

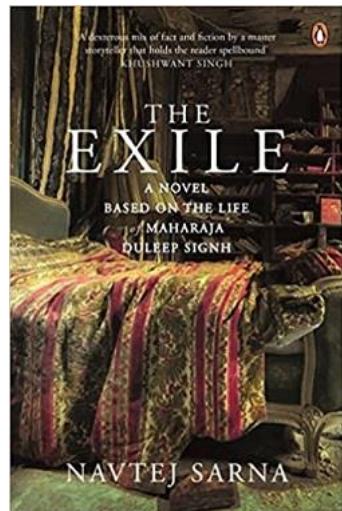
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Book Review on Navtej Sarna's 'The Exile: A Novel'

Arshdeep Singh

Chapter 1: Introduction About The Author

"[The Exile](#) is written by Indian diplomat and bureaucrat Navtej Sarna and published by Penguin Group in 2008. Navtej, born in 1957, in Jalandhar is a 1980 batch Indian Foreign Service officer and has served successful terms as ambassador to Israel and high commissioner to the United Kingdom. He also served on key post of ambassador to the US in crucial times of election and played a key role in the visit of PM Modi to Washington. He also was one of the longest-serving spokespersons of the MEA and was given a year's extension after superannuation¹."



¹ <https://www.examrace.com/Current-Affairs/NEWS-Navtej-Sarna-New-Ambassador-to-the-US.pdf> (last accessed 6 September 2019)

"He has command over English, Hindi, and Punjabi and has knowledge of Polish and Russian languages. Apart from serving the nation he has authored many fictional and non-fictional books and translated "Zafar Nama" and 30 short stories of his father to English. His first book, *We Weren't Lovers Like That* was also published by the Penguin Group in 2003; along with *The Book of Nanak*. Some of his recent works are *Indians at Herod's Gate: A Jerusalem Tale* (2014) elaborating the ties of the Indians with the holy place of Jerusalem and *Second Thoughts: On Books, Authors and the Writerly Life* (2015) a collection of his essays and columns in the newspapers over the years." ²

[Navtej Sarna](#) has written this book in the late 2000s handsomely portraying the life story of the last Punjab ruler Maharaja Duleep Singh. The historical stories of Punjab like wars, kings fascinated him a lot. He also had a keen interest in exploring new avenues about India's freedom struggle. The woeful story of Maharaja Duleep Singh narrated by his mother, Surjit Sarna in his childhood had a deep impact on his mind. "It was nearly forty years ago that I first heard mention, in tragic terms, of Maharaja Duleep Singh from my mother"³. He believed that the story of Maharaja "could never quite be communicated by the cold bare-bones approach of history"⁴. He tried to present a fictional narrative of the historical facts or perspective. "A dextrous mix of fact and fiction by a master storyteller that holds the reader spellbound"⁵ He has

² <https://www.rediff.com/news/report/sarna/20081015.htm>(last accessed 6 September 2019)

³ Sarna Navtej , *The Exile*, Penguin Books, 2008, pp. xi

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Khushwant Singh

attempted to provide utmost objectivity to the book he could, by referring to the dates, journeys, letters, and other historical facts which he encountered during his extensive research. "He has gone to England, Moscow, Paris, Lahore (capital of the Sikh kingdom) and the Library of Congress in Washington, DC to collect data and understand the atmosphere in the past; made possible as he served India in most of these nations." He analyses different views of the people about the actions of Duleep Singh through numerous characters in the novel and tries to explore and imagine the feelings of Duleep to the sufferings he experienced.

