India has evoked and continues to evoke a wide range of reactions from both Indians and non-Indians. On the Indian side, responses range from admiration to irritation, with the latter memorably represented by Nirad C. Chaudhuri and V.S. Naipaul.\(^1\) The variety is no less impressive with regards to the way India has been engaged with by non-Indians. In E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924), one of the classic texts of the colonial encounter, one gets to be familiar with most of the Indian as well as non-Indian ways of looking at India, from confusion to empathy, as far as the latter are concerned.

If the preceding paragraph gives a sense of dynamism and movement, it also contains an implied centre around which the crosscurrents of viewing India revolve. Attracting or repelling, India appears to exert a magnetic hold on whosoever cares to turn to it. In a sense, *Joan in India* by Suzanne Falkiner is the story of one such India-crossed Melbourne girl called Joan Falkiner who showed extraordinary courage and determination to go out to India in 1939 to marry her fifty-seven-year-old Indian lover Taley Muhammed Khan, the Nawab of Palanpur, who she had first met two years earlier in Europe at the age of nineteen.\(^2\) The marriage, noted Melbourne *Truth*, gave ‘the molars of Melbourne a juicy social morsel to masticate’ (4). The liaison of the colonial cousins also caused the colonial bureaucracy both in India and London a good deal of trouble. However, by way of relating the romantic tale of Joan and Taley in the broader context of the British Empire in the twentieth century, Falkiner not only grounds the story in history but also provides an analytical framework by which to explain the inter-colonial relationship.

Deftly combining the skills of an archaeologist with those of a historian, Falkiner goes from one corner of the world to another, to excavate the love story of Joan and the Nawab of Palanpur. The breadth is aptly captured in the titles of the different parts comprising the book: Bombay, Palanpur, London, The South of France. The Prologue sets the scene for the journey which commences in June 1992 and is recounted in snatches throughout the book. The larger blocks of the narrative are the uneven bits and pieces in the historical reconstruction of the lives and times of the two central characters whose romance is both facilitated and hindered by the all-encompassing historical force known as imperialism initiated by modern Europe. Thus history, romance, and travelogue blend, to add a rich, hard-to-define flavour to the narrative, making it difficult for the reader to lay the book aside until finished.

*Joan in India* can also be read as revisionist history in that it challenges nationalist constructions of Indian princely states as dens of backwardness, corruption, exploitation, and extravagance. In his *Autobiography*, for example, Jawaharlal Nehru, first prime minister of independent India, characterises the landlords as a class “physically and intellectually degenerate.”\(^3\) Nehru goes on to call the landlords ‘complete parasites on the land and the

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\(^1\) See, for example, Chaudhuri’s *The Continent of Circe* (1965), Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness* (1964) and *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977). In a later work called *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), Naipaul has shifted towards a more positive approach to India.

\(^2\) As the common surname suggests, the author of *Joan in India* (niece) is (distantly) related to her subject Joan (aunt).

people’ as well as ‘the spoilt children of the British Government.’ As far as Nehru was concerned, British colonialism and Indian feudalism were both anti-national forces whose demise was the precondition out of which the Indian nation(-state) would emerge. In contrast, the image of Palanpur that emerges in Joan in India is that of a small princely state whose ‘intelligent’ and modern-minded ruler tried by all means to improve the lot of his subjects.

Theoretically-oriented readers, especially those who are still under the deconstructionist spell of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, would find the book most engaging at those moments when the physical journey to retrieve the story of Joan and Taley takes on a spiritual character in the form of self-exploration, with explorer becoming explored in the process, much in the manner of Ronald Ross in Amitav Ghosh’s The Calcutta Chromosome (1996). A brief episode in Chapter 23 brilliantly captures how the two roles became reversed at times. On her last day with her subject, Falkiner is still trying to ‘tease all sorts of information out of her [Joan]’ (269). It is, however, the investigated who outdid the investigator. Always changing the subject of her marriage with the Nawab, Joan finally succeeds in getting the author of Joan in India ‘drunk ... under the table’ (270).

Spanning three continents and divided into four parts, Joan in India has thus a meta-narrative consciousness which frequently brings to the fore the difficult question of how history comes to be narrativised out of a complex and dense web of conflicting data. The task of shaping history (not the other way round) into a coherent narrative becomes all the more daunting if the historian has to rely on the (un)reliable memory of others in the absence of historical record. Where did the colonial lovers first meet? There are as many answers as there are storytellers: one informant gives Buckingham Palace as the most likely venue (xiv); another reports that ‘Joan and the Nawab had met at a hotel in Switzerland or Germany’ (5); Joan herself believes that ‘it was in London’ that she had met the Nawab (262). Not surprisingly, the author of Joan in India who had gone out to research Joan ends up humbled: ‘Not for the first time, I wondered how much I could trust anyone’s account of Joan, least of all her own’ (272). No historical reconstruction can possibly aspire to tell the final truth.

Though narrative history in the main, Joan in India admirably mixes the genres of adventure, romance, and travelogue, to produce a hybrid work as fascinating as the story of inter-racial relations it sets out to narrate. Masterfully told against a meticulously delineated backdrop of colonial history, the humane tale holds the reader captive just as India had once captivated the nineteen-year-old Melbourne beauty Joan in the form of her lover, the Nawab of Palanpur. On top of everything else, however, if Joan in India signifies anything, it is that India continues to draw attention from non-Indians as strongly today as it has for centuries.

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