
Epilogue

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Kalimpong as Fiction or Ethnography? Gorkha/Nepali Sensitivities in the Himalayas

Abstract Whether produced as an ethnographic account or a fictional narrative, Kalimpong is ultimately subject to the problematics of representation. It is, after all, at the interstices of history, ethnography, literature, and the scientific discourses employed in the service of governmentality, that we find the production of subjectivities, catalogued communities, and an emergent politics of resistance. This essay is an attempt to look at the difficulties in reading/writing this place in the optic of the two traditions of imaginative literature and ethnography, and of a monstration recounted through the prism of a particular novel. Inseparable from this is the terminological difficulty inherent in forging Nepali or Gorkha identity. This is evident in the production of rather unwieldy devices indicative of some distance from the historical homeland of Nepal in the form of lexicons such as Indian-Nepali, नेपालु भारतीय (Nepamul Bharatiya), भारतीय-गोर्खाली (Bharatiya-Gorkhali) or भर्गोली (Bhargoli). Gorkhaness has increasingly become synonymous with Indian Nepaliness, but only invests in degrees of differential commonalities with Nepaleseness and diasporic Nepaleseness. While this counters the irredentism of a Greater Nepal thesis, it cannot completely exorcise the seductive spectres of ethnic absolutism for diasporic subjects. Rather than just looking at the work of “Nepali” writers who narrate Gorkha subjectivity as it attempts to relocate itself within the matrix of the Indian nation, riddled as it is by ethno-nationalist demands, including the continuing cry for a Gorkhaland, this essay instead focuses on the question of reading/writing (itself a practice) in Kiran Desai’s Booker winning *The Inheritance of Loss*, a novel which, penned by a dialogically cosmopolitan writer, became notorious for its narration of a post-1980s Kalimpong in flux.

For any fraternity—and therefore for a we-subject in the process of being constituted—to demonstrate is to manifest itself. The being of the “we” is displayed, but also exhausted, in the demonstration. There is great dialectical trust in this monstration. This is because the “we” is ultimately nothing but the set of its demonstrations. In this sense, the real of the “we”, which is the real as such, is accessible to each and every one in and by the demonstration. To the question: “What is there that is real?”, the century responds: “Demonstrating.” What does not demonstrate is not (Badiou 2007, 107–108).

*For a moment their conversation was drowned out by the sounds of a procession in the street. “What are they saying?” asked Noni. “They’re shouting something in Nepali.”
They watched from the window as a group of boys went by with signs.
“Must be the Gorkha lot again.”
“But what are they saying?”
“It’s not as if it’s being said for anyone to understand.
It’s just noise, tamasha,” said Lola (Desai 2006, 200–201).*

Introduction: inheritance of loss-gain

Kiran Desai’s novel *The Inheritance of Loss* [TIOL], which won the Man Booker Prize in 2006, reportedly¹ sparked a furore in the Kalimpong-Darjeeling hills—a mainly Nepali-speaking part of the world—unbeknownst to many of the book’s metropolitan readers. The long history of expropriation in this region, from the heady days of colonialism when the British lorded it over the hill stations to post-independent, “home-grown” Orientalism (Poddar and Subba 1992) and more recent territorial claims, illustrates how deeply questions of material entitlement are embroiled in issues of language and identity.

Desai’s novel charts the ethno-nationalist Gorkhaland agitation in the hills, specifically events in Kalimpong in the mid-1980s, which sought to carve out a separate state from Bengal. “Gorkha” is a self-descriptive term (its spelling marks a difference from the British rendering “Gurkha”) that refers to Indian Nepalis rather than Nepalese, i.e. citizens of Nepal (Subba 1992). Reports had it that Gorkha ethno-nationalists were enraged by

1 *The Guardian* made a meal out of some rumours that a book-burning was in the offing. When contacted by a hopeful scribe from *The Guardian*, Anmole Prasad (see later), a local citizen, tells us he was unsuccessful in disabusing him of his already acquired notion that natives were up in arms over the portrayal. The story had caught on and went viral, infecting news channels around the world, no doubt to the delight of Desai’s publishers, faced as they were with the rather onerous task of peddling a piece of literature.

