Educating Seeta

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The ideology of romance presents love as the exceptional case which defies official rules governing social and sexual intermixing in any culture. The subversive potential of the exceptional case opens up many possibilities for arguing for the transformative potential of love plots, their questioning of received social norms, and their Utopian projection of possibilities in a world that denies them. I will return to the possibilities of romance later, but first I want to emphasize the importance of reading the romance as a record of social and political history. I return to William Dalrymple’s *White Mughals*, a recent study of a romance set in eighteenth-century India, in which he presents interracial marriage as embedded in the political, social, and cultural relations of ruling British officials with the native aristocracy in the South Indian state of Hyderabad, though it is ultimately set apart from its context and in defiance of the governing social assumptions of that period. Surrounded by political intrigue, imperial ambition, and jostling for social power are the two lovers, the aristocratic Khair-un-nissa and James Kirkpatrick, British Resident at Hyderabad. Dalrymple’s objective in his account of this late-eighteenth-century romance between an Englishman and his Indian wife, is to celebrate the synthesis of cultures, and the possibility of romance that crosses racial and cultural boundaries. He paints a picture of the tragic, sad, and ultimately wronged Khair-un-nissa betrayed by the perfidy of one Englishman, as much as she
was loved and honored by Kirkpatrick. Against the backdrop of the aggressive policy of annexations instituted by Lord Wellesley, the racist premises that drove Company policy, and the uncultured approach of British officials to Indians in general, he shows the greatness of Kirkpatrick and the nobility of his love for Khair-un-nissa. In Dalrymple’s account, the colonial context is more complex than segregated British and Indian cultures would suggest. In his introductory remarks, he points out that “the Kirkpatricks inhabited a world that was far more hybrid, and with far less clearly defined ethnic, national, and religious borders, than we have been conditioned to expect, either by conventional Imperial history books written in Britain before 1947, or by the nationalist historiography of post-Independence India, or for that matter by the postcolonial work coming from new generations of scholars, many of whom tend to follow the path opened up by Edward Said in his pioneering *Orientalism*” (Dalrymple xli). The romance, however, works ultimately to expose the colonial context in which it took place as close-minded, prejudiced, and driven by bigoted racial and cultural assumptions.

Dalrymple’s declared objective in the subtitle of his *White Mughals* is to flesh out a tale of “love and betrayal in eighteenth-century India.” His remarkable archival work in many languages provides a rich context in which to understand the story of Khair-un-nissa. But it is a tragic tale, and the early picture of Khair-un-nissa as someone who actively sought out Kirkpatrick and declared her love for him, gives way to a picture of a lonely young woman, who after the untimely death of Kirkpatrick is victimized by both her enemies at the court of the Nizam of Hyderabad and intolerant British officials. She is unable to return to Hyderabad to be with her mother nor does she have any desire to become a part of Anglo-Indian society in Calcutta, which, in any case, would have been hostile towards the Indian spouse of a British colonial official. At this difficult juncture in her life, she becomes entirely dependent on the friendship and patronage of Henry Russell, first assistant to James Kirkpatrick at the Residency at Hyderabad, and later Resident himself. This part of the story revolves around Russell’s kindness to Khair and his eventual betrayal of her. In her final days, we see Khair as a betrayed lover, who pines away at the age of twenty-seven.

By keeping the focus on the idea of romance Dalrymple is able to highlight the nobility of Kirkpatrick even as he foregrounds political intrigue, social ferment, and economic enterprise in the background of this great romance. However, what stands out at the end is surely not the wonder of such an interracial romance taking place at all, but rather
the impossibility of it. Structurally, politically, and socially, everything is ranged against Kirkpatrick and Khair-un-nissa once the marriage is accomplished. After Kirkpatrick’s untimely death, Khair-un-nissa is unable to access the support of her family because of the enmity of a faction of the court of Hyderabad. When Henry Russell offers her his protection and in fact enters into a relationship with her, it causes a second round of consternation among British officials. Thomas Sydenham, Kirkpatrick’s successor as Resident at Hyderabad, was courteous to Russell and Khair, but reluctant to grant Khair protection were she to return to Hyderabad with Russell. Sir George Barlow, senior member of Wellesley’s Council, “was horrified by the new development” particularly because of its possible political consequences. He claimed a recent rebellion by Sepoys at Vellore had been caused by their anger at “the connexion of native women with European officers” (Dalrymple 433). Given that Kirkpatrick and Khair-un-nissa’s relationship had already left a trail of acrimonious discussions, accusations, and defenses, the situation could hardly be expected to improve after his death. The narrative highlights the intense cruelty of both British colonial and Hyderabad officials towards a woman who, in Dalrymple’s narrative, has fortune, beauty, and courage: all the attributes of a heroine of romance.

