
Book Reviews

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ROMA CHATTERJI (Ed.), *Wording the World: Veena Das and Scenes of Inheritance*.
Delhi: Orient BlackSwan Private Limited, 2015, viii+481 pp., 2015, ₹1295.00,
ISBN-13: 978-0823261864 (Hardcover).

The book is a tribute to Veena Das and her indubitable influence on generations of scholars across the world. It is a voluminous and rarefied collection of 21 essays, difficult to encapsulate within a book review. The contributors delve into Das' concern with what it means to live in a world devastated by pain and suffering. How can such worlds be studied and written about? These questions also illuminate the co-constitutedness of the event and the everyday; the encasement of research and writing on pain and suffering in an ethics of responsibility; and the implications of these for anthropological thought and practice. The essays may be discussed, as the editor does, under five related themes.

The first theme presents pain as an aspect of the ordinary and how people living on the margins respond to pain. Through research in a refugee camp of south Lebanon, Sylvain Perdigon explores the significance and meaning of *shahada* (martyrdom) among 'noncombatant martyrs' against those 'who died fighting on the battlefield' (p. 30). References to *shahada* in ordinary talk complicate a linear understanding of the concept, unravel histories of suffering and express a desire for its acknowledgement. Aaron Goodfellow's essay is about Katrina, a patient of a clinic that provides free screening and treatment of sexually transmitted infections in Baltimore. Her ordinary narrative discloses the complex relationship between medical technologies, the intervening presence of the state and vulnerable human lives. Lotte Buch Segal's essay explores how the conjugal relationship of Palestinian women is shaped in the context of their husband's incarceration and the ways in which the physical absence of the husband engenders scepticism. She problematises this in the Palestinian notion, *sumud*, which is invoked to reiterate the strengthening of bonds in the absence of the detainee, particularly in the context of the honour that his incarceration brings to the family and to the Palestinian cause. Naveeda Khan's study of a Chauras, a community living in the silt islands of the Yamuna River in Bangladesh captures how the community reflects on climate change when subtle changes and personal disasters mar their lives to predict the impending death of nature. Ein Lall and Roma Chatterji's photo essay documents an experimental dance project. Based on an interactive reading of specific texts on violence and conflict, the dancers seek

to creatively engage with the question of what it means to ‘let pain of the other happen to your body’ (p. 69).

The second theme of the book, ‘Violence, Everyday and the Event’, illustrates how the event and the everyday draw on each other in the context of violence. Pratiksha Baxi’s essay is a sensitive portrayal of the legal interrogations of a child raped by her stepfather and the inherent violence therein. The details elicited in the different proceedings about the rape, the background of the child and her mother’s relationship with the stepfather further instigate an environment of blame and violence for the victim. Deepak Mehta’s piece on the Babri Masjid controversy presents another instance where law continually defers decisions in favour of the *status quo*, thereby denying any sense of justice and restoration. Don Selby presents different evocations of Buddhism in Thailand. One such evocation emerged with the establishment of the National Commission of Human Rights and drew parallels between an alternative reading of Buddhist thinking and human rights. This is seen as an event that marked a turn to the ordinary, as a way of engaging with Buddhism to evolve and relate it to human rights and everyday ethics. Yasmeen Arif demonstrates, through her study of two Sikh neighbourhoods in Delhi affected by the Sikh riots of 1984, how they relate differently to the event and the same transfigures, lives on and serves as a testimony to their current predicament as a community. Based on an analysis of Das’ work, Bhriqupati Singh’s essay charts the continuities in her intellectual journey to explicate how her shift towards the ideas of ‘everyday, scepticism, voice and life’ is also where she locates her politics and that of the researched.

The third theme, ‘Ethics and Aesthetics of Relationships’ elaborates upon Das’ discussion on ordinary ethics, or ethical lives of people at the margins and those living in conditions of intimate violence. Expressed in subtle and reflective ways by which people relate with their others, this ethics expresses the aesthetics of relationships. Based on her fieldwork on sexual assault victims in Baltimore, Sameena Mulla explores the nature of their affective relationships with kin, the critical role played by relatives in the legal contestations that follow and the tensions that emerge within families when a family member is the perpetrator. Sangeeta Chattoo’s essay explores ethnicity in the family practices of Muslims of South Asian origin in UK, as a site of subjectivity accomplished through various familial and cultural negotiations in the everyday. Clara Han draws on her research in La Pincoya, Chile to illustrate how addiction intervenes in domestic relations and the demand it places on family members to be affectively available to offer care. Rita Brara’s essay on Punjabi kinship unravels an understanding of kinship from a reading of sayings, songs, and practices in the lives of Punjabi women. Articulated in the form of dyadic relationships, such as, mother–daughter and brother–sister, and based on everyday experiences, women’s rendition of kinship is affective, dialogic and collective.

The fourth theme, ‘Anthropology and the Picture of Thought’ is by far the most provocative, as it engages with the question of what constitutes thought in anthropology. Anand Pandian asks ‘what makes us anthropologists’ and initiates a discussion on the relationship between thought and event in anthropology. He argues that in being receptive to the world of events, ‘it is thought that we

encounter when we do anthropology' (p. 171). The sensibility that emerges thereof is 'far beyond the field of empirical research', and the moment of 'conceptual becoming'. However, in working with the dichotomy of empirical research (reduced as it is to 'a world of practical activity') and conceptual becoming, Pandian separates thought from event, the person from the anthropologist and lends a sense of coherence to what is now accepted as the uncertain grounds on which anthropological thought claims authorship. To quote Das, '... the life of the mind is located not in the brain but in relationships ...' (p. 374) and what we encounter when we do anthropology are people and relationships. The life of the mind has to return to people and relationships for its sustenance. Andrew Brandel's essay traces romantic sensibilities in ethnographic practice (in the work of Boas and Levi-Strauss) and wonders how the historiography of anthropology would read if 'the work of ethnographic encounter' is recast through the work of art.

'The Affinity of Art and Anthropology', the final theme, turns to the world of art as a form of knowing. Through beautiful illustrations, Mani Shekhar Singh's essay shows how young Maithil artists in Bihar experiment with received knowledge to express their politics and expand the horizons of their art. Roma Chatterji reflects on the unique mirror motif and its significance as a form of storytelling among the Chittrakars, the folk artists from Bengal. The highlight of the book is an essay by Das, 'Adjacent Thinking: A Postscript' and an interview with her, where she reflects on her journey as an anthropologist, the contexts that defined her ideas, and the uniqueness of anthropology as a discipline.

The book is novel, specifically for the diverse research sites it accommodates in its exploration of pain and suffering. Despite this, the book would appeal only to a select audience. Some of the essays are written in a manner that obfuscates, rather than reveals the 'ethical loneliness' of worlds devastated by violence. Even so, it can serve as a valuable resource for research scholars and academicians working on similar themes and are familiar with the associated semantics.

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