Chapter 2: Characters

Maharaja Duleep Singh is the protagonist of the novel [The Exile](#). Words fall short when one discusses the life and character of Maharaja Duleep Singh. Duleep was the youngest acknowledged son of Lion of Punjab Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He was born on September 4, 1938, merely a year before the demise of Ranjit Singh. He was enthroned to the throne of Punjab at the very tender age of five, in the wake of internecine rivalry and chaos after Ranjit Singh's death ("A lion had died, the jackals would now come out to prowl")⁶. Although a proxy ruler ("Punjab wastes without a real ruler")⁷ at the initial stage of his life as a king with his mother ruling on his behalf, yet his reverence was up to the mark. It could be substantiated from the fact that he was always addressed as his highness and was given due respect as was given to his forefathers. He was offered the throne after the assassination

⁶ Sarna Navtej, *The Exile*, Penguin Books, 2008, pp. 6.

⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 43.

of Maharaja Sher Singh and Dhian Singh, the Wazir. His whole life after attaining the throne was full of suffering and deceit ("I do not know whose pain is greater, that of ordinary prisoners or of a prisoner who is also a king")⁸. He was misguided by people time and again.

He was often in a dilemma throughout his life to find out who was his well-wisher. First, he was influenced by the ways of life of the Britishers and their philosophy, although it is considered by many that it was imposed on him by ways of manipulation and lack of knowledge about his own rich culture and traditions. Then he was suspicious of his wife Ada at times. He was right in his suspicion though. She was not loyal to him and her intentions behind marrying him were not clear or justified. At the later stages of his life, Duleep was not supported by Ada and on the contrary she was indulged in stealing jewellery which belonged to the Royal family and providing the same to her mother by taking advantage of his pathetic condition.

Duleep Singh as a king always tried to follow the footsteps of his father Sher-e-Punjab Maharaja Ranjit Singh and often undermined himself while comparing himself with him. He always felt downgraded while thinking of the similar circumstances and what would have been his father's approach if he was at his place. ("At other times I feel that no son of his could have matched him, for men like him are not born every generation. It is too much for the best of men, too crushing inheritance")⁹. Duleep was never killed nor was he tortured but he suffered immense losses during his lifetime-

⁸ Ibid, pp. 43.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 66.

the loss of his family, the loss of his position of authority (which he ascended at five years of age, after the past petitioners, including his stepbrothers, kicked the bucket under secretive conditions), the loss of his kingdom and the loss of his celebrated belonging the Koh-I-Noor, the loss of his nation of origin and everything well-known. Finally he gave in to his grief over deprivations and died alone in a cheap hotel room in Paris. ("My Maharaja was alone, very alone, when he died")¹⁰.

Mangla was the favourite slave girl (daasi) of Duleep's mother, Maharani Jindan. She was compassionate towards Duleep till the end of his life. ("I used to hold him so close, like he was my child")¹¹. She considered herself merely to be a dancing girl of Maharaja Ranjit Singh just a plain-looking kanjari, a word which was not taken as an offence those days by many of the female servants. She was loyal to her sarkar to the utmost faith and owed everything to him although being apprised that her prayers and well wishes would not matter much to the greatest king of Punjab. Although she was incompetent to be an advisor, ("But I was only you must remember a slave girl")¹² still she tried to dispense the best possible suggestions to Maharani Jind Kaur sans any concern of being reprimanded by her majesty. She often tried to comprehend what was going in the Maharani's mind and was recurrently right in the process of doing so. She counselled Maharani Jind Kaur after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and refrained her from performing the rite of sati and

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 8.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 31.

¹² Ibid, pp. 34.

alternatively thinks about the future of Duleep. She was deeply anguished when she was denied a meeting with his son like Duleep after he returned to Fattehgarh from England. Her endless love for Maharaja Duleep Singh even after his death could also be figured out from her views that she will die in peace if Duleep's ashes were brought back from England.