Writing about her life in Calcutta after Kirkpatrick’s death, Dalrymple comments, “There is absolutely no question of Khair-un-nissa being some sort of powerless ex-concubine: this is a beautiful, charismatic Mughal noblewman behaving according to her rank, with a pair of senior British officials running around to do her bidding” (Dalrymple 425). Far from being a helpless damsel in distress, Khair-un-nissa took charge of the social and organizational aspects of her family in Hyderabad, which at this point consisted of her mother and her grandmother. Henry Russell was very responsive to her and accommodated most of her requests about communicating with her family and the court in Hyderabad. It is certainly true that Khair had the confidence and presence of someone who belonged to an upper-class family, and probably never thought of herself as a mere concubine but as someone who brought social power and privilege to the marriage. But her marriage to Kirkpatrick involves for her a loss of power and social standing. She is ultimately bereft of the networks of social influence that she would have had as an aristocratic Muslim woman. Further, her story highlights the continuing prejudice against mixed marriages in colonial India, both in the British community and in the courtly society of Hyderabad. The romance between her and Kirkpatrick thus becomes an exception rather than representative of relations between the communities. The
exceptional nature of this romance suggests, however, the Utopian possibilities of crossing over, of bridging cultural divides, of feeling and commitment that grow despite official and social ideologies.

For another instance of the provocative, inflammatory, and ultimately Utopian potential of the romance, I turn now to an episode from contemporary India. In a thematically appropriate segue, this episode pertains to a contemporary cinematic rendering of the life of another Mughal, the sixteenth-century emperor Akbar, in a movie entitled *Jodha Akbar*, which was released in India in February 2008. Akbar is widely regarded in popular mythology and historical accounts as the most tolerant and liberal among Mughals. The expansion of his empire over large parts of India was accompanied by an inclusive and liberal view of religion. To add to this egalitarian mix was the fact that he married a Hindu princess from among the clans of Rajputs, rulers of small states and principalities in Central India, and among the strongest opponents of the Mughals. This marriage of alliance, which, in folklore was a happy one, elevated his Rajput wife to a position of great influence, especially after she became the mother of the heir to his throne. Historians quarrel with popular accounts and cinematic representations over her name—Jodha Bai—which they argue was incorrectly given to this particular princess when in fact there is more evidence to suggest that it belonged to her son Jahangir’s wife. Regardless of the controversy over the actual name and identity of this Hindu princess, the movie, filmed as a lavish period piece with celebrity actors in the lead, has enjoyed tremendous success at the box office. The supposed distortion of history, however, has aroused the ire of right-wing Hindu groups in large parts of North and Central India. They have called for a ban on the movie; subsequently a ban was imposed in a few states. The matter went up to the Supreme Court which lifted the ban on screening the film in some places, though it remains in place in many Indian states.

From some of the comments made by the protesting groups, it is easy to conclude that the real issue is not the correct name of the princess involved in the story, but the idea of love between a medieval Muslim prince and a Hindu princess recreated on the screen in sensuous detail. This has offended the sensibilities of a population engorged on a diet of violent Hindu-Muslim conflict during the past two decades. Their anger at the misrepresentation of history was further aggravated by the filmmaker Ashutosh Gowariker’s insistence that the film was based on his historical research on the cities of Delhi, Jaipur, and Agra, important sites of the Mughal empire. Gowariker explicitly mentions the absence of any stories about Jodha Bai in all the historical writing
about Akbar, which then inspired him to make her the focus of his film about the life of the Mughal emperor. Responding to the furor over the historical accuracy of the events in the film, historians have pointed out that she is not present in any of the Persian chronicles about Akbar’s reign. They do, however, agree that the historical record confirms that Akbar married a Rajput princess of the kingdom of Amer, though her name was not Jodha. From the historian’s point of view, this projection of an egalitarian, proto-feminist Jodha is as anachronistic as the emphasis on Hindu-Muslim harmony. In sixteenth-century India, Rajputs often contracted marriages with Muslims, and many of these were, as in other parts of the medieval world, ways of making political alliances, negotiating peace, or acknowledging the sovereignty of the ascendant power. Hindu-Muslim differences would not have stood out as much as they are made to in the film rendering of this particular interreligious marriage. Caste, clan, and lineage were much more important in the medieval world than distinct religious identities. It is important to remind ourselves that many of the identities that we privilege in the modern world were created by colonial regimes. The reification of caste and religious identities was in large part caused by colonial taxonomies which were then funneled into modern political constituencies. In that sense, it is a point well taken that it is our great need to highlight differences and resolve them in romance narratives in order to restore sanity to our conflicted world, but that these differences were not the primary categories in which identities were recognized in the world of Jodha and Akbar.

