

December 2007

Book review of 'The Inheritance of Loss' by Kiran Desai

B.P. Giri
Dartmouth College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Giri, B.P. (2007) "Book review of 'The Inheritance of Loss' by Kiran Desai," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 27: No. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol27/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

a destabilizing heterogeneity of views. Some DIO officials, for instance, expressed misgivings about the fact that “people’s participation” borrowed from a long-standing local system of corvée labor, in which Pahadis (high-caste Hindu immigrants to the district from Nepal’s hill districts) relied on the unpaid labor of the region’s indigenous inhabitants, the Tharu. District political leaders and DIO bureaucrats were newly sensitive to the inequality of corvée labor in the wake of the 1990 Jana Andolan, which opened forums for Nepal’s minority ethnic groups to address what they view as their subjugation at the hand of high-caste groups.

In chapters 5 and 6, Masaki focuses on several local river-control projects in two Bardiya villages to show that although the traditional corvée system was still in operation in 2000–2001, the system was also precarious. The “story-line” at the local level was that Pahadis were “benevolent benefactors” who bring development to the “backwater” Tharu—a “story-line” that was often proffered to justify the corvée system. But insofar as this “story-line” was predicated on a contradictory mix of exploitation and benevolence, it presented openings to the Tharu to negotiate a more favorable position for themselves. Historically, for instance, Tharus would have been expected to collect and haul the boulders for the ramparts. The Tharu protested, however, that this would be by far the hardest of the project’s tasks and asked for and received cash compensation. The Tharu also employed what Masaki, following James Scott, calls “infra-politics”—for example, sending children instead of adults to work (with the idea that the Pahadi supervisors at the work site could not demand much labor from children), and leaving en masse for lunch or other breaks. Masaki argues that microprocesses such as these mediate the implementation of policy and serve as the circuits through which power draws local and non-local actors into relation. He argues that even such seemingly local microprocesses, by reducing the efficiency of individual projects, also contributed to the decline of the D&P agenda.

The strength of *Power, Participation, and Policy* lies in its theoretical rigor, and is successful in carrying out the stated objective of offering an “ascending” analysis to counter the simplistic assumptions found in “descending” approaches. The theoretical framework, however, is also a limitation. Masaki’s theoretical framework is robust, to be sure, but it dominates the book, and left me wondering if there isn’t a vast amount of thick description unexploited in his notebooks. Reading between its taut lines, one can discern a rich if unrealized account of how the changes ushered in after the 1990 Jana Andolan continue to reverberate in Nepal’s out-of-the-way places through the complicated intersections of policy, development, caste, ethnicity, class, gender and local systems such as corvée labor.

Ken Croes earned a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Princeton in 2007 for his dissertation, “Nature of a Nation: Monarchy, Development, and Culture in Nepal’s Annapurna Conservation Area Project.” He is currently a project director with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center.

THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

KIRAN DESAI

New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006. 324 pp.

REVIEWED BY B. P. GIRI

In the years since Salman Rushdie published his groundbreaking novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981), English language literature from India has ceased to be treated as colonial anachronism or postcolonial anomaly; instead, it has achieved considerable international recognition and visibility to become part of world literature. Curiously, the arrival of Indian English literature in the international arena has been made possible by an increasing number of writers who are “loose in the world,” so to speak, and, as such, they belong to a global fraternity of diasporic Indians, appropriately called “India Abroad.” Kiran Desai (the daughter of Anita Desai, a widely acclaimed Indian author) is one such writer, and the Anglophone literature has become all the richer because of her magnificent new novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Appropriately enough, the best way to approach *The Inheritance of Loss* is to consider it under the rubric of postcolonial diasporic fiction. Even as the story is set, for the most part, in the lush and exotic surroundings of Kalimpong, India, in the shadow of mighty Kanchenjunga, many of its characters are displaced individuals who struggle to invent a life out of place, away from their ancestral homes and homelands. The novel, for example, features a colonial era judge, once an impoverished student in England, who returns to India to a life of colonial service. In the process, he morphs into the figure of an Anglicized babu, someone who rejects his family and native heritage, choosing instead a life based on an obsessive pursuit of false colonial ideals. Another character, Biju, is an illegal immigrant, living among other immigrants in New York, trying to eke out a difficult living in the basements of one shady restaurant after another. Then there are a handful of European expatriates, who are gloriously out of place in the same city the judge calls home. It is clear from this cast of uprooted characters that a certain sense of alienation and loss, said to be an integral part of the diasporic condition, is at the heart of the novel’s inheritance.

