



Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary

Veena Das , Stanley Cavell (Foreword by)

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In this powerful, compassionate work, one of anthropology's most distinguished ethnographers weaves together rich fieldwork with a compelling critical analysis in a book that will surely make a signal contribution to contemporary thinking about violence and how it affects everyday life. Veena Das examines case studies including the extreme violence of the Partition of India in 1947 and the massacre of Sikhs in 1984 after the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In a major departure from much anthropological inquiry, Das asks how this violence has entered "the recesses of the ordinary" instead of viewing it as an interruption of life to which we simply bear witness. Das engages with anthropological work on collective violence, rumor, sectarian conflict, new kinship, and state and bureaucracy as she embarks on a wide-ranging exploration of the relations among violence, gender, and subjectivity. Weaving anthropological and philosophical reflections on the ordinary into her analysis, Das points toward a new way of interpreting violence in societies and cultures around the globe. The book will be indispensable reading across disciplinary boundaries as we strive to better understand violence, especially as it is perpetrated against women.

Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary Details

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Haley says

I honestly found this very difficult to get through but it's possible that I just don't have the background knowledge in Indian history, philosophy, and anthropological theory to have appreciated/enjoyed it.

Tara says

Das is an anthropologist who worked with communities who had been displaced by Partition in 48 or 49. This is an interesting story. Many women were on the “wrong” side after the Partition had occurred. India and Pakistan made it a part of their national pride and honor to have the women returned to their proper places. This meant that many women on either side who had taken up with men (hindus or muslims) were forced to or “encouraged” to return to their families of origin. The time of the Partition is shrouded in secrecy for families. Women did not talk about what happened to them because of the shame. Das also studies the community of Sikhs that had been terrorized by Hindu mobs after the assassination of Indira Gandhi.

Lisa says

Das is crafting both an ethnography and rethinking how anthropology is produced. She is considering both physical violence in India from partition to the assassination of Indira Ghandi, but also the violence of studying violence.

Yang says

It requires certain background knowledge of the history of contemporary India in order to get to the author's point although Das did present us the details of the riot of 1984, and other cases.
