



Silence of the Chagos

Shenaz Patel

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Beyond the Maldives is an archipelago containing fifty-six islands clustered in seven atolls, the Chagos. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the inhabitants of these islands became permanently homeless.

Shenaz Patel's *Silence of the Chagos* testifies to the affects of that secret exchange through three Chagossians' experiences of displacement and the story of the ill-fated ship that transported human cargo during the island's surprise evacuation. Dreamy and lyrical, the novel fictionalizes their experiences and captures the formless ennui of a grieving people denied not only their home, but their identity.

Before there was silence, there was life on Chagos's Diego Garcia. Shaped by the twin rhythms of the island's coconut plantation and the traditions of its native population, the island is depicted as idyllic. Much like a company town, Diego Garcia's inhabitants were all employees of the island's single industry, dependent on the Chagos-Agalega Corporation's shipments to receive necessary goods. Yet, as Charlesia and others remember it, it wasn't just a good life. It was the best that life could be.

Contrasting the islanders' deep-rooted satisfaction on Diego Garcia with a forced displacement they weren't prepared for manifests the pain and trauma of removal. The islanders' lingering doubt and shame about their powerlessness is emphasized not only through their wistful memories of island life, but in all they elide. Patel's compelling afterword adds a nonfiction precis that fills in many of the imagined narrative's telling omissions.

For the Chagos, 2018 "marks half a century that an entire population was uprooted and deported from an archipelago." Taking advantage of decolonization's instability, the US convinced Britain to allow the islands to be turned into a US military base to "keep the 'free world' safe." Stateless yet forbidden to return to their island home, the Chagossians have given up on silence; Patel's book bears witness to their struggle.

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