Dr John Login was a fatherly figure for Duleep. Duleep lionized him till the dusk of his life. A surgeon by profession, he was appointed by Lord Dalhousie as Duleep's superintendent after the annexation of Punjab. After the annexation of Punjab by the Britishers, Dr. Login was given the responsibility to conclude the rule of Maharaja Duleep in Punjab but he never gave in to temptations even after he was given the custody of the toshakhana of the Durbar (jewels, precious relics, illuminated manuscripts, etc.). Login was a person so close to Duleep that he was privy to certain facts of Duleep's life which were concealed to the others. He was the one, owing to the influence of whom Duleep showed inclination towards Christianity and got baptized as a Christian, though he was wrongly suspicious of the possibility of a betrayal at the hands of Login. But Duleep was always filled with veneration for him.

Arur Singh is an important character in the novel. He was the most closest and loyal servant of Maharaja Duleep Singh. Arur's first meeting with Duleep was as a valet, after which there was no turning around and he remained Duleep's confidant till the end of his life. He played a significant role in organizing the Maharaja's rebellion in India carrying important messages to other princes' and authoritative people in the Sikh community. He was ordered by Maharaja Duleep Singh

to go to Punjab and raise money from his subjects and unite people and rebelled East India Company's soldiers against the British to cut telegraph and rail lines. He emerged as one of the very few loyalists of Duleep during his dark days. He was tortured at the Chunaar fort for three years by Officer Henderson but he maintained his will and allegiance to his king, giving rare information than he had already given to the false Bengali inspector. This incident shows that he was a simple, witless man entrusted with more responsibility he could have handled ("Foolish man, that's what I ultimately am. A simple peasant, unfit for all this politics.")¹³

Maharani Jind Kaur or Jindan portrays the character of Duleep's mother and fifth wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. She was a very beautiful woman and was seldom afraid of anybody except the Sarkar ("Only the lion heart could tame her")¹⁴. She is portrayed as a courageous woman and showcased wits to rule the Punjab under the name of her son after the death of Ranjit Singh. She was rightly counselled by Mangla, her favourite slave girl, to take care of her son instead of performing sati and stay near the throne to rule. Initially she ruled like a true empress with her brother as wazir to Duleep but then her world started to fall apart when the Khalsa army killed her brother. It was only the beginning of her onerous and miserable life as the British annexed Punjab and she was separated from Duleep, confined as a prisoner in Chunaar fort, until she escaped to live in exile in Nepal. After living fourteen years in agony she reunited with Duleep in India and went to

¹³ Ibid, pp. 223.

¹⁴ Ibid.

England to spend the rest of her life with her Dula Ji at the mercy of the Britishers. Ultimately, she died in vilayat in exile.

Chapter 3: Plot

The exile archives the life of the last Maharaja of Punjab, Duleep Singh, and the hardships he went throughout his life to regain his authority of Lahore. After the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the lion of Punjab, the throne of Lahore was an easy prey to the internecine feud between courtiers and allies of the king. Following the betrayed death of Ranjit Singh's elder son Kharak Singh, there was bloodshed in the affluent city of Lahore. Amid the massacre, Duleep was brought back from Kashmir at the tender age of five, to occupy the throne. He is used as a puppet by his close well-wishers to fulfil their desires. Merely after two years, the Britishers pronounced war against Punjab violating the treaty of Amritsar on the banks of Sutlej. After the courageous and valiant resistance of Sikhs, Punjab is annexed by the Britishers, aided by the skirmishes among Sikh chiefs and the Khalsa army. They legitimized the annexation on the pretext of uncivilized administration and bad political atmosphere. They declared Duleep the king of Punjab and administered him an oath of allegiance to the Queen. With passing time he is separated from his mother, Maharani Jindan, and deprived of his kingdom, treasure, the Koh-I-Noor, and personal freedom. Maharani is imprisoned in Chunaar fort until she flees to Nepal to live in exile. In February 1950, Duleep is sent to Fatehgarh under the supervision of Dr. John Login and is prohibited to meet Mangla - the loyal servant of Maharani. He is recited Bible and acquainted with Christianity and English lifestyle; with the ulterior motive of baptizing him as a Christian and

