit inter-racial sex). Roychowdhury’s regular bouts of apprehension become extremely irritating. For example, she acknowledges the parallels between her book and the ‘Merchant-Ivory’ approach to representing colonial India when her boyfriend indignantly declares:

‘I hate it here [the railway rest room], Laura. I hate you in this place. All the railway officials rush around treating you like royalty and me [Suhrasheel] as your faithful servant. I feel as if I’m in a bad film sequel, *The Return of the Raj or Heat and Dust II*’ (p.8).

In my view, Shubrasheel’s reported observation is pretty astute. Indeed, *The Jadu House* and *Heat and Dust* have much in common. Both ‘stories’ are motivated by their respective author’s ‘personal’ interest in Raj history, and the protagonist of each book falls in love with an Indian man. In response to Shubrasheel’s accusation, Laura states that her aim is not to revive the Raj, but to ‘draw forgotten ghosts out of the shadows’. However, her ‘forgotten ghosts’ are my ancestors. And it is her desire to release these spirits that troubles me. Like many western anthropologists and sociologists before her, Roychowdhury uses Anglo-Indians as a pretext for talking about something else altogether. In this case, Anglo-Indians, the human progeny of Britain’s colonisation of India, provides Roychowdhury with an excuse for re-shaping her personal identity. The book is literally self-obsessed, and contains several passages that describe the author’s various attempts at cultural cross-dressing. After cultivating the image of a demure, modest, somewhat dowdy English memsaheb, Laura ‘reinvents’ herself, first, as a Bengali maiden, then a sexually voracious Anglo-Indian ‘harlot’ and, finally, in a move that more or less restores the ‘order of things’, as a respectable, middle-class Bengali wife.

Laura notes, quite early in the book, that Mrs. Gupta, her Bengali host,

has revived my teenage dreams of dressing up as someone else. This time my fantasy is not an eighteenth-century gentleman. Mrs. Gupta wants to teach me to be a traditional Bengali lady (p. 25).

Later, Mrs. Gupta is appalled by Laura’s apparent identification with the subjects of her anthropological investigations: ‘I don’t recognise you, Laura, you’ve become too Anglo-Indian from all your researches (p. 242)’. Roychowdhury explains her desire to re-fashion her identity with reference to her ‘Englishness’ and the stultifying atmosphere of her alma mater:

At Cambridge, where I followed generations of Paulinas to study Archaeology and Anthropology, I realized that academia didn't always allow a shape-shifting freedom to reinvent oneself and, if anything, the notion of Britain I was trying to escape was reinforced (p.15).

So, Laura's excellent Indian adventure is an act of rebellion, an attempt to escape the suffocating strictures of her cultural background. Roychowdhury is astute enough to acknowledge that this background accords her a degree of privilege unavailable to her Anglo-Indian subjects.

As they sing I stare at my hands, which look whiter than they ever have before. And I feel the privilege, the passport, they provide to indulge myself with ideas about transforming my identity. Mrs Gupta had welcomed my attempts to become like a Bengali woman because she thought that I, like her, had pure blue blood. This is a luxury that this family doesn't have. They are not allowed to belong anywhere, so experiments with their identity are forced on them, producing a restlessness not of their own making (p. 52-53).

Again, Roychowdhury assumes that the mere observance of a problem absolves her of any ethical responsibility towards her subjects. This tactic of anticipating possible criticisms by noting them in passing is perhaps the most serious flaw of the book. As I've already mentioned, Anglo-Indians do not provide the major focus of *The Jadu House*. Laura's sexual transgressions are at the core of the book.

She confesses that she is a married woman at the outset. Her husband, an African graduate student at the University of Michigan, makes several cameo appearances as the jealous husband, who suspects that his wife's infidelities. Of course, the hapless husband has just cause for concern. For, in a refutation of Kipling's maxim that 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet', Laura takes an Indian lover. She goes on to provide her readers with candid revelations of her desire for Subhrasheel (who, at twenty-one, is — shock, horror — several years younger than his mistress). We are treated to descriptions of how the author's body responds to the erotic libations of the Karma Sutra and Masters and Johnson. Apparently, the 'forgotten ghosts' that Laura attempts to 'draw out of the shadows' are obsessed with inflammatory tales of unbridled desire and illicit sex. I'm hardly a prude, but, as any student of the Anglo-Indian community knows, the sexually voracious Anglo-Indian 'harlot' is arguably the most common stereotype perpetrated by colonial fiction. So much for destabilising commonly accepted myths about Anglo-Indians!

Predictably, the book concludes with Laura's wedding. Wistfully ruminating on two Anglo-Indian 'friends' (Gary and Carol) who have recently moved to America, Laura observes that it is ironic that as she is about

to be enfolded in all the markers of a Hindu bride, they have vanished from Indian soil. And there will be no Anglo-Indians at the wedding: the social mores of Bengali middle-class society would not permit this and it would cast doubts on the associations of the bride (p.263).

Ultimately, Roychowdhury's celebration of Anglo-Indian hybridity does little to break down India's rigid caste boundaries. Like so many classic Hollywood narratives, *The Jadu House* concludes with a wedding and the restoration of the status quo. Despite flirting with various cosmopolitan identities, and bathing in the warm glow of the 'we are the world' ethos of global popular culture, Roychowdhury reinforces the primacy of an older colonial aristocracy. For her coupling with the semi-regal Subhrasheel is reminiscent of the almost forgotten narratives of Maud Diver. Diver, a contemporary of Rudyard Kipling, wrote romantic novels that often explored inter-racial romance. Roychowdhury concludes *The Jadu House* by asking, rhetorically, whether Anglo-Indian histories can ever be heard. The short answer, is no. At least not until books that purport to be about Anglo-Indians actually focus on Anglo-Indians.

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