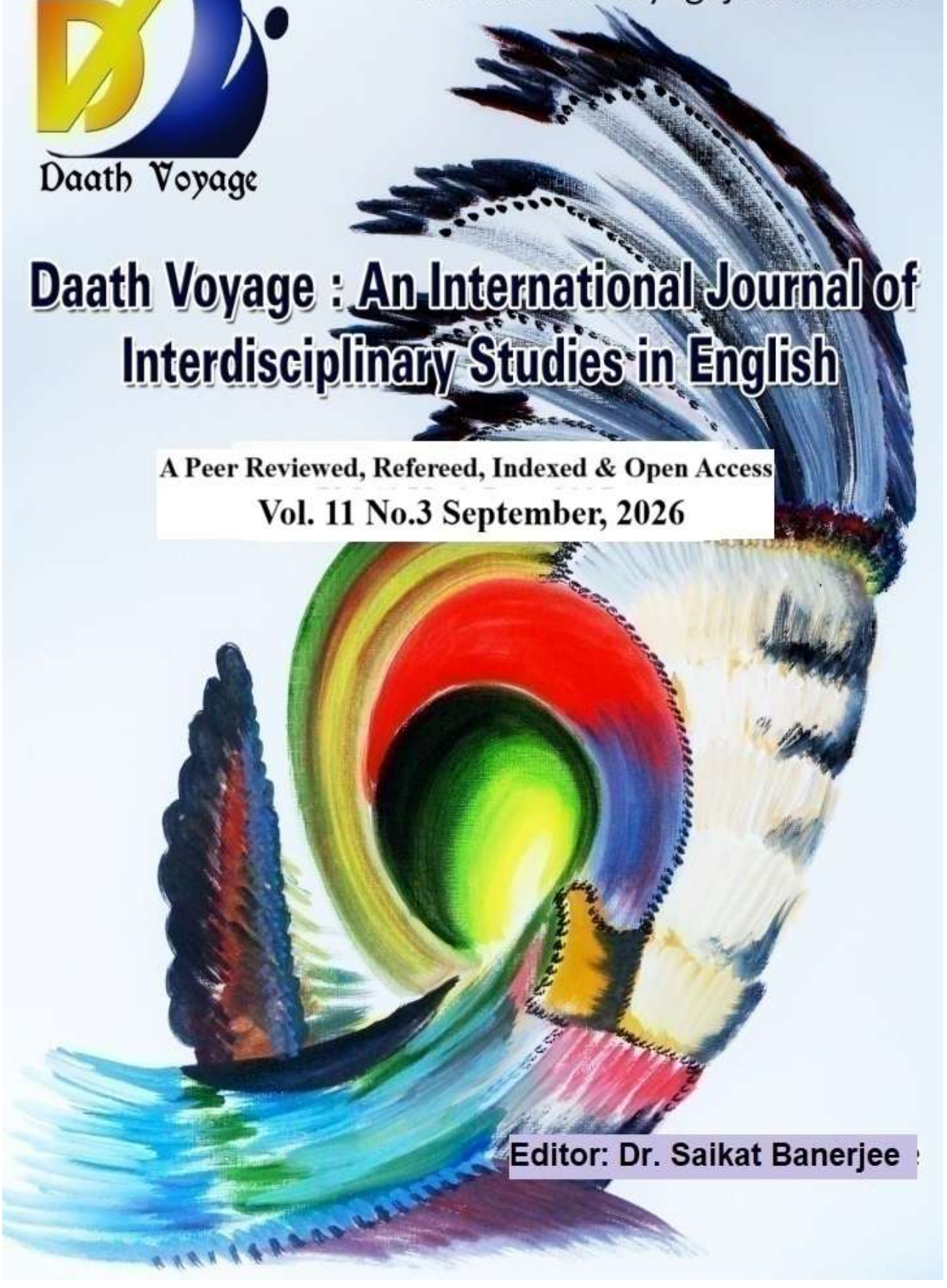
ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access
Vol. 11 No.3 September, 2026



Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed& Open Access Journal)

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.11/No.3 September, 2026

Women and the *Koh-i-Noor*: Narratives of Parallel Resistance in Indu Sundaresan's *The Mountain of Light*

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Received 14 August 2026 Revised 21 August 2026 Published 30 September 2026