Desai's representation of Gorkhas, and book burnings were threatened, thus profitably adding Desai's novel to a growing list of artistic works that have prompted violent expressions of political outrage: the Rushdie Affair, the murder of Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam, the Danish cartoon crisis, the hullabaloo around Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. In the Darjeeling hills, it was not the question of religion however that attracted the ire of Gorkha ethno-nationalists, but what was seen as Desai's unflattering portrayal of the Gorkha community by the expanding tribe of those who read the book after the story broke. While *TJOL* is critical of the Gorkhaland agitation, of ahistorical claims that the region belongs solely to Gorkhas, and the disavowal of violence directed toward other minorities during the agitation, it also criticises—though, we argue, not entirely successfully—their disenfranchisement and prejudicial treatment in its depiction of this ethnically mixed, vernacularly cosmopolitan (to adopt Homi Bhabha's phraseology) borderland, both liminal and permeable.² It is a contact zone wherein conflict, conjunction and constant flow, or "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference [...] the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (Bhabha 1994, 2).³

That the Desai Affair transpired after the novel won the Booker illustrates not only the power of such an accolade, but testifies to the changing role of the global media in rousing sleepy little towns (although Kalimpong cannot be said not to bustle now) in the Himalayas. The novel itself engages with global concerns—its wide geographical sweep is achieved through marrying the region's local political concerns to the plight of illegals in New York, and the way in which it delves into colonial history as it narrates the rise of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) attests to the power of its interventionist mode. In this essay, we discuss the reception of Desai's novel in Kalimpong, India, Nepal and among metropolitan audiences, and draw out certain ironies at play in the novel's reception (not least in its winning the Booker) and the novel itself, seen in the context of this region's history. Here Roland Barthes's disclaimer in *Empire of Signs*, is worth recounting: "I can [...] though in no way claiming to represent or to analyze reality itself

2 The concepts of borders, boundaries, and borderlands are extremely rich and loaded. But it bears interpositional that the GNLF's prime schismatic and supremo, Ghising, was to deploy the diversionary tactic of "no man's land" (and "ceded land") in the late 1980s to feed political fires.

3 For a more elaborate reading of this dynamic in relation to the town, see the chapter by Prem Poddar and Lisa Zhang entitled "Kalimpong: The China Connection" in this volume. History, ethnography, fiction: narratives produced by these forms determine the sense of politics in a particular place. The idea of supplementarity explains why no synthesis in writing can be anything more than provisional. Whether "the supplement supplements [...] adds only to replace [...] represents and makes an image [...] its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness" (Derrida 1996, 144). The supplement ultimately is both accretion and substitution (200), and the analytical attempt here is to advance that the supplement is not a representor more than a presence, a writing (or the staging of an argument) more than a place (Kalimpong).

(these being the major gestures of Western discourse)—isolate somewhere in the world (faraway) a certain number of features (a term employed in linguistics), and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan” (Barthes 1982, 3).

Ethnie and *andolan*

The Kalimpong-Darjeeling region came under East India Company jurisdiction as a result of treaties and settlements brought about by wars fought against Nepal and Bhutan. In the British national imaginary, the Gorkhas enjoyed a privileged status among the south Asian “martial race” soldiers (see Streets 2004; Caplan 1991; Mozumdar 1963), and were recruited from prisoners of war even as the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814–16 was going badly for the British.⁴ They were deployed for the colonisation and consolidation of early nineteenth-century Assam, in the Anglo-Burmese War of 1824–26, in Afghanistan in 1919, in the theatres of World War I and II, (and more recently in the Falklands, Afghanistan and Iraq).

The swathe of territory dividing eastern Nepal from British India, Sikkim, and Bhutan can be conceptualised as having largely indeterminate and fuzzy boundaries. Boundary lines “waxed or waned according to the military strength and vigour of the ruling dynasty [...and] followed from the history of western diplomacy and drew their meaning from maps and lines drawn on maps” (Stiller 1973, 220–221). The history of migration and settlement in this region—which is questioned by those who subscribe to the thesis that Gorkhas are autochthonous—cannot, however, be denied.⁵

The setting up of hill stations and tea gardens (see Hopkirk 1990) is the other colonial vector central to the formation of a Gorkha community in the Darjeeling area. The immigration of Nepalese was encouraged by the colonial state, which required labour for infrastructure-building in its hill stations as well as its economy of tea gardens and cinchona plantations in Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong.⁶ Though nothing like the moment of classic capitalism produced by the movement of Indian indentured labour

4 Eden Vansittart, a recruiting officer, is reported as observing that “without a strong hand they [the Gurkhas] would very soon deteriorate and become slovenly” (in Caplan 1991, 573).

5 It is difficult to assess the validity of the report by Dr. Campbell, Superintendent of Darjeeling, who raises “not more than hundred souls in 1839 to about 10,000 in 1849, chiefly by immigration from the neighbouring states of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan” (in O’ Malley 1989, 22). Campbell is the man who brought China tea seeds from Kumaun and pioneered the growing of tea in Darjeeling.

