

| BOOK REVIEW |

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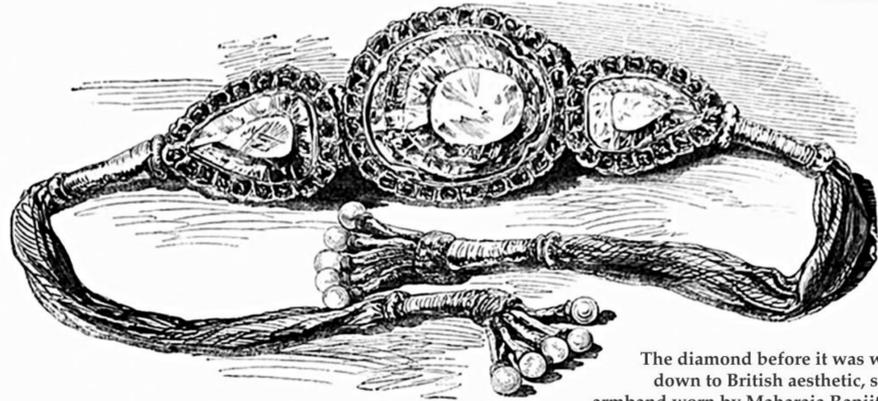
The world's most infamous little diamond—only the 90th largest in the world—glimmers along a bloody trail from throne to armband, (briefly) a humble paperweight, from brooch to crown, smuggled and secreted, carelessly misplaced or locked away, looted, gifted, exhibited, mocked, cut and, even today, sought by several claimants. William Dalrymple and Anita Anand trace the Kohinoor diamond's journey over the centuries in an "entirely new history" that attempts to rescue the diamond from "the fog of mythology" that has surrounded it—fog that is attributed to Theo Metcalfe whose narrative, albeit unsubstantiated, has been this diamond's accepted history for 170 years.

*Kohinoor: The Story of the World's Most Infamous Diamond* is symmetrically divided into two parts. The first half is written by Dalrymple, who takes us beyond time to the Syamantaka jewel of Hindu mythology (implying that this may or may not be the origins of the Kohinoor). The mists of time obscure any "clear and unambiguous" mention of the Kohinoor until after Nadir Shah's invasion of India during the reign of Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah "Rangila" in the mid-1700s. By this time the Kohinoor, which had been just one of myriad jewels adorning the famous Peacock Throne in Delhi, had already left for Khorasan as part of Nadir Shah's considerable loot, "loaded on 700 elephants, 4,000 camels and 12,000 horses [pulling] wagons all laden with gold, silver and precious stones."

From Nadir Shah to the Afghan general Ahmad Shah Durrani, the diamond seems to have had a comparatively simple transfer—at least by one newly translated account (other accounts mentioned in the book's endnotes state otherwise)—but Dalrymple does not spare us any graphic details of the next particularly gruesome leg of the Kohinoor's journey as the diamond passed on to Ahmad Shah's son and eventually his grandson, Shah Shuja. Worn as an armband with its sister-stone, the Timur ruby (actually a red spinel), the Kohinoor already symbolised significant power; this symbolism was taken to its zenith when it was painstakingly and determinedly acquired by Maharaja Ranjit Singh as "the seal on his status as the successor to the fallen dynasty." Treasuring it his entire life and wearing it peerlessly and proudly, Ranjit Singh died presumably failing to indicate what the Kohinoor's fate was to be. Or perhaps he had indicated quite clearly, but various contenders to his throne chose not to interpret the instruction quite so sagaciously. Either way, Dalrymple's half of the book ends at this murky point in time.

Anand takes up the diamond's story from Ranjit Singh's elaborate cremation ceremony in 1839. In the four years that followed, "Punjab lost three maharajas, one maharani and numerous aristocrats", leaving five-year-old Duleep Singh as heir to the throne and owner of the jewel.

With the East India Company poised and waiting, it was only a matter of time before the British declared war and fierce



The diamond before it was whittled down to British aesthetic, set in an armband worn by Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

# MEET THE WORLD'S MOST INFAMOUS DIAMOND

SARA ZUBAIR



Duleep Singh was the last subcontinental owner of the Kohinoor.

battles led to the final defeat of the Sikh forces. Sir Henry Lawrence had, meanwhile, decided that Duleep Singh's mother was to be imprisoned. At a mere seven years of age and quite alone, the young boy signed a legal document giving up his claim to the Punjab. The third clause of this Treaty of Lahore, March 29, 1849, read: "The gem called the Koh-i-Noor [sic], which was taken from Shah Sooja-ool-Mulk [sic] by Maharaja Runjeet [sic] Singh, shall be surrendered by the Maharaja of Lahore to the Queen of England."



An illustration from a Bhagvad Purana manuscript shows Krishna being given the legendary Syamantaka gem. Many devout Hindus believe the Kohinoor is the mythological gem..

The Kohinoor was entrusted to Lord Dalhousie for safe passage to England and since 1850 it has remained on English soil. Anand describes the stone's perilous journey and rather lukewarm reception in England where it failed to redeem itself even as the centrepiece of the Great Exhibition of 1851. Fashioned to a different aesthetic, it learned to sparkle brilliantly, but was considerably reduced from 190.3 metric carats to 93 metric carats. Finally set as a jewel in the crown, it was worn by several British queens and consort and was last seen in public in 2002 on the coffin of the Queen Mother of Britain. Duleep Singh, meanwhile, was entrusted to the care of John Login, a Scottish doctor, taken to England and was

Queen Victoria's golden boy for a time; in his later years, he unsuccessfully sought to revive some of his family's fortune and glory and died in 1893, "penniless and alone in a shabby Parisian hotel." Even though the book is divided equally in terms of its authorship and, to an extent, the writing style, its history remains asymmetrical. Anand deals largely with the decade or so between Ranjit Singh's death and the first few years of the Kohinoor in England, with room for Duleep Singh's tragic life as well as the jewel's present-day claimants. Compare this to the length of time Dalrymple covers and the asymmetry becomes apparent.

