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April 9, 1989

## OUT OF PURDAH INTO POLITICS

By RACHEL BILLINGTON; Rachel Billington is a British writer whose most recent novel is "Loving Attitudes."

RAJ By Gita Mehta. 479 pp. New York: Simon & Schuster. \$19.95

When, after the Indian Mutiny in 1857, Great Britain took over rule of the subcontinent from the East India Company, Queen Victoria commented with satisfaction that at last India was "all . . . mine." She then proceeded to rewrite the proclamation of her Prime Minister, the Earl of Derby, to the Indian people in words that were extraordinarily sympathetic for that time: "Firmly relying ourselves on the truth of Christianity . . . we disclaim alike the right & the desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects . . . but all shall alike enjoy the equal & impartial protection of the law." She had found the jewel for her crown.

Queen Victoria loved India with the same kind of patronizing affection that has colored so much writing before and after independence. The many high-minded Britons who devoted their lives to India have tended to obscure and romanticize the ugliness of colonial rule.

Gita Mehta, an Indian with strong American and European links, opens her first novel, "Raj," in 1897, the 60th year of Victoria's reign. It is clear at once that there will be no sentiment lost on the British. In a small and remote princely kingdom, a son is born to the Maharajah, but his joy is tempered by his concern at a great famine. A visiting noble from Udaipur advises him that he must go to see the queen in London: "Tell Victoria the speech of Britain is golden, but her taxes are more savage than the sword of the Moghuls." Another noble joins in: "Britain cripples us with her greed. Half of India's money goes to fatten England. The other half is spent on an army in which no Indian can be an officer." But the Maharajah is only fully persuaded by his wife's words: "India's Empress cannot ignore India's suffering."

Needless to say, it turns out that Queen Victoria, old and near the end of her life, has no interest in or influence over the fate of a kingdom so far from the center of British government in India.

Ms. Mehta has chosen to tell the story of the last 50 years of British rule through the eyes of a princess of that small, remote and conservative kingdom. The limitations of such an angle on history are the limitations of her protagonist, Jaya, who spends most of her early years in purdah and only truly emerges from the women's quarters toward the end of the novel. Thus most of the book deals with the etiquette, ceremonial and religious devotions carried out in a society where every action was guided by tradition.

In her journals, Lady Curzon, the American wife of the viceroy of this period, describes meeting a princess such as Jaya in Jodhpur. Afterward, when the princess joined Curzon on a balcony, the diarist noted: "The contrast - she and I standing side by side, looking over the battlements, and that painted jeweled female prisoner inside covered with emeralds who has to receive her horrid little husband on the rare occasions he comes near her by placing her face to his feet - is really the contrast and dividing line between East and West."

Ms. Mehta takes us behind this European perception and shows us that in fact the truth was not much different. Worse still for Jaya, since she is forced to marry the westernized Prince Pratap, who finds her traditional appearance, complete with nose ring and painted hands and feet, physically repellent.

If the novelist is unforgiving toward the British - with the possible exception of James Osborne, a cold-fish army officer with alluring green eyes - she is not much kinder to some of the princes who swagger through her pages. These polo-playing, plane-flying, Eton-educated bounders are utterly degraded, although at least their corruption can be attributed to their British masters.

Happily there are other influences in Jaya's life, beginning with Mrs. Roy, an Indian tutor whose family is deeply involved in the movement for nationalism. Jaya finds herself pulled three ways: by the old traditional beliefs in which she grew up, by loyalty to her husband and his kingdom and by her growing understanding of India's need to be united in its struggle for independence. She must, it seems, unlearn the lessons of thousands of years. In this context Gandhi enters the story, and we move toward the climactic violence of post-World War II India and its suddenly attained freedom.

With both her odious husband and Anglicized son dead, Jaya puts her faith in democracy and applies to enter government - thus suggesting the famous Maharani of Jaipur as a model. Jaya has come a very long way from the world of tiger hunts,

concubines, eunuchs and purifying dips in water smelling overwhelmingly of attar of roses.

"RAJ" is a novel; Jaya is a fictional creation. But the strengths of the book all lie in the facts and details of social setting, incident and politics, which dominate the characters so that even the figures central to the story have little individuality. They appear to be stereotypes Ms. Mehta wields to highlight or to illustrate points. Jaya never seems to make any real contact with the men or women who cross her path. There is a hint that she loves the green-eyed Captain Osborne, but it is hardly developed beyond a schoolgirl crush. There is more than a hint of the attraction she feels for the politically active Amrit Roy, which culminates in an unconvincing scene of sexual consummation. In general, Jaya is a kind of sleepwalker, making her way through remarkable events.

But even if "Raj" cannot measure up to the creative power and subtlety of such modern writers as Paul Scott or Anita Desai, it does justify itself, if only for the Indian social history. Moreover, its strong viewpoint should remind those who suffer from "nostalgie de l'Empire" of the immense price India had to pay for the Raj.

Photo of Gita Mehta (Sigrid Estrada)