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***Book Review: The Perils of Being Moderately Famous*¹**

Nisha Ghatak²

The Perils of Being Moderately Famous is Soha Ali Khan's contribution to the popular genre of celebrity autobiographies in India. Khan's narrative is an insight into her often-unexpressed humour and reflects her anxiety, related to being in the shadows of powerful familial figures. She is the youngest daughter of Sharmila Tagore and Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi, the Nawab of Pataudi, North India. Born into royalty, her older Saif Ali Khan, like her mother, is a famous Bollywood actor. Soha Ali Khan's writing touches upon her life as a member of the royal Pataudi family but delves deep into her Bollywood career. Her efforts to disentangle the royal life from the perspective of a modern Indian female is reminiscent of other memoirs authored by royal princesses like Gayatri Devi's *A Princess Remembers: The Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur* (1976). Unlike Devi, Soha Ali Khan's memoir is a tribute to her life choices, her failure as an actor, and her ability to find content in being "moderately famous" in a remarkably popular family.

The introductory chapter of the book clarifies Khan's intention to focus on stories from her life where her royalty or her social roles are not the focus. Khan's writing is an insight into the life lived beyond the public gaze – one that celebrates the twinkle in her husband's eye and the hours spent away from the gaze of the media.

Khan devotes several pages of her book to remember her life as a student at Oxford and her tryst with living independently in a world where she was far from her familial privilege. Unlike the many Indian celebrity autobiographies that have tried to break away from the question of social privilege, Soha Ali Khan graciously accepts it. In remembering her Oxford days in vivid details, Khan carefully juxtaposes her life against the last queen of the Pataudi family, her grandmother Sajida Sultan. She recognizes the differences between her grandmother's life and her own while maintaining a sense of unmistakable pride. Similarly, Khan's admiration for her famous parents is measured and affectionate.

Between articulating her admiration for the Pataudi clan and her mother's Tagore family in Bengal, Soha Ali Khan takes the readers through a myriad of historical details which she claims have influenced but not shaped her. Her narrative does not follow a linear temporal order and are interspersed with dozens of photographs. Beyond the narrative of the royal Pataudis, Khan celebrates her maternal grandmother's privilege and acuity. These pages provide insight into the social innuendos that shaped the life of the privileged Bengali women of the time and immediately act as a parallel to the royal life of Sajida Sultan, Khan's paternal grandmother and the queen of Pataudi. Khan takes her readers back in time through pictures and descriptive paragraphs that elaborate on the difference between their lives and hers as a Bollywood artist. Beyond these laudatory depictions, Khan attempts to deconstruct the futility of fame and her urge for normalcy. In a strange yet fascinating juxtaposition, Khan refers to Gerardus Mercator's Eurocentric

¹ Khan, S. A. (2017). *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous*. New Delhi: Penguin India.

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distortion of continent sizes and relates it to the self-consumed vain Bollywood life. She narrates readers through her perception of marriage and relationships. The narrative is heavy with details on everyone else but herself. On the occasions where she turns to her personal stories, Khan shines. We are informed of her disillusionment with Bollywood's treatment of middle-aged actresses and her decision to turn to authorship. Through travel adventures with her friend Tom, in her life as a banker in Mumbai and her decision to become an actor to her experience with motherhood, Khan's writing is genuine but lacks depth. Although full of wit and intelligent candour, Khan's writing ends on an abrupt note – leaving the reader wanting more. Her stories read like diary entries of a humorous mind remembering her lineage and her past. Her attempt to distance herself from familial fame falls short as she leaves the readers wanting to know more about her as an individual.

This book is catered towards an audience that is bedazzled by the Bollywood life. As a celebrity autobiography, it demonstrates the weight of expectations that overburdens a life of social privilege and fame. For scholars working within the genre of female memoirs, this book provides an intriguing insight into the authorship of upper-class female confessional narrative in South Asia. A genre quickly becoming a favourite among young readers, such celebrity autobiographies weave in stories of historical female figures from influential royal families with the almost mundane lives of modern-day celebrities. This book will be an interesting read for those drawn to 20th century Indian history as well as for those looking for a breezy confessional narrative of a failed Bollywood actor.

Through her narrative, Soha Ali Khan does succeed in creating a celebrity autobiography that could potentially contribute to the changing perception of gender roles and fame within the Indian film industry. "Diminished by the world", as she states, it is such moments of inadequacy in a moderately famous life that lead to the recognition of fame as fleeting moments of recognition in a vast expanse that is human life.