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## MEET THE WORLD'S MOST INFAMOUS DIAMOND

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The first half of Dalrymple's section references texts from as far back as the 10th century CE that mentioned large gemstones—cautioning all the while that the Kohinoor may or may not be one of them. He also underscores the Mughals' love of precious stones and general opulence, creating an elaborate and extended *mise en scène* with a large number of endnotes and questions. This portion is quintessentially Dalrymple with his particular brand of storytelling—battles, fascinating characters, a few gruesome deaths, the occasional humorous anecdote—but not really the promised fog-free, new history. For anyone who enjoys reading about history, and especially the slightly fictionalised style that Dalrymple employs by cherry-picking details for their narrative pleasure, this is quite enjoyable.

The pace Dalrymple sets, however, is inconsistent: several emperors and their family members are dealt with swiftly in a single paragraph while others are drawn out in excruciating detail. There are also some uncharacteristic loose ends. The Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah "Rangila", for example, is introduced with attention to the minutest detail of his preferred style of footwear, but disappears without a trace once the narrative shifts to Nadir Shah. This is by design, one could argue, because the tale follows where the diamond leads, yet the extreme violence of "the fallow-cheeked former court eunuch named Agha Mohammad" is described vividly despite the Kohinoor being nowhere near his person. In fact, the entire tale of the Kohinoor is punctuated so frequently by gruesome murder and intrigue that it could well be something from *Game of Thrones*, a book/TV show that Dalrymple explicitly refers to when describing one exceptionally grisly death. Other reviewers have also made the comparison, suggesting that this association may not be entirely accidental—rather like many of the deaths mentioned therein—as *GoT* is an extremely popular book/show. However, perhaps the gratuitous

violence is not as necessary here (if, indeed, it is necessary there).

The colonial penchant for chronicling everything, and the fact that many such records still exist, allow Anand the kind of detail that Dalrymple cannot provide. Yet, while Dalrymple refers to more Urdu, Persian and Sanskrit sources, Anand relies largely on the perspective of the colonial interlocutors of the time, such as Ranjit Singh's Austro-Hungarian physician or Duleep Singh's Scottish guardian. This gives us the standpoint of someone who sees Ranjit Singh as "a man of 'very low stature' who on horseback looked like 'an ape on an elephant'", and who writes about the tradition of sati with the requisite horror and disgust. We also learn of Duleep Singh's childhood from someone who "had reservations about the way [the Kohinoor] had been appropriated" but attributed Duleep Singh's preference of solitude to his "contemplative nature rather than any sadness." Anand's own authorial voice tries to redress this imbalance with dramatic flourishes, such as the moment when Duleep Singh's mother is "torn screaming from his side", fighting as she is dragged away, and "begging the Sikh men around her to wake up and fight, not just for her and her son, but for the very survival of Punjab itself."

Some of Metcalfe's aforementioned fog is dispelled through this entire journey, but the aura of death and destruction that accompanies the Kohinoor, as well as Dalrymple's unanswered questions, leave the diamond's origins shrouded. And whatever Dalrymple may have done to separate the diamond from correlated misfortune, Anand reinstates it, even concluding with a nod to its association with the mythological Syamantaka.

This is not necessarily problematic, depending on one's view of the enterprise of history as a whole. However, it does raise the question of how to read this book. It sits uncomfortably as the promised new history, and it would be unfair to read it as mere fiction, so how is one to situate it? One way is to focus on the diamond itself; as Jody Joy, senior curator at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, UK, in his paper *Reinvigorating Object Biography*:



Alexandra, wife of Edward VII, at her coronation in 1902, wearing the Kohinoor. By then a superstition had set in that the diamond must never be worn by a reigning monarch..

*Reproducing the Drama of Object Lives*, writes: "Biography is relational and an object biography is comprised of [sic] the sum of the relationships that constitute it." This allows us to view the Kohinoor with its attendant symbolism rather than despite it. Another way is to remember a different book altogether: "And some things that should not have been

forgotten were lost. History became legend. Legend became myth. And for two and a half thousand years, the [jewel] passed out of all knowledge."—*Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Sara Zubair is a writer, editor and educationist with a doctorate in curriculum and instruction. The article first appeared in Dawn.

### ABOUT TOWN

REGISTRATION OPENS ON  
**NOVEMBER 1, 2017**

**DHAKA INTERNATIONAL FOLK FEST 2017**

Organiser: Dhaka International Folk Fest

November 9-11, 6 pm, Bangladesh Army Stadium, Banani

**Look! Look Inside!**  
An Art Exhibition  
By Artist **Anik Halder**  
Exhibition Opening: 06.30pm  
05 November, 2017  
Curated By Anik Sadik Rashid Siddiqui

**LOOK! LOOK INSIDE!**  
SOLO ART EXHIBITION BY ANIK HALDER

November 5-11, 12-7 pm, Jatra Biroti, 80 Kemal Ataturk Avenue, Banani

**Layers**  
An Art Exhibition  
By Artist **Fahad Hasan Kazmee**  
Exhibition Opening: 27th October, 2017 at 6.30 pm  
27th October-23rd November, 5-8 pm

**LAYERS**  
ART EXHIBITION BY FAHAD HASAN KAZMEE

Organiser: Kala Kendra  
October 27- November 22, 5-8 pm, Kala Kendra, Iqbal Road, Mohammadpur