In a strange convergence between left-wing academic historians and Hindu groups, the concern with the accuracy of the historical record has dominated much of the controversy around the movie. It is even more ironic that Hindu groups concerned with the accuracy of historical facts have been mired in controversy in India and the United States over the revision of school history textbooks that, according to them, portray Hindu culture and religion in a negative light. Sometimes going against the work of academic historians, the community has sought to take charge of the version of Hindu history which will be handed down to their children, thereby making it transparent that all versions of history have a political and ideological position. *Jodha Akbar* appears in my concluding remarks because it is once again a strong reminder of the power of a romance plot to suggest possibilities of social and political alliance and unanticipated networks of desire, which make up the immense unknown possibilities of human connection and commitment. While those concerned with an accurate
rendering of the history of glorious Rajput kingdoms protest that Akbar’s wife had a different name, others see the film as reflecting political and social concerns of contemporary India. They have been content to forgo the quibble over Jodha’s real name to celebrate the secular and nonsectarian vision of the film and its portrayal of the romance between religious groups that have been murderously hostile to each other in contemporary India. In language that evokes Doris Sommer’s conception of the romance as an allegory of political reconciliation, the sociologist, Shiv Viswanathan celebrates the film’s “romance of unity and integration. . . . There is a passion and power in this unity (in diversity), which is what contemporary India needs.”

The Danish anthropologist Stine Simonsen Puri reads another kind of cultural lesson in the recreation of this medieval Hindu-Muslim romance. For her, it is an example of how a negotiation of identity can happen while opening oneself to another culture. Jodha insists on having her own Hindu temple and on following Hindu festivals and ceremonies while living in the house of her Muslim husband at the same time that she participates in the cultural life of his extended household.

This romance appeals to the popular imagination just as nineteenth-century interracial romances did to their vast audiences. The director of Jodha Akbar admitted, despite his earlier claims to historical accuracy, that he ultimately based his depiction of Jodha on “popular usage.” The legend of Jodha Bai has become attached to Akbar in the popular imagination, and Hindi films depicting that era of Indian history have perpetuated the idea of a romantic, companionate marriage between the two. It could well be that the reason none of the Persian chronicles of Akbar’s times mention Jodha is that they were operating within their own conventions of recording what was considered significant history, and women did not figure in it. It is the achievement of modern historiography and theory that we can interrogate archival and recorded history and bring such absences to light.

The controversy over bringing to cinematic life a neglected figure from history in an interreligious romance demonstrates not only the discontents of contemporary sectarian politics but also the Utopian possibilities of romance. As Sharmishta Gooptu points out in her review of Jodha Akbar, historical anachronisms apart, the significance of this contemporary rendering of a romance lies in “its power to make the past relevant to the present through the mechanics of pleasure and the imagination” (Gooptu 2). The creation of romance fantasies thus does important cultural and political work. Readers of Anglo-Indian romances thrived on vicarious transgressions of racial boundaries
and the pleasures of imagining an unconventional domestic life. These romances set up complex patterns of identification and rejection in their representation of cultural difference and racial otherness. The function of the romance is thus not just critical, but also creative. Romances that traffic in history are compelling and subversive because they present alternative possibilities of social, political, and cultural connection that both excite and disturb us. This is why a complex engagement with different forms of romance not only enriches our understanding of the nineteenth-century colonial world, but is as urgent and necessary an enterprise for our contemporary globalizing, multicultural world, preoccupied as it is with matters of “difference.”