The novel’s diasporic location also reveals its cosmopolitan outlook and sensibility. In its very first page, the narrator asks the reader to juggle two impossible images—a rare view of the majestic Kanchenjunga looming over the horizon and an image of giant squids from the pages of *National Geographic* over which Sai, the judge’s sixteen-year-old grand daughter, lingers for a moment. The interesting thing about these

Virginia Woolfesque, strikingly juxtaposed images is not just an aesthetic of estrangement that underscores the workings of the modern Western novel, but also the possibility that Desai's novel looks at the world from within a *National Geographic* lens, a polished, cosmopolitan eye that surveys the world's exotic places for the edification of its readers. Traditionally, the Western novel has sought to enlarge the humanistic sensibility of its readers. Many, if not most works of canonical English fiction effortlessly engage in what may be termed, for lack of a better term, a "humanizing mission," as they seek to bring members of a formerly overlooked national, gender or social type or niche within the sphere of literary representation. One could argue that *The Inheritance of Loss* continues this humanizing function superbly well as regards to many of its Indian and non-Indian characters.

However, there are some exceptions. In current discussions of postcolonial literature, the concept of diaspora is routinely opposed to anything having to do with the consolidation of a nationalist feeling. Unlikely as it seems, *The Inheritance of Loss* manages to supplement its diasporic awareness of alienation and loss with a Nehruvite kind of nationalism (Nehru, in fact, makes a brief appearance in the novel), allegedly under threat from violently executed sub-national insurgencies that have wrecked havoc in different parts of India for many decades. And it is from this political vantage point that Desai's novel seeks to expose and condemn the excesses of the Gorkhaland insurgency that swept over Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills in the 1980s. (An aspect of this critical stance is reflected in the fact that Sai falls in love with a Nepali-origin tutor, who betrays the girl's family to the insurgents before deciding to join their ranks. The promise of their love remains unfulfilled despite strong feelings on both sides.)

The novel's criticism of the Gorkhaland insurgency is fraught with difficulties. Historically, the Subas Ghising-led insurgency was not really about throwing out non-Nepali residents of the hills in spite of its adoption of violent tactics the novel justly criticizes. Instead, its agenda included self-empowerment of a marginalized community by demanding access to state institutions and resources. In addition, the insurgency is broadly understood to have challenged not so much the legitimacy of the Indian nation *per se*, as the long-time hold of the ethnic Bengali elite in the politics, industry, and bureaucracy of the state of West Bengal in general, and in Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills, in particular. It seems to me that while the novel does acknowledge some of these inconvenient truths here and there, it *still* chooses to foreground the insurgency as a threat to cross-cultural harmony, on the one hand, and the unity of the Indian nation-state, on the other. In this context, one sometimes wishes the author had acknowledged her roots in the ethnic Bengali community, so the reader could judge for himself or herself the somewhat partisan nature of the novel's nationalist rhetoric.

I indicate this limitation of the novel's politics with some trepidation since humanistic education has ingrained in us

a view of literature that tells us that literary works are above politics even when they delve into a clearly political subject. Instead, we are asked to understand literature's mission in terms of larger humanistic goals about the pursuit of truth the way the author sees it, and about individual courage, honesty, power of world disclosure, and so forth. Somewhat opposed to this line of thinking, a minimalist view holds that the work of fiction as fiction is not relevant to the world of actual events, where politics presumably dwells. Despite these old-fashioned pieties about literature's relation to politics, in India as elsewhere, non-professional readers do care deeply about literary fiction, and one of the reasons why they care is they find the fiction's account of the imagined world quite useful in the cultivation of their self-image as well as group identity, or, in short, in the business of living. To these readers, therefore, a novel's politics are as important as its aesthetics, as they are two parts of the same narrative coin.

To suggest the above is not to deny Desai's novel its formidable aesthetic powers, among which should count its superb mastery of the novelistic craft, its imaginative use of ordinary language, and, above all, its self-assured intelligence and wit. *The Inheritance of Loss* is neither excessively erudite in the manner of a Rushdie novel, so it is quite relaxed about the selection of its audience (I believe a novel has the power to select its audience by means of the type of thematic and linguistic registers it uses), nor is it constrained by any dogmatic commitment to a narrowly conceived idea of a reading public. The author is keenly aware that she lives and writes in a divided world—divided by nationalisms and colonialisms, but also by gender, class and ethnic affiliations. Trying to speak to and about multiple sectors of a global reading public spread across entrenched divides of ideology and identity is not easy. At the same time, for a diasporic writer, someone who lives in one place but writes about another, communicating across such divides is a risk well worth taking. The readers of the *Himalaya* should be especially grateful that a young but formidable literary talent has applied herself so well to unraveling the mysteries of the social world that surrounds them in their own neighborhood.

B. P. Giri is an Assistant Professor of English at Dartmouth College. His research interests include literature and politics, literary theory, and postcolonial diasporic fiction.