Abstract: This paper looks at Indu Sundaresan's historical novel *The Mountain of Light* through the lens of women and empire, studying the close connections between women of South Asia and the *Koh-i-Noor* diamond in the era of British rule. This paper applies Arjun Appadurai's concept of the social life of things (3) and Bill Brown's thing theory (1) to show how both women, specifically Wafa Begam and Maharani Jindan Kaur, colonised and the famous diamond act as hidden symbols of power. In the novel, these women employ their veils (*purdah*) and special nooks to prevent British men from spying on them and to outsmart the colonial authority of the British East India Company. Ultimately, the manner in which the British strip the power of these royal females and send them into exile parallels the way in which the *Koh-i-Noor* is physically destroyed when it is cut in London in eighteen fifty two. Hence, the women's veil is not a symbol of surrender but an effective weapon used by women to fight back and struggle for their independence.

Keywords: Feminist Study; Indu Sundaresan; *Koh-i-Noor*; Material Culture; *Purdah*.

Introduction

The combination of material culture and feminist criticism offers an effective method of interpretation to analyse Indu Sundaresan's historical fiction work, *The Mountain of Light*. Whereas traditional accounts of the British Empire treat the renowned *Koh-i-Noor* diamond as an inert war booty that was taken over, documented and put on display on the wrist of Queen Victoria, Sundaresan's account challenges this oversimplified, gendered history. In the book, the *Koh-i-Noor* does not remain as a static mineral resource; instead, the diamond is presented as an active object that participates in the struggle of visibility, resistance and sovereignty. The centre of this struggle is represented by two unique women from South Asia, Wafa Begam, the former wife of the king of Afghanistan, Shah Shuja, and Maharani Jindan Kaur, the favourite wife of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the mother of the young Dalip Singh. Both women face and

ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.11/No.3 September, 2026

overcome the challenges of colonial growth and local power struggles, and while doing so, they reveal how the female body and the diamond both are seen through the male colonial and dynastic gaze. Seeing through this lens, the South Asian woman as well as the diamond becomes the currency of power that must be revealed, searched, and owned to assert the soverignty. However, the power of both the *Koh-i-Noor* and the women lies in the conflict between display and concealment. While Wafa Begam uses the gendered boundaries of *purdah* and *choli*(bodice) to hide the diamond from colonial search parties, Maharani Jindan Kaur employs a green veil to physically filter the stone's light, which shows how both woman and gem refuse a direct, unmediated colonial gaze. The paper deals with how the author demonstrates the way the literal and symbolic *purdah* functions to criticise the West for its desire to unveil, categorise, and dismantle the passive spectacle of the forms of political activity of South Asian women. By using feminist critic lens and material culture studies, the paper argues that the veil in this novel does not symbolise the passive submission or victimhood of the Orient but rather signifies a symbolic site of political negotiation, strategic concealment and subaltern agency.

Theoretical Framework

To comprehend how the diamond and the female body operate in Indu Sundaresan's novel, this paper looks at them through the theoretical lens of Marxist-Feminist commodity aesthetics and material culture studies. In his seminal work, Arjun Appadurai argues that the objects are not static things but are, in fact, living entities that are shaped by movement, circulation and change (15). When an object like *Koh-i-Noor*, which is a symbol of regional treasure, *transitions* from a symbol of regional power in South Asia to an act of colonial looting in London, its meaning undergoes a violent transformation. The colonial administration attempts to deprive this diamond not only of its active, native history but of its life at all, reducing it to a stateless object that merely reflects the power manipulation of the British crown. Bill Brown's interpretation of the transition from an object to a thing correlates with the processes of colonial cataloguing (4). As Brown points out, an object is something that one sees through or makes use of without thinking, whereas a thing is something that asserts its independent material presence, interrupts plans and demands attention (4). Thus, one expects South Asian women and regional treasure to behave as passive objects, which can be easily measured, classified, and owned under the colonial gaze. Nonetheless, through the hiding of the *Koh-i-Noor* in the fountain at Shalimar Gardens by Wafa Begam and the wrapping of the

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ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.11/No.3 September, 2026

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

armlet in her veil by Jindan Kaur, such passivity is disrupted, transforming not only themselves but also the diamond into become active things that resist imperial control.

