

# Woman on Top

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## Woman on Top

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PENELOPE Cruz doesn't know what she's letting herself in for. No sooner has the sultry Hollywood star announced her intention to play the role of Anita Delgado, the 'Spanish Maharani' who came to Kapurthala to marry the colourful Maharaja Jagatjit Singh almost exactly a century ago, that a controversy has erupted over the book that is the basis for the movie. And both book and controversy have all the elements of a potboiler. The dramatic personae are made for controversy: a sophisticated maharaja known as much for his eclectic mind as for his interest in women and a neo-literate teenage Spanish dancer. Add to that, not only an angry current Kapurthala maharani and her son, but also newly discovered descendants of the Spanish maharani and there is bound to be Action! As if Javier Moro's Spanish book released in India by Full Circle as *Passion India* (and Penelope Cruz's entry) weren't exciting enough, now 'Maha' Akhtar, a PR-turned-businesswoman-turned-flamenco dancer has set New York abuzz by claiming descent from Delgado.

The svelte Ms Akhtar has added yet another twist as rumours swirl that she is the result of a liaison between Delgado's debonair son, Prince Ajit Singh of Kapurthala, and a Lebanese lady. Both Mr Moro (nephew of Dominique Lapierre of *Freedom at Midnight* fame) and some Kapurthalas are dubious about the claim but Ms Akhtar has already told SundayET via email, "I won't be changing my name and don't really want anything from anyone. They are just great people, and just knowing my roots is great.... The last thing I want to do is capitalize or exploit any of this. It's a very personal story, and I am not the kind of person who would ever take advantage of anything or anyone...."

That assertion, however, would be cold comfort for some Kapurthala royals, given that the book itself is a rather curious mix of fact and fiction. "It is a fictionalised account. The Americans rather pompously call this genre 'dramatized non-fiction'," says Mr Moro via email. "I took certain liberties, but always based on documents or information I could gather. There is fiction: the dialogues have been invented... My main concern was not to be faithful to the historic truth... but to be faithful to the spirit of the characters, to their conflicts as well as to the historic period. Sometimes, fiction enables a writer to get closer to reality than a pure historical account."

"It's utter nonsense," retorts Kapurthala heir Tikka Shatruijit Singh vehemently about Moro's version of the saga of Delgado (known after marriage as 'Prem Kaur de Kapurthala') and his great-grandfather. "Moro and his book are just trying to make profit out of the life of a truly remarkable man! He has written it to make it a bestseller, not to give a real account." Indeed the disclaimer on the fly leaf of the book begs the question. It says the "characters whether real or imaginary" are "products of the author's own imagination and interpretation". Howzat? The reaction of the main Kapurthala royals - the current head, Maharaja Sukhjot Singh has maintained a distance from the outset, while his wife and son have been more combative - has only increased the spotlight. Geeta Devi, in fact, snubbed Mr Moro when they met in New Delhi and got the Spanish ambassador to desist from

helping his compatriot, which Mr Moro also acknowledges via email. "He's come out with a book that is scurrilous and one-sided," insists Tikka Shatruijit. "The book, for instance, doesn't show how deeply my ancestor was interested in the world around him. His travels weren't only to live the good life: wherever he went, he delved into that country's development and culture and wrote insightful accounts of what he saw in his diaries. That's why so many world statesmen were his friends."

A recent dramatisation of a royal romance was Khalid Mohammed's film *Zubeida*, in which he undertook to tell his version of the story of his mother's marriage to Jodhpur's Maharaja Hanuwant Singh, the father of the current Maharaja Gaj Singh II. Where the story veered from fact to fiction was apparent to the current Jodhpur royals but they seemed to prefer not to fuel the controversy and draw attention back to a forgotten issue. Mr Mohammed, on his part, never openly claimed it was anything other than a film.

Mr Moro, by saying it is "a true story" and then retreating behind the phrase "dramatised non-fiction", however, shows that he is aware the Kapurthalas may consider legal action. But he spiritedly says, "I am absolutely prepared for any action! Not only would that give great publicity to the book, but it would give me the occasion to ask for DNA testing... Modern technology offers a chance to rewrite history, and this would be a splendid occasion. I hint in the book that Jagatjit Singh might have been chosen by the English against the other part of the family, the Christian one."

Even so, Moro has taken the rather novel step only for the Indian edition. "I altered names because I had altered the historic 'truth'" he says, about giving Jagatjit Singh's sons and daughters-in-law different names. "Yet most of what I tell about those characters is true. I am sure the members of the Kapurthala family won't have any problem in recognising who is who in the story."

The English translation of Spanish edition's epilogue - as opposed to the Indian edition - clearly mentions the real names. Had he stuck to that for India too, his assertion of "non-fiction" would have been braver. But then the implications would be grave too, for a focal point in his book is the claim that the Spanish maharani's eventual lifelong love was her stepson, artfully called 'Kamal' in the Indian edition.

Mr Moro avers that he "came to learn that Anita had a enduring and passionate love story with one of the sons of Maharajah Jagatjit Singh. This is something that she tried to conceal till the end of her days, yet her niece Victoria (who died a few years ago) was aware of it. So was Anita's biographer Elisa Vazquez, who was a great help in sharing information." He says he also "found several newspaper clippings from the 1920s evoking the story of a 'Indo-Spanish Phaedra', like the Greek tragedy..."

Now, will Penelope Cruz manage to tiptoe through the heavily-mined ground between the book, its writer and the descendent and still remain the Woman on Top?





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