

LEISURE BOOKS

THE ART OF SURVIVAL

A woman buffeted by fate, running from identity and religion, shapes *The City of Palaces*



THE CITY OF PALACES
by Sujata Massey
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BETWEEN THE COVERS
Historically, the book is steeped in nostalgia for a city easily recognisable from the retellings of those who have not left its history behind.

I cannot tell," her protagonist begins her story, and she seems thus to speak for all women running from and to something. There is little to suggest helplessness in their chameleonic existences though, more a willingness, despite the limited choices life offers, to take on the path as it comes.

Apart from a strong survival spirit and a pretty face, Pom's saving grace is her ability to seemingly make friends and find helpers in the unlikeliest of places—from embracing strategically placed trees to an upper-caste family in a boat, the doctors of the Keshiari Mission to Miss Richmond who teaches her English, Bidushi, Jyoti *ma* who saves her from mice and night frights; and he from whom she chooses to stop running, Simon Lewes. Characters, both real and benevolent, offset the dangers of the routes she must traverse to arrive at her destination. The homes she finds solace in are outlined to the last bottle of cream on the table, the books on the shelves, and the drawing rooms of friends crackling with warmth that is sincere. Massey's strength is her clarity of people and their intentions.

Structurally, *The City of Palaces* is a steeply linear narrative. Events are strictly sequential, neatly compartmen-

By Gayatri Jayaraman

There is a haunting quality that converges in this tale of Pom, rechristened as the orphaned servant Sarah, who then becomes the runaway nameless Muslim niece of a coach driver, turned Pamela, once the costliest virginity sold at Rose Villa, resurrecting herself as Camilla Smith, a job-seeking clerk in Calcutta. Eventually, she renames herself Kamala Mukherjee and spends the rest of her life as a high society Bengali companion to an Englishman, secretly favouring the Indian freedom struggle.

Women with no identity, are to Sujata Massey, women of freedom and power. She embodies them in characters like Pom, a lower-caste girl with nothing on her horizon except marriage, who uses her intelligence to move out of servitude. "You ask for my name, the real one, and



SUJATA MASSEY

Photograph by CHRIS HARTLOVE

talised, nothing creeping up on the other or dovetailing in. The novel retains Pom's voice, irrespective of her many avatars, till the very end. The past is retrieved only to facilitate a suitable impact on the future. Choices are explained with a simplicity that will not allow room for greys. The divides are clear: English supremacy, Indian nationalism. Hindu vs Muslim. Neutral Christians. Characters all fall into either good or bad, and nothing in between. Thus compartmentalised, togetherness comes only to those straddling the middle: In an Anglo-Indian narrative of dualism, shades of Massey's own comfort zone of mixed parentage.

Historically, the book is steeped in nostalgia for a city easily recognisable from the retellings of those who have not left its history behind. Rabindranath Tagore's poetry fleck the opening of chapters, and the clichés of Calcutta's colonial past—from Flury's to nightclubs, cocktail parties, salons, Chowringhee and College Street to revolution, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and Partition—all hang heavy, like a framed sepia-toned image from some collective Bengali memory. Herself four-dimensional in lineage, Massey was born in the 1960s UK to a Bengali father and German mother and grew up in the US, where she now lives. Hence drawn towards exploring what is solved by mixed parentage, and what is lost by not acknowledging it, Massey relied on accounts by Anglo-Indian senior citizens, many dispersed post-Independence, their contributions to communities disbanded, other lost institutions and literature.

Originally released as *The Sleeping Dictionary* in the US and Europe, *The City of Palaces* works its way from the pretty-faced fortune of a small family to the mark of its destination, from caste to the casteless. Redemption in all manner of religion, all form of belonging, is rejected soundly. Independence, in more ways than one, comes and goes. Still, the buffeting never stops. "Once again, a wave had come and swept away the life I knew. This time, the wave was freedom."

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