Furthermore, feminist scholars have long established the way in which the bodies of women and material commodities are controlled systematically under colonial capitalism. In her foundational book *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray posits that patriarchal societies treat the bodies of women in such a way that they are passive commodities whose value is dependent entirely on how they are traded, displayed, and possessed (171). To bring this critique into the context of empire, postcolonial scholar Anne McClintock in her book *Imperial Leather* illustrates how colonial capitalism relies on a dual form of exploitation whereby natural resources such as exotic gemstones and bodies of colonised women are used as raw materials for surveying, classifying, and consuming (57). Sara Suleri in her book *The Rhetoric of English India* points out that the impulse of the colonial enterprise is an intense longing to pull back the exotic veil of the East and to lay bare its treasures and its subjects for systematic study and governance (16). Within this combined capitalist and feminist gaze, both the female body and luxurious gem are displayed to fulfil the spectator's desire, yet they are strictly disciplined to maintain the social and imperial hierarchy. However, the veil provides an alternative to complete exposure, allowing the sovereign subject to look out at the world without being seen entirely. The veil is a strategic sign of agency and not voicelessness, resisting the erasure of colonial records (Spivak 82-83).

Behind the Purdah: Wafa Begam and her Veiled Power

The very first chapter of *The Mountain of Light*, "Fragment of Light," offers the information about Wafa Begam, the first wife of the dethroned Afghan king Shah Shuja. After he is forced to escape from Peshawar, he hands Wafa a small package, claiming that it will save his life one day or secure her future life in case he dies. The *Koh-i-Noor* diamond is contained in this case, which is covered in simple satin cloth. Shah Shuja believes that he has safely entrusted the *Koh-i-Noor* to his wife because the *zenana* or *harem* is the only secure vault left in the declining empire. Wafa Begam maintains the *Koh-i-Noor* because of her mastery of *purdah*, the traditional practice of female seclusion; nevertheless, Sundaresan presents us with a different interpretation of *purdah*; it becomes crucial as a strategic means of concealment for Wafa Begam. The physical barrier created by her veil as well as the high walls surrounding her quarters creates a protective shield preventing the greedy eye of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the British.

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Sundaresan demonstrates this in the scene where Wafa hides the diamond in her clothing: she wears a small and tight *choli* that is held together by thin silk strings, making it impossible for anybody to notice her bare waist. Because her waist is bare and her trousers are loose, she can tuck the massive golden armlet of the *Koh-i-Noor* directly against her skin or into the sleeve of her blouse, secure in the knowledge that no male guard would dare touch her body. When Wafa first arrives in the Punjab, she "figuratively dangled the diamond in front of Ranjit Singh," promising to give it to him only when her husband is safely rescued from his prison in Kashmir. Here, the actions of Wafa demonstrate the commodity circulation of the female body as explained by Irigaray. Wafa does not submit to being merely exchanged or possessed by the male sovereign. Rather, Wafa makes her clothed body a secure vault and transforms the passive commodity into an active 'thing' that decides the destiny of kingdoms.

When the British and Sikh forces try to corner the royal couple during their late-night escape from the Shalimar Gardens, Wafa's defensive strategy is tested. The escape is intercepted by Fakir Azizuddin, the foreign minister of Ranjit Singh, who has spent months disguised as their old gardener. Azizuddin demands that the royal party submit to a search, offering a comfortable pension in exchange for the diamond. He believes he has cornered them, but he fails to anticipate how Wafa will weaponise her gender. Stepping forward in the dim moonlight, her veil wrapped tightly around her head, Wafa cuts through the minister's plans, declaring: "You don't have a woman on staff, do you? I refuse to be searched by a man…In fact, I refuse to submit to a search by any woman" (Sundaresan 44).

