

The Last Resident

Shahzad A. Rizvi

Bringing together romance and history, Shahzad Rizvi paints a breathtaking picture of India during its struggle for independence in his novel *The Last Resident: The Story of a British Official and an Indian Princess*. The novel was inspired by his childhood in India, his love of storytelling, and by his encounters with that rare but beautiful thing, a cross-cultural romance that flourishes and makes both partners thrive. Using vivid imagery, the author takes readers on a journey through his homeland where they experience the love, hope, and willpower that shaped the nation.

Rizvi begins his novel from the point of view of an Indian Civil Service Officer, Nigel Hadley. Nigel is not the typical British officer. Idealistic but not judgmental, he believes in unity among all cultures rather than the dominance of his own.

When Lady Pamela, taking advantage of her uncle's position as Viceroy of India, entraps Nigel, his dreams of exploring India unfettered go up in smoke. After a single lustful encounter, she forces the young officer to marry her to save her honor. Their loveless marriage contrasts sharply with the true love and mutual respect that Nigel later finds with Mehr Un Nisa, the Indian princess of the title. In addition, by contrasting spoiled, sulky Pamela with young, enthusiastic Nigel, the author illustrates the good and bad in all cultures.

Throughout the novel, characters are developed this way to illuminate the struggle between ideals. The best example of this is the difference between the Nawab of Bhojpal and the Viceroy of India, Lord Willingham. Despite his Islamic upbringing, the Nawab befriends a Jewish scholar and makes him his prime minister. Against the wishes of his council and what is expected of him as a Muslim, the Nawab does what he believes is right. In comparison, Lord Willingham cannot even defend Nigel from his niece, Lady Pamela, or the accusations of her parents.

When Nigel is appointed the first Resident (British diplomatic representative) to Bhojpal, he endears himself to the Indians by learning their language and enthusiastically diving into their culture and traditions. His Indian friends describe him as "a most remarkable Eastern man who happens to be Western." These very actions and attitudes, however, antagonize his British colleagues and superiors. Nigel's abiding love of India and his idealism are not accompanied by executive ability. He is a hapless administrator and neglects his duty, forsaking the expectations of his own culture as he immerses himself in India.

Jacob Joseph, the Nawab's best friend and closest advisor, is another man who has expanded his experience and emotional life far beyond his own cultural identity. A Jewish minister in a Muslim state, he continually lays his life and livelihood on the line for the sake of the people he

loves, using his insight and ingenuity to solve the thorniest problems. Again and again throughout the novel, Mr. Joseph comes through with the right solution just in time to save the day. This fictional character is the author's valentine to the Jewish community that he deeply admires, and sends a hopeful message of mutual tolerance between Islam and Judaism, two faiths with much in common.

When Nigel falls in love with the Nawab's daughter, Princess Mehr Un Nisa, it's Mr. Joseph who stands behind the couple and ultimately brings them together. Mr. Joseph's genius makes peace between conflicting cultures and proves that love is worth more than pride.

Known as the "poet princess," Mehr Un Nisa is the embodiment of the feminine and the other half of Nigel, mirroring his love of the nation, its culture, and honor. Throughout the novel, the princess and Nigel are drawn to each other beyond their own will. Like the gods and goddesses of Indian mythology, their love is one of necessity and one cannot exist without the other.

On a deeper level, the love between Nigel and the princess is a metaphor for the love affair between East and West. The author creates a relationship where both partners thrive and draw the best from each other's personalities and cultures, creating deeper understanding enriched by their differences and their need for each other.

A master storyteller, Rizvi creates a foreground of vivid characters—the Nawab's libertine nephew Shittu, eccentric poetry lover Bhadde Mian, and gifted hakim Sehet Ali, to cite three examples—against a background of historical facts that provide context for events in his characters' lives. Through the skillful use of imagery, description and metaphor, Rizvi weaves together a rich landscape of India, inhabited by believable people. *The Last Resident* is a story full of stories, and is a moving introduction to the nation that continues to capture the hearts of its visitors.

Brittany Searle, Journalist, Australia - April 2013

Dr. Shahzad A. Rizvi's latest novel, *The Last Resident*, is set in the fictional city of Bhojpal, India. Its young hero, Nigel Hadley, is a British diplomat who is given the responsibility of overseeing Bhojpal in the office of "Resident" during the last days of British rule over India, and is hence the last British civil servant to serve in that capacity. It may be difficult to decide where in a modern book store this work should be shelved, for it is a romantic novel as well as a cross between historical fiction and fictional history.

There is a good deal of rich visual detail to place us in the exotic city of Bhojpal and to serve as the background for the many twists and turns the plot takes. Young Nigel is the ideal romantic hero, intelligent, courageous, full of idealism and good will, quickly popular for his ability to speak Urdu and his understanding of and compassion and fondness for the Indians he is eager to serve. He is more comfortable living simply among the people than with the pomp and circumstance his position traditionally entails. It is not surprising that even Gandhi himself takes a liking to him and that he and the beautiful and virtuous Indian princess, Mehru, fall in love, nor that, as in any romantic novel, they have many obstacles to overcome before they can be together.

More surprising than these two are the characters of the Nawab of Bhojpal and his Cambridge-educated Prime Minister, the brilliant Jewish scholar Jacob Joseph. In the belief that one cannot be a good Muslim without thoroughly understanding Judaism and Christianity, the other two major Mosaic religions, the enlightened Nawab had searched for a qualified scholar of Judaism and hired Joseph to tutor his daughter. Mr. Joseph, who is also referred to as Master Sahib, a respectful form of address to teachers, earned the esteem not only of his employer, but, as Prime Minister, of the whole princely state. It was largely through his efforts that Jews fleeing the Nazi regime found shelter in Bhojpal, as later did Hindus fleeing from what was to become the Muslim country of Pakistan, thus making the city a model of tolerance and integration.

At a time when the two political parties in our own country seem incapable of reaching agreement on almost anything and when there is rampant fear of Islam following 9/11, Dr. Rizvi's novel is balm to the soul. It introduces us to a culture outwardly very different from our own, but, though not overtly didactic, means to teach us that we all share a common humanity.

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