6 Kalimpong is not quite a Plumwoodian “shadow place” of extraction in the same sense as Darjeeling, hill station and supplier of choice tea. Because of its geo-strategic positioning in the Indo-Tibetan trade, Kalimpong became, after all, visible, albeit for a short period, to the magnets of economic and political power. Plumwood, meditating on the politics of dwelling, critiques the singularised, special “set-apart home” that presumes access to an affectively charged homeland, which in effect is really a privilege of the powerful (2008, 144).

to the Caribbean during this time (see Mishra 1996), an old diaspora of plantation labour did take form. The production of colonial knowledge about Darjeeling was inevitably followed by the reconstitution of fuzzy identities into an enumerated community (see Kaviraj 1997). The 1860s are marked by an upsurge in the production and circulation of gazetteers, manuals, and ethnographies. Subjecthood was conferred as the colonial state sought legitimation by creating a public sphere, though the notion of a civil society was rather limited (see Chatterjee 1995, 237). Moreover, colonial legitimation was secured through the archival gaze and techniques of ethnological governmentality: "Following these alarming events [the 1857 Rebellion] the problem of populations became not just a challenge of liberal governance [...] but an imperial mandate, shot through with anxieties about the surety of both colonial knowledge and colonial power. Such were the contingent origins of ethnological governmentality on the sub-continent" (Middleton 2015, 66). By the middle of the second decade of the twentieth century there had emerged a sizeable middle class in Kalimpong-Darjeeling (Chalmers 2003).

The two specific sectors that were stressed by the reform movements of this time are general education, and the improvement of Nepali language and literature (Onta 1996). In consonance with other movements in colonial India, civil society was uneven, monopolised by elites, and paternalistic in its pedagogical objective. Civil society organisations in the region contributed actively to the forging of a new self-identity that relied on notions of kinship (or *jati*); a standardised Nepali language as a vehicle for uniting different groups seen as constituting the Gorkha *jati* became key.⁷ Not unsurprisingly, a deterritorialised Gorkha subjectivity ambivalently flitting between the double vision of "homeland" and "hostland"—constituting the two poles of a diasporic public sphere—became the topos of literature produced in the Kalimpong-Darjeeling hills. Migration, unsurprisingly, has thus been a central concern from Lain Singh Bangdel's novel मुलुक देखि बाहिर (*Outside One's Home*) (1947), all the way to Asit Rai's नया क्षितिज को खोज (*Search for a New Horizon*) (1981) and beyond.⁸

7 The Darjeeling writer I.B. Rai's continuing fear of possible divisions is well brought out in his पहाड़ र खोलाहरू ("Hills and Streams") article: "When will the Nepali race ever get anywhere when it has to walk the main street taking everything along with it? The path of the sub-race is our only short one, a way of quick progress. For how long will we wait together, with the future of the race our only aim?" (Rai 1993, translated in Poddar and Prasad 2009, 182–183) The Nepali *ethnie* or nation thus comes to be considered as a community of genealogical descent, with its own native history, vernacular language and culture, and popular mobilization: "golden *sayapatri*," "*gundruk*," "*timur*," "*chimphing*," "*Dasain*," "*Tihar*," "a racehood that has lasted 3000 years." One cannot fail to read the "origin house" (*moalghar*) that stands on the ridge in पहाड़ र खोलाहरू, as an emblem or metaphor for nation. Its residents are a unified people, a *jati* (translated as "race") whose origins are lost in the primordial past, held together by what Anderson calls "a deep horizontal comradeship" even as it is riven by the inequities of "sub-race" or caste. See also footnote 9.

8 The pioneering writer Agam Singh Giri (1928–71) must be mentioned. Giri anticipates many of Rai's concerns and is subject to a similar vacillation in terms of

In multi-ethnic postcolonial India, Gorkha identity is best seen as articulated in terms of an ethno-symbolic matrix of nationalism that underlines pre-modern ethnic identity and community in reading the modernity of its *ethnie*.⁹ Gorkhas are paradoxically “Janus-faced,” to use a term of Tom Nairn’s (1981, 71–72), in looking atavistically at the primordial past of the *jati* and at the same time desiring progressively to fulfil the requirements of modern citizenship and nationhood while the subject attempts to shed its perceived ambivalence towards colonialism.