What takes place here is a great example of how the agency of the subaltern works. Wafa doesn't use any weapons in her fight; she rather uses the strict patriarchal norms of chivalry against her captives. The reason that empowers Wafa in this situation is the absence of female officers in Azizuddin's team and the fact that the shop nearby is not open at that time which is run by a woman. Therefore, her body remains an untouchable space with no violation. Wafa's victory is temporary, but it exposes the limits of desire to control and catalogue. In order to conceal the *Koh-i-Noor*, she has to find an even safer place than her clothing to put it. She navigates through the slippery stones of the central pool in the middle terrace and finds a place to tuck the golden armlet into the third fountain spout from the northwest corner. The act of putting the *Koh-i-Noor* in the water channels of the gardens allows her to camouflage it in nature. The diamond is no longer an object in the treasury ledger, but a hidden part of the earth sitting in dark and quiet water. It is only after the Maharajah cuts off their food supply and drains the pools that a weak Wafa, now

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www.daathvoyagejournal.com

tired and hungry gets her armlet and gives it to Azizuddin. Yet, through her long resistance, she shows that the veil is not a passive coverage, but a powerful instrument of delay, negotiation and political survival.

The Glimmering Veil: Maharani Jindan Kaur and the Refusal of the Gaze

If Wafa Begam symbolises the concept of complete concealment, Maharani Jindan Kaur stands for the concept of the active contrast of the partial display. Rising to the heights of poer from a low social status, she emerges as Ranjit Singh's favourite wife; she is an outstanding figure of natural brilliance, and she is by no means easy to control in the patriarchal court. Her relationship with the *Koh-i-Noor* demonstrates high visual harmony and Sundaresan shows this harmony on the banks of the Sutlej River in December eighteen thirty eight. Jindan stands on the border of her husband's empire and looks at the British Governor-General's dusty camp while wearing the *Koh-i-Noor* on her right armlet. Sundaresan writes about it with a lot of details: "On her right arm, just above the elbow, and gathered in the fabric of the veil, the Kohinoor diamond glowed softly... as the radiance of the sun percolated through the green of the veil and set the stone on fire" (Sundaresan 50).

When Jindan puts the *Koh-i-Noor* in her veil, she unites her own body with the stone's material power. The *Koh-i-Noor* is not represented as a jewel on its own in a showcase; it is used in connection with her actions and clothes. This unity of the woman's body and the sovereign stone goes against the imperialist desire expressed in McClintock as "survey, catalogue, and consume" of the colonised lands (57). Wearing the veil, Jindan creates the barrier that stops the specular gaze of the empire. Using the veil to cover her face, she denies the colonial divide between display and refusal to be shown, and keeps the precious stone an active, living thing (Brown 5) instead of being just a lifeless item of colonial consumption. Such a visual combination causes serious distress and jealousy in the male dominated court of Lahore. Older sons of Ranjit Singh and their greedy wives are scandalised by the fact that the daughter of the water-carrier can wear the *Koh-i-Noor*, the jewel that should only be worn on the turban and arms of men to display their virility and noble blood. By wearing the diamond, Jindan takes the masculine right to sovereignty.

This sea-green veil serves also as a barrier for Jindan's appearance during her diplomatic visit with the English ladies, Emily and Fanny Eden. In the red tent pitched on the northern bank of Sutlej, Jindan hides behind a veil of shining white seed pearls. Not much of her face is visible to these English ladies; yet they know that she is a woman of immense power. These two ladies are bound by their corsets and Victorian traditions, but Jindan is comfortably seated on her divan and speaks through an interpreter. The last

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moment of this meeting is when the English ladies get to see the *Koh-i-Noor* ring on her arm. For Emily, who has spent her life in the structured spaces of London and Calcutta, the sight of the massive diamond on the young queen's body is an unsettling reminder of a raw, independent sovereignty that the British cannot easily manage. The veil allows Jindan to control how much she and her wealth show, thus frustrating the desire of the colonisers to catalogue and own the material wealth of Punjab.

Colonial Administration and Distortion of Culture

To appreciate the significance of the *purdah* as a protective device, it is important to contrast it with the Western administrative systems mentioned by Sundaresan in the novel. The British presence in India is characterised by its systematic passion to catalogue the information and execute audits. This administrative gaze is the very engine of the double exploitation described by McClintock, where both natural resources and human bodies are reduced to taxable, manageable commodities (57). The technicalities behind this bureaucratic mindset can be seen through the character of Mr. Taft, who performs the mundane task of following the Governor-General, noting down the various gifts that he receives from Indian rulers and reporting them to the British government. The large-scale bureaucratic mentality becomes evident when Emily Eden receives a gift of cashmere shawls from General Avitabile. While she is enjoying these gifts, Mr. Taft is waiting outside her tent with his pen and notebook ready to jot down everything: "everything had been registered, the price assessed after he had calculated the labour, the material, the cost of living in Kashmir" (Sundaresan 93). And even when Emily receives roses Mr. Taft cannot help but inspect them, opening the petals of the flower to search for any diamonds hidden inside. He views the natural beauty of flowers as a mere cover for contraband, getting hurt by thorns in the process. For Taft and the East India Company, there should be no opportunity for hiding anything, and all values should be calculated and recorded.