incapacitating his claim to the kingship. After giving up his religion he is lured by John Login to visit England to avoid any rebellion by the people of Punjab. He was exhibited the extravagant lifestyle of England and given luxuries and fancy toys expected to manipulate his stay in England. But as time elapsed, his freedom was restricted and his pension curtailed by the India office becoming a serious conflict between him and the British government. The Britishers moulded the terms of the treaty of Lahore and denied money due to him and revenue from his personal estates in Punjab. As the rift between the Maharaja and the government widened, the Maharaja chose to return India and rebel against the injustices endured by him at the hands of the Britishers. He was denied entry to the west India to prevent any uprising and difficulties for the government. But fortunately he united with his mother in India. After being denied permission, Duleep and his mother went to England where she passed away and the Maharaja still suffered injustice of the East India officials.

The story takes a twist when Duleep gives up his right to stipend under the treaty and follows an open rebellion against the crown. He visits various places and influential people to seek help raise an army and reclaim his kingdom. He tries to unite the people of Punjab and other enemies of Britain; such as the Nizam, king of Patiala, people of Kashmir and Holkar, who have suffered betrayal from the Englishmen in India under one banner. He attempted to exploit the Russia-Britain struggle in Afghanistan and different geopolitical clashes existing in Europe against England.

There are times his expectation is broken and he sees no real way to continue with his plan, notwithstanding, there would

consistently be new roads open to him. He tried to take advantage of the Russia-England conflict in Afghanistan and various geo-political conflicts existing in Europe against Britain. But, at last, he became senile and his body crippled by the paralysis attack, he was alone fighting the great empire abandoned and betrayed by his generals, friends, and the powerful sovereigns of the world. He finally gives up to drinking, crushed by the death of his adored ones and ditched by his family, lying in peace accepting the will of the Waheguru.

Chapter 4: Motifs

4.1 Vilayat

The notion of Vilayat has recurred throughout the novel. Vilayat, is literally a Punjabi word meaning foreign land. It is construed by many as anything which takes one away from his motherland. The thinking of the well-wishes of Duleep was also analogous. After Duleep was influenced by the Britishers and baptized into a Christian, his departure to vilayat was not welcomed by his fellow Indians, though it was worsened by his change of religion as well. His stay in the Havelis of India was considered better than in any luxury hotel of England. This hate for vilayat in the minds of Indians was also due to the feeling of hostility against the Britishers. Further, a person cannot enjoy the joys of his life in someone else's country, no wonder how extravagant his lifestyle is over there. The real satisfaction lies within one's own country and people. So from this perspective, the criticism of vilayat was well justified.

Chapter 5: Symbols

5.1 Lion

The author has used the word lion on numerous occasions all through the novel. The word lion literally means an animal considered the king and the most daring of all in the wilderness. The author has used it at various instances to delineate the valour and rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, by whom the whole of Punjab was integrated under one banner. He was embraced as sher-e-Punjab by the people, meaning the lion of Punjab. People would address Duleep as a son of the lion and admired him as their ruler due to his father. The lion is used to symbolize authority and sovereignty, illustrated, when Ranjit Singh is given the punishment of a hundred lashes, but no one encouraged to do it. It is also used to transmit the idea that even the lions are mortal and will die someday as Ranjit Singh did.

5.2 Koh-I-Noor

The world-famed Koh-I-Noor diamond is referenced by the author at numerous instances to symbolize wealth and riches, the power and sovereignty, and the pride of the kings. The diamond was presented by Gulab Singh to Ranjit Singh after the former's defeat, as a mark of surrender and peace. Ranjit Singh and Duleep Singh used to wear it on their right arm to establish authority and demonstrate power and later it was set in the crown of the Queen. The Britishers, after the annexation of Punjab made Duleep surrender it to the English Realm as a mark of allegiance to the crown and affront to the defeated Sikhs. Years later Duleep got a chance to see it again and felt angered, ashamed and mortified by the Great Britain when he had to give it back to her majesty and realized that he was no

longer the king. So, it ultimately also symbolizes the passing of a legacy or viability, which still awaits its rightful owner.