One of the legacies left by the British after exiting India in 1947 was large numbers of Nepalese settlers in Northeast India, pushed out of Nepal by poverty and a repressive Rana-ruled regime, and attracted by opportunities in the Gurkha regiments, tea plantations, forests and urban centres, with the additional prospect of land grants, lucrative farming and greater security. High caste Nepalese moved as herdsmen to the marginal forestlands in Northeast India and quickly established themselves as farmers and dairymen. Late nineteenth century Kalimpong saw the survey—and consequent settlement by Nepali farmers—of the Kalimpong Khas Mahal, a productive tract of water-rich agricultural lands situated in a great southern-facing bowl over the Tista and Relli valley. One after-effect of the deployment of Gorkha soldiers in imperial trouble-spots, including wars of rebellion within India, was the perception that Nepalis in India were antagonistic to a free India. Ambivalence towards past “collaborators” was inevitable among the “Aryan” establishment; this was reinforced by a cartographic anxiety and a general attitude in New Delhi and Calcutta towards what were considered peripheral and recalcitrant borders peopled by “Mongoloids.”¹⁰ A discourse of development under Nehruvian central planning sought to assimilate these peoples, with uneven results.

a politics of belonging and unbelonging to land and hill, nation and community. In I.B. Rai’s seminal story *हामीजस्तै मैनाकी आमा* (“Maina’s Mother is Just Like Us”), a folk song by Giri about the Gorkhas of Kalimpong-Darjeeling is tellingly deployed: “Her eyes watch a leaf wafting down, making her wait for her own existence. She goes far across the brown ridges of the fields. On a piece of rising ground, luxuriant grass is growing. From the end of a garden she walks steeply uphill, moving from terrace to terrace....

Why then did you come here?

Why then did you come here?

Why then did you come here?

Why then did you come here?”

(in Poddar and Prasad 2009, 83).

9 A Nepali book that struggles to narrate the problematic of dislocated memory is the historian Kumar Pradhan’s *पहिलो पहर* (*First Watch*), Darjeeling: Shyam Prakashan, 1982.

10 The sandwiching of “Tribal” groups between the upper-caste *bahuns* and *chhetris* and the lower caste *matwali jaatharu* “the drinking lot” in the Gorkha social formation has taken on a distinct political dimension lately as these groups recognise the benefits of being officially declared Scheduled Tribes and have become the ready subjects of Development Boards recently installed by the current West Bengal Government under Mamta Bannerjee. These ethnic Development Boards, recognised through an executive fiat by the West Bengal Government as an alternative conduit for delivering funds, are the latest tinkering in a long

The Indo-Nepalese Treaty of Friendship of 1950 stipulated an open border whereby Indians and Nepalese were permitted to travel, work and settle unrestrictedly. Transient migrant labour thus blurred the boundary between migrant Nepalese (i.e. citizens of Nepal) and Indian Nepalis (or Gorkhas) already domiciled in pre-Independence India. This is similarly the case with *madeshe*¹¹ Bihari Indians and Indian Nepalese in Nepal. It gave rise to issues relating to dual citizenships and entitlements and notions of loyalty, especially with Kathmandu viewed as a socio-cultural centre. Political parties, vested interest groups and some sections of the media have made use of this to intensify ethnic/national rhetoric. The official recognition of Nepali in 1992 as one of the Indian state languages assuaged some of the strong feelings that had begun to develop in the 1970s, when there was also a series of ethnic expulsions of Nepalis from the Northeastern states, the merger of Chhogyal's Sikkim with India (1975), and the rise of a simmering ethno-nationalist movement that would later be monopolised by the GNLf in Darjeeling. The flight of *Lhotshampas* (Nepali refugees) from Bhutan in the late 1980s via India to refugee camps in Nepal was another impetus (see Hutt 2003).

Cultural and ethnic hybridity has characterised the borderland geography of the Darjeeling hills at least since the recorded early nineteenth century. Of importance here is the Jelep La pass near Kalimpong, through which much of the Indo-Tibetan trade was carried out until the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959 (if we were to date it as such, when the Dalai Lama fled), or 1962 (when the border closed down after the Sino-Indian war). A small location in the Great Game, Kalimpong was also, in Nehru's phrase, a "nest of spies." Representations of the area in ethnographic writings and travel accounts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflect its complicated history and cosmopolitan character, whilst reiterating discourses of

line of experiments in governance. "These semi-autonomous boards would allow these [...] tribal communities to safeguard their cultural, economic and social welfare [...]. Per the logics of counter-insurgency, these tribal development boards would further divide the Gorkhas and undercut the movement for Gorkhaland" (Middleton 2015, 215). While this provides a dividing wedge in the idea of a unified Gorkha identity, it also has other implications: Ghising, for instance, was to milk this towards the end of his chairmanship of the DGHC and GNLf rule. One scholar writes: "An analysis of the ways in which the classificatory arrangement by which the state identifies and designates communities as tribes has become a politically provocative and productive tool to divide the hill communities" (Sarkar 2014). See also footnote 5. Focusing on an anthropology of the ethno-contemporary and writing about the pursuit of a tribal status in the 1990s and 2000s, Middleton has also directed his analysis to the government anthropologists administering these claims. Putting on spectacles of sacrifice, blood-drinking, