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Song of Himself

D.J. CARLILE

ODE TO LATA

A Novel

by **Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla**

Really Great Books:

288 pp., \$22.95

“Ode to Lata” is quite an achievement. In his first novel, Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla traces the history of a life over three continents, through three generations of a family, exploring multiple facets of human sexuality in the process. From India to Kenya to Los Angeles, the book’s varied strands converge in the person of Ali, whose story it is.

Ali’s family is from India, but he was born in Kenya, where his grandparents had settled. He is Muslim by upbringing but his Hindu roots are not far from his heart. The films of Bollywood are the template of his dreams. These fantastical musicals, featuring melodramatic love stories in which the lovers scarcely embrace, much less kiss or copulate on-screen, are a staple of Indian culture. Song lyrics from these florid epics are scattered as commentary on Ali’s disarranged love life: “poignant lyrics that epitomize the suffering of love and which only Lata can sing. . . . Imagine Ralph Fiennes lip-synching Michael Bolton when carrying his dead lover out of the cave, only to be met with the rest of the cast . . . equally bereft, in a full production number. That’s Bollywood.”

In his early teens, Ali discovered he was gay, and his eventual move to California is an attempt to find a life of his own where he is not expected to marry and raise a family. His mother looms over his life as a reminder of what his “native community” expects of him.

Ali’s father, an attractive womanizer, was murdered by his jealous mistress when Ali was 6, and memories of violent quarrels between his “loving parents” have

He is understandably wary of heterosexual relationships from an early age. In his child’s mind, these are bound up with anger, jealousy, tears, reproaches and blood.

The book’s style is conversational yet confessional. When his mother visits from Kenya, he temporarily shelves his night life and meditates: “[A]lthough I didn’t doubt how much she and my father had loved me, their parenting had been a sanctioned debacle of neglect at best. And now, years later, with him six feet under and her enraptured in religion, I had been left with huge holes in my heart . . . which, I had been convinced for so long, could only be filled by someone exactly like my father. How to tell her all this without breaking her heart?”

The night life of West Hollywood—the rounds of drinking, cruising, drugs, dancing and sex—is not glamorized. “When first treading into gay Los Angeles, one of the rudest shocks had been that

“Ode to Lata” traces one man’s attempts to come to terms with himself.

opposites didn’t always attract. The clones were looking for clones. The buff men were looking for other buff men. And the most popular of them all, the tops, were looking for bottoms who, alas, looked like tops. Only the queens weren’t looking for their own kind. . . . When night falls on Santa Monica Boulevard, a modest stretch of its cadaver begins to take on a shadowy kind of life . . . as early as dusk. . . . [W]hen darkness finally cloaks its pavements and bus benches . . . it actually starts to surge and ripple . . . a visible procession of sexual trade. The drivers stealthily . . . search out those they will not acknowledge by day. Here they will find a menagerie of sexual creatures to expiate

camp from the world of Hindi cinema. The nostalgic, melancholy strains of ‘filmi’ music; and the evergreen voice of Lata Mangeshkar.”

This story resonates for any and all of us. We are often stuck in roles of failure that we blame on our childhoods or find ourselves in relationships that collapse due to unrealistic expectations. We are often creatures of self-deception and self-inflicted misery. “Ode to Lata” engages cultural differences and the loathing dismissal engendered by racism and intolerance. Ali himself demeans his lifestyle and his less-than-perfect body, his ethnic “otherness” and needy emotional hunger.

The morning after a wild night, he’s consumed with disdain while his bed partner is in the shower: “We had met in some dark corner at a sex club where he could barely make out what I was. I might have even seemed Latino to him at some point. But now, with daylight intruding through the blinds . . . [a]ll those images of 7-Eleven salesmen and heavily accented sing-song dialects would have come flooding into his mind and maybe he would have cringed. . . . I can’t seem to remember exactly when it all started. This shame. . . . Perhaps it’s all the result of being born in the shadows of colonialism. Imagine growing up in a country where being white automatically meant that you were entitled to the privileges that everyone else had to struggle for.”

Late in the book, Ali thinks of India’s fate and how the Moguls and then the British made their mark. “Two very different cultures with one very virulent trait in common, their puritanism, had ruled India. An epoch of lavish sexuality had been expunged . . . Suddenly what was natural had nothing to do with our ancestors . . . Centuries of history were suddenly consigned to oblivion . . . Exported to the West . . . India and her legacy had been prostituted not only by outsiders,

stuck in Ali's memory: "There is pandemonium in the room. I stand barefoot, crying hysterically in my flimsy vest and underpants and look up at these two larger-than-life people going amok. There is shouting and screaming and a lot of movement, and it's very confusing and I can't understand what's going on. I only know that it's bad. I cry harder . . . I know I see blood . . . everywhere it seems. On the wall. On their hands. On their faces. In the mind. I am standing in the middle of the room. Can't they see me? Why aren't they protecting me from all this?" Ali's grandparents, too, have spent their long life verbally sparring and attacking each other.

D.J. Carlike is a critic, playwright and translator.

them from the churning in their bellies. Here they will find the seeming virgin . . . the jaded man . . . and the *homme fatale* who, by the nature of his handsome looks, is fated to leave for other loves and lands."

Ali is a romantic at heart and is drawn to men who must be pursued and seduced. He has little skill in maintaining a relationship that is nurturing and sexually charged. He complains to his fellow expatriates about the incomplete nature of his love life. They, in turn, cluck their tongues and sigh along with him in a roundelay of sympathy and sarcasm: "Chatting away in an orgy of different dialects—Gujarti, Hindi, Urdu. . . The sweet exaggerated vernacular . . . The sardonic appreciation and extraction of

but by her own children. They had reduced her to a commercialism about pungent spices, gods and goddesses with multiple limbs and heads, and the movies. . . ."

Dhalla writes: "Passion thrives on many annihilating emotions. It's fueled by catalysts so fickle, so fleeting, that the promise of lasting love is never one of them." This is a book of healing, of a soul coming to terms with itself and the body and mind it inhabits. This novel allows the so-called "straight" world a more intense glimpse into the male gay lifestyle than similar efforts, for it is told by an "outsider" who is deeply enmeshed in gay culture—one who is part of the scene, but stands at a distance, waiting and wishing to belong somewhere, anywhere. □