Chapter 6: Themes

6.1 Demise of the family head

All the chaos which began in the life of Duleep Singh was after his father Maharaja Ranjit Singh's death, who was their family head as well as the chief of the Sikh Empire. Skirmishes began to flourish internally among the brothers over the possession of the throne of Lahore. In the present era as well, the demise of the primary person of the family augments a lot of trouble and bitterness among the left out members, in matters related to the division of land and other material possessions. This, sometimes even aggravates to extremities like bloodsheds after which it is impossible to restore normalcy in the family

6.2 Consequences of War

The harsh consequences after the war is not a new concept. Originated due to disagreement between those in power, wars are fought by young men who have no personal grudges against one another. Wars not only take a toll on the lives of those fighting in the battleground, but also have repercussions on the lives of the people associated with them. Plethora of women are enslaved and pushed into prostitution. The ordeals which Mangla puts forward, about the atrocities inflicted on her or the other slave girls aptly substantiates this.

Chapter 7: Language/Writing Style

Navtej Sarna in the book *The Exile* exhibits his fine writing skills by bringing to light an amazing combination of history

and facts. Both the aspects run hand-in-hand throughout the novel in juxtaposition. The language used is simple and comprehensive with an emphasis on the significant events. Although some traditional words from the Punjabi language such as *Waheguru*, *vilayat*, *toshakhana*, *kanjari* etc. are used as it is, yet the meaning is vividly illustrated, either by the word itself or by the lines following that word. Usage of contemporary words is preferred by the author rather than archaic, which might also be a good option keeping in view the subject matter of the novel. Written articulately, this novel gives the reader an insight into the Lahore city of the nineteenth century and describes the often-troubled life of Maharaja Duleep Singh. This poignant novel is the result of dedication and brilliant writing prowess of Navtej Sarna¹⁵.

Chapter 8: Exposition

The author in this book gives an insight about the social evils prevalent in the society in the earlier times. There used to be a huge disparity between the genders. The dominance of the men was omnipresent. Women, especially from the lower strata of the society (the workers, maids, caretakers) were merely treated as objects and were often prone to exploitations like sexual harassment at the hands of the kings or influential people. The ordeals of her life which Mangla speaks about vividly substantiate this claim. There was no significance of their life or interests or their consent to do a particular act. Things were so worse that all this was acknowledged by the women as their fate rather than

¹⁵ <http://ajayinbombay.blogspot.com/2011/12/book-review-exile-by-navtej-sarna.html>

standing up for their rights or liberty. No scope was present there for women for the liberal ideas to emerge.

Polygamy, amongst the kings is also depicted by the author. Even a noble maharaja like Ranjit Singh could not spare himself from this evil. Ranjit Singh had five wives and children from all of them but the pity is that all of them were not acknowledged and were possibly deprived of the benefits and riches of the royal family. Moving forward, it can also be figured out that women or girls those days were easily pushed into prostitution either by their family members or forcibly by unscrupulous males at their workplaces. Outraging the modesty of a woman was no offence, (It is conveyed by the behaviour of Mangla and her description of the environment at the Palace), contrary to the modern days when there are numerous provisions to safeguard the rights of women. So the law was predominantly based on customs and no written sanctions were present or in other cases were not enforceable due to the inexistence of monarch.

Internecine or family feuds, due to the large family size (as in the case of Maharaja Ranjit Singh), is also something which needs a thought. The chaos that began in the life of Duleep was primarily triggered by the claims for stakes and lust for power among his cousin brothers. It is in vogue in the present time since time immemorial. This is probably the only issue or discrepancy of that era that is still incessant and finds its place in many families. The disputes related to the division of ancestral property among the forefathers are carried on till generations and eventually end up in bloodsheds.