The urge to control everything reaches its height during the annexation of Punjab by the British when Henry and John Lawrence come to Lahore to carry out a survey of the enormous empire's treasury. While Henry works in the Sheesh Mahal, the Palace of Mirrors, he is accompanied by the Howard brothers, two clerks who do nothing but measure and count various state treasures. As Makraj Misr says, these people lack a soul and emotion to possess something beautiful. They want to turn the entire colourful history of Punjab into a mere accounting book. The colonial survey is not merely about the measurement of stones; it is about managing a human life. During the annexation process, Henry Lawrence records the details of

ISSN 2455-7544
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every widow and concubine abandoned by Ranjit Singh demanding proof of date of birth, their ancestry, the dates of their marriage to Maharaja, and whether they had had any children. Thus, the documents of these women are collected to strip them of their royal titles, transforming their lives to an administrative ledger so that the Company can determine their pension. By subjecting these widows to the same mathematical scrutiny as the gold watches and the forty-five carat teardrop diamond, the colonial state treats both human and mineral bodies as exchangeable commodities on the global market. This systematic exposure is the ultimate goal of the colonial state: to leave no stone unmeasured, no person uncategorised, and no territory unmapped.

In this situation of calipers and ledgers, the veil of Wafa Begam and Jindan Kaur become an important element of political resistance. Despite the efforts of the British to implement their system in Punjab, the royal women and the *Koh-i-Noor* keep evading their grasp. The veil acts as a protective cocoon of fleeting meaning that cannot be accurately gauged by either Mr. Taft's measuring tools or the Howard brothers' calipers. It is a tangible reminder that political forces in South Asia cannot be completely assimilated into colonial accounting.

Conclusion: The Broken *Koh-i-Noor* and the Loss of Autonomy

The tragic end of The *Mountain of Light* comes when the *Koh-i-Noor* is finally stripped of its *purdah* and sent away to London for reshaping. After the Second Sikh War, the young Dalip Singh, who has lost his kingdom, has no option but to sign a treaty surrendering both the throne and the treasury to the British Crown. In July eighteen fifty four, the sixteen-year-old Dalip meets Queen Victoria in Buckingham Palace, where she shows him the newly cut Koh-i-Noor. When Dalip takes the stone to the window, he is struck by its physical transformation: "The Kohinoor lies weightless upon my hand, its heft cut away in an effort to give it more brilliance... Surely the job has been bungled? Where is the mountain of light? The diamond cutters have taken away too much—this is not a mountain anymore, but a hill, a hillock, a mere bump in the horizon" (Sundaresan 310).

By cutting away the weight of the diamond's mass to satisfy Western tastes, the British have physically mutilated the stone. In McClintock's terms, this act of recutting is a literal domestication of the exotic (35). The reduction in weight symbolises the physical displacement of the sovereign women who protected it. Maharani Jindan Kaur, who was once the fierce "Lioness of the Punjab," has her jewels removed from her, is taken from her son, and is imprisoned in Sheikhpura, and, years later, dies frozen in

ISSN 2455-7544
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a damp London suburb. Their bodies are, like the facets of the diamond, obediently disciplined by the colonial state and ignored. Nevertheless, by depicting the stories of the women in parallel with the diamond, Sundaresan demonstrates that their history is not lost. *The Mountain of Light* shows that the veil is not merely a symbol of passive compliance. On the contrary, it is a lively and substantial place of political mediation, tactical hiding, and preservation of culture. Through the protective pleats of the veil, Wafa Begam and Jindan Kaur fight against the icy and calculating eye of the colonial inspection and prove that subaltern agency can survive even the most complete forms of imperial territorial and systematic political dispossession in nineteenth-century South Asian colonial history.

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