

The Heart is Like Glass

By Geetika Pathania Jain

ODE TO LATA 10th ANNIVERSARY EDITION by Ghaleb Shiraz Dhalla. *Final Word Books, Los Angeles, CA. Originally published in 2002. Republished in 2012. 311 pages. \$14.95.*

Ode to Lata accomplished many firsts including being the first South Asian LGBT novel to be reviewed by the *Los Angeles Times* and the first account of the South Asian gay experience from an author from the African continent. Available for the first time in paperback and e-book in a special 10th Anniversary edition, it includes a bonus story:

Just in time for the national discussion on same-sex marriage, *Ode to Lata* enlightens the readers as to the dangers of the “closet” and how having a functional familiar relationship is entirely dependent on honesty and acceptance.

Dhalla’s book plumbs the psyche of an openly gay Los Angeleno of Indian descent. Unlike gays in long-term, stable relationships that are flocking to Washington D.C. in committed pairs, Ali is still looking for true love, and is afraid he might never find it. Meanwhile, we watch him skin his heart as various lovers, friends and family members weave in and out of his life. It doesn’t help that his yearning has been declared unnatural and immoral by society.

Through most of the novel, Ali is trying to understand just how he came to be this needy and angst-ridden, searching for love in all the wrong places. Carousing in gay clubs at all hours, jilted by lovers and spurned by friends, he frequently finds himself absolutely alone in a roomful of bodies.

Ali may find solace in the excesses of gay Los Angeles culture for a while, but this does not quell the yearning in his heart. He plumbs the dysfunctions in his family history as well as sexual encounters from his youth in an effort to understand his proclivities. Self-aware and ironic in his neediness, there is an endearing vulnerability that transcends sexual orientation, race, or gender.

His “perfect pick up line,” a masterpiece of bitter humor, is “Come here, baby. I’ll make your life pure hell.” Bill, the beautiful male sex worker, exerts an attraction that overcomes Ali’s repugnance at Bill’s odious politics. When Bill reveals that his swastika-like tattoo is a symbol of his hatred for black people, Ali tries to be tolerant of Bill’s intol-

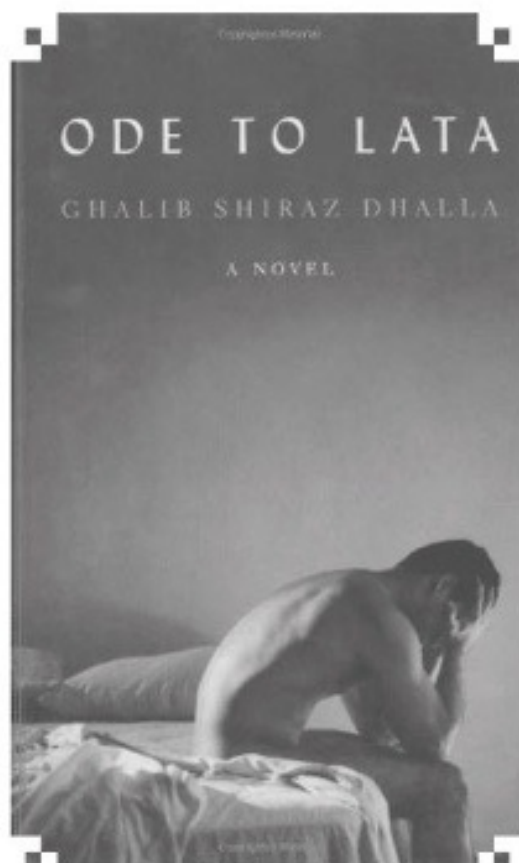
erance. “Bill’s prejudice, I justified, even in all its repugnance, revealed an honesty that deserved both admiration and pity.” But whether it is Richard, Nelson, or Bill, the heart-break is not long in coming. Ali wonders why the repeated trauma has not inured his heart, hardened it permanently. It is here that Lata’s mellifluous voice is invoked by Dhalla’s book title: *sheesha ho ya dil ho, akhir toot jata hai* (the heart is like glass; eventually, it will break.)

Ali’s mother, who inspires both loyalty and a deep irritation in her son, comes to terms with her son’s sexual orientation in a moving and well-written scene set in LAX International airport. Her religion considers homosexuality the work of the *shaitan*, or devil, but however much Ali regrets “that there would be no grandchildren for her to dote on, to carry on the family name, that the tree stopped here,” he refuses to “live a lie,” and “trap some poor woman,” into marriage with a closeted gay man who chooses societal respectability over authenticity.

Though the scenes described are sometimes tawdry and cringe-inducing in their explicitness, the stark loneliness that propels him to these sensual and ultimately unfulfilling encounters is unmistakable. Like other members of the extended Indian group “Saath” of “familially or societally misunderstood Indians,” Ali tries to “escape the castigations of his sexuality and the lonely choices it had compelled him to make.”

Ali’s rift with this adopted South Asian “family” of misfits is well described. He regrets the careless remarks that he made, and misses the camaraderie that he once shared with the gossipy members. For Indians gossip is as staple as chappatis and basmati rice. No one is ever immune from this customary avocation (participated in innocuously and disguised as a form of concerned colloquy), which succeeds in hurting feelings all around. One could always count on being the topic of the evening if one didn’t show up at a barbeque or at some insomniac coffeehouse where the group was meeting.

There is an activist strain in Ali’s gay pride endeavors and “an obligation to educate this disturbingly repressed community” of South Asians. “We had become a culture that is ashamed of sex ... that wore that tyrannical



face of puritanism. Parents unable to talk to their children about the risks involved...” It was simply and entirely a matter of shame illustrated by the instance of an AIDS outreach effort to distribute condoms. It is received with a healthy dose of tittering, as well as abuse by a gas station owner: “Go! Go! *Gandu, haram sade, pata nabin kahan se ajate hain!*” (Where do these faggot come from?)

This book is the answer to this crudely worded question, describing in courageous, painstaking detail, exactly where Dhalla is coming from.

Last year, when I reviewed *The Two Krishnas*, Dhalla expressed a hope that his work would “help us to understand that the more compassionate we are and the better we learn to accept those that are different from us, the better it is for everyone in the end.” (*India Currents*, Feb 2012)

The Bollywood, make-no-mistake, here-it-comes-with-a-capital-E end. The End. ■

Geetika Pathania Jain lives in the Bay Area. This week, her playlist will include Lata Mangeshkar’s songs mentioned in Ode to Lata. She might even hum these tunes while she does the dishes.