Book review


When The Journal of Indentureship and its Legacies reached out to me in summer 2022 to review Ira Mathur’s Love the Dark Days, I didn’t really know what to expect. Mathur is best known for her candid broadcast and multimedia journalism. Coming together as a complex tapestry of memoirs, Love the Dark Days represents a significant departure from Mathur’s journalistic form. The book chronicles Mathur’s most intimate relationships and traces the footprints of her family – particularly those of her grandmother – across continents, cultures, and epochs. In this sense, it sits alongside other recent efforts (Bahadur 2016; Carby 2019, Hirsh 2018) to merge autobiographical writing with materials from personal/public archives in order to explore the everyday violence of colonialism and the ways that this violence reinvents itself across generations.

Mathur’s book is fascinating to read but hard to review because there is simply so much going on in it. Love the Dark Days is quite astonishing in terms of its breadth of historical and geographic coverage. It catapults the reader between India, Trinidad and Tobago, Britain and St Lucia in a series of carefully arranged recollections that link past and present. In postcolonial India young ‘Poppet’ (Mathur) and her siblings reside for long intervals at her grandmother’s house while her parents travel, entertain and enjoy the trappings of upper-class Indian society. In Tobago three generations of Poppet’s family – daughter(s), mother, grandmother – desperately try (and mostly fail) to find comfort and belonging in exile. In London we find the narrator coming of age: reinventing herself, falling in and out of love, finding her craft and coming up against the everyday violence of racialization and DOI:10.13169/jofstudindentleg.3.2.0098
hostile immigration rules. In St Lucia, Poppet receives mentorship and guidance from an ailing Derek Walcott, whose voice and influence loom large throughout the book. “Sit. Feast on your life”, Walcott writes in *Love After Love*. And this is exactly what Mathur has done.

*Love The Dark Days* weaves together a number of threads that put the work into direct conversation with scholarship on postcolonial societies and the legacies of enslavement and indenture. Firstly, Mathur’s book gives life and texture to the concept of intergenerational trauma: the transmission of the emotional ill-effects of a historical event to future generations. Poppet’s grandmother, ‘Burrimummy’ is a product of Colonial India and herself the daughter of the last Nawab of Savanur (a former princely state in the southwest of present day India). Her family were complicit with British rule and she is formidable, unapologetic, unforgiving and irredeemably tied to the hierarchies and pageantry of the colonial order. But, following the adultery and heartbreak committed by her late husband Burrimummy is also estranged from the world of riches that she once knew. Her pain and resentment fester, harming her relationship with her daughter ‘Nur’ (Poppet’s mother) who becomes aloof and noncommittal towards her own offspring. ‘What a terrible inheritance’, reflects Poppet. ‘...all these unhappy women passing along their sadness with their jewellery’; ‘We all fall into the crevices created by one another’s neglect’.

The book also does an excellent job of capturing both the discomfort and the liberatory potential of living and being *in-between* worlds: never ‘at home’; never ‘authentic’. Early in the book we find Poppet grappling with the sense of always being an outsider and never feeling ‘good enough’ to belong: she is dark-skinned in a culture that values whiteness; her family represents ‘old money’ in a society that is rapidly reinventing itself; she is neither fully Muslim nor fully Hindu; and she fails to aspire to her family’s ambitions in respect of marriage and education. However, in the
multi-cultural melting pot of postcolonial Trinidad she eventually finds redemption. ‘People who hurt go numb or go porous. They can turn into perpetrators or saviours. Some of us, hover between the two. Darkness serves to connect us even as it destroys us. The trick is to allow our many selves to exist democratically’. As she feasts upon her life, Poppet realizes the privilege and possibility attached to her positioning, ‘I can see the world from prisms of multiple identities: Hindu, Muslim, India, Pakistan, Caribbean, Europe’. The same liminality that felt disabling in the sharply divided Indian society of her youth is concomitantly the fuel of social and cultural revolution in Trinidad. It is the source of the urgency and pride that runs through Walcott’s works: ‘Either I am nobody or I am a Nation’.

Love the Dark Days is also, fundamentally, a book about loss and grief. In writing it Poppet/Mathur explains, “I’m hoping it will get the great boulder of my grandmother off my back”. Although the figure of Burrimummy is sometimes cruel, sometimes absurd, she is also presented as someone who is undivided in her loyalty to her grandchildren – she loves them so much that she moves to another continent to be near them. She battles endlessly with lawyers and realtors from her deathbed to ensure an inheritance for them. Burrimummy provides the constancy that Poppet does not get from her whimsical parents, but she also functions as an anchor and thread connecting Poppet to a past that is otherwise largely unchronicled. The loss and grief that undergirds this book, is a familiar kind of loss for those of us who have emerged from transitional worlds that are known to us only through the words and objects of our forebears. It is the loss not just of a special person, but of all the history that they carry too.

In the end, Love the Dark Days is a story of multiple reckonings. In it, Mathur/Poppet reckons with the past, with loss, with love, and with herself. The book has no heroes and there is an almost brutal honesty in the presentation of the characters, including some of those closest to her: her husband, her mother, her siblings.
as well as her mentor and friend, Walcott. The book is raw and uncompromising, in a good way. Like some other reviewers, I did question the amount of space that Mathur gives to Walcott but this is only because she evidently does not need his words to help her construct her own beautiful and original prose.

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REFERENCES