Chapter 9: Critical Appraisal

The book, in a nutshell (having a reading of merely two fifty pages), beautifully narrates the life of the last Maharaja of Punjab, Maharaja Duleep Singh, the youngest acknowledged son of the famed brave Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab. Set in the nineteenth century, it conveys the story of the life of the rulers of Punjab after Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign, the annexation of Punjab and the exile of its former rulers with a wonderful mix of facts and fiction. A coherent and chronological account of those years is vividly illustrated using plots, schemings, and betrayals.

Partitioned into five noteworthy parts are the five stages, in a manner of speaking, of Maharaja Duleep Singh's life. The kingdom of his father, his life at Shish Mahal as a regal ruler and after that Lord at five years old, the extension of Punjab by the English through their tricky methods and conspiring minds, the outcast of the Maharaja in Britain and his life thereof, and the acknowledgment of every one of that was lost to and grabbed from him prompting his defiance; the five sections are advanced to the reader in type of portrayal by different focal characters of the story. This type of portrayal makes the story simple to pursue and individual to relate.

The bluntness, courage and fondness of Mangla, the slave girl of Maharaja Duleep Singh's mom, Maharani Jindan, who witnessed his birth and the dutifulness and bondage of Arur Singh, Maharaja Duleep Singh's helper for numerous years, who was the nearest to him at his last time are reflected in an exceptionally unpretentious yet clear ways through the composed words. Similar to the impression of the ways through which Dr John Login and Lady Lena Login

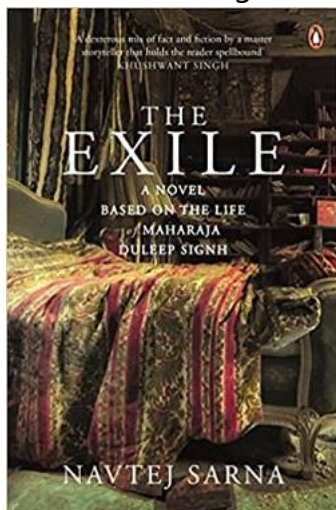
(Superintendent of the Maharaja and his better half respectively, who were like his parents) appear to legitimize every one of their activities and those of the English Government, at any rate, at least on the paper. The portrayal of General Charles Carrol Tevis, who went about as a government operative of the English against Maharaja by claiming to be his well-wisher and comrade, leaves the reader furious, bitter and feel dejected. The feeling of dejection and pity remain true throughout the most part of the novel for the portrayal of the Maharaja himself, who has been depicted to be felt sorry for, blinding trusting and yet a royal rebel. Of uncommon intrigue are the portrayals of the conditions which prompted Koh-i-Noor moving hands from India to Britain and the conversion of the Maharaja to Christianity.

All things considered, the book leaves the reader despaired and sympathetic for the protagonist and an unbelievable displeasure, powerlessness and disappointed adoration for the guile of the British and every other person who sold out and humiliated the last Maharaja of Punjab, Maharaja Duleep Singh, who deserved better than he sustained.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

The author in the novel is able to fulfil its objective that is to bring before the readers a piece of literature that describes the life of Maharaja along with his feelings at different occasions. It was not possible by numerous historical accounts written by the historians merely depicting historical facts having personal prejudices. The author wanted the readers to experience the circumstances faced by Duleep Singh and then decide his character rather than labelling him as "The Black

Prince" on mere historical facts. He is able to portray the reader all the hardships and sufferings inflicted upon the Maharaja and his efforts to rebel against such tyrants. The author also aims to showcase the reader social evils such as human trafficking, forced prostitution, sati, and bonded labour mass prevalent at that time.



Title: [The Exile: A Novel](#)

Author: Navtej Sarna

Publisher: Penguin

Available: [Amazon](#)



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Arshdeep Singh is a law student at the Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, Punjab. He has a profound interest in historical narratives and the book 'The Exile' written by Navtej Sarna falls in his reading genre.



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