



SACHI

Society for Art & Cultural Heritage of India



In 1817, an Irish poet, Thomas Moore who had never set foot in India, closeted himself in a friend's library in England to write a romantic poem about a faraway land and a fairytale princess, she of the tulip cheeks or Balla Rookh as he called her.

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Moore's poem captured the popular imagination with its versification of exotic scenes and colorful images from the distant Orient. More importantly, it introduced the valley of Kashmir to the Western mind, providing the "canvas upon which future European travelers to Kashmir painted much of their story". (Kenneth Jain MacDonald, 2003).

In Mughal history, there is no record of the existence of *Lalla Rookh*, who Moore presented to the world as the youngest daughter of the Emperor Aurangzeb. But she assumes a distinct persona and a tangible presence in our minds through the creative muse of Moore for whom she is the most beautiful princess that existed, comparable in her loveliness to those written about in Indian and Persian legend. The verses from *Lalla Rookh* became songs set to music by several composers in the nineteenth century and performed in theatres and salons



Image Credit:

Illustration: Namouna, K. Meadows, E. Scriven

From the Book: *Lalla Rookh: An Oriental Romance* by Thomas Moore
London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans and Roberts, 1858

across Europe. The French composer Felicien David was

perhaps the most successful of those musicians who gave the poem a new life and being as an opera. Even before David, an opera based on the poem was performed in Berlin in 1822 – a spectacle that transported the audience to India and to the exotic climes depicted in the work. Besides Felicien David, Robert Schumann wrote an oratorio based on one segment from Moore's poem, entitled "Paradise and the Peri". So did the Russian composer and pianist, Anton Rubinstein.

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and

**The Departments of Music, and
Art & Art History at Mills College**

Are Pleased to Invite You
to A Very Special Afternoon

*Imagined Journeys:
Balla Roukh and Her Story*

An Illustrated Talk by
Nirupama Rao

Former Ambassador of India to the United States

Followed by a Conversation with

Dr. Nalini Ghuman

Associate Professor of Music, and Asian Studies
Faculty Member, Mills College

Sunday, May 3

4:00 pm - 6:00 pm

Danforth Lecture Hall, Mills College Art Center
5000 MacArthur Boulevard, Oakland

For questions email info@sachi.org; Tel. 650-918-6335

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What Moore succeeded in creating through *Lalla Rookh* was a veritable India of the imagination. His story of this fictional Mughal princess begins in Delhi, winds its way through Lahore and culminates in the valley of Kashmir. The princess is betrothed to be married to Aliris, Prince of Bukharia (Bokhara in modern Uzbekistan). Replete as the poem is with romantic flights of the picturesque, there is however the undercurrent that it expresses about the uniqueness of Kashmir (Cachemire Benazir): the unequalled Kashmir as the Persians called it through the ages. It is a uniqueness expressed not only through descriptions of the beauty of the Vale (an Elysium on earth), but also its geopolitical positioning as a gateway from India to Central Asia and the utilization of marriage as a means to strengthen the historical linkages between Mughal India and Bokhara. From the time of the Emperor Akbar, the Mughals had been drawn to Kashmir and Moore celebrated that linkage through devoting one segment of his poem to Nurmahal, or Noor Jehan, the wife of the Emperor Jahangir, the son of Akbar.

Moore's *Lalla Rookh* has been largely forgotten in the world of the twenty first century and even in the century preceding it. In 2013, the Opera Lafayette of Washington D.C. revived Felicien David's opera bringing it to the stage at the Kennedy Center and later at the Lincoln Center in New York to very positive critical acclaim. A compact disc of the music of the opera conducted by Ryan Brown and performed by the Opera Lafayette orchestra was released under the Naxos Label.



Nirupama Rao, a former Foreign Secretary of India and also a former Ambassador of India to the United States, has been actively involved in the efforts of Opera Lafayette to revive *Lalla Rookh*. Her talk will focus not only on India in the Western imagination but also on how Kashmir's unique linkages with Central Asia – severed in large part today – must not be forgotten and that aspirations for their revival must be kept constantly alive.



Nalini Ghuman, Associate Professor of Music and Asian Studies faculty member at Mills College teaches courses on women in music, on orientalism, and music of the Indian subcontinent. She publishes on early 20th century British music and its relation to nationalism and imperialism. She is the author of *Resonances of the Raj: India in the English Musical Imagination, 1897-1947* (Oxford University Press, 2014).



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From *Lalla Rookh: An Oriental Romance*, by Thomas Moore
London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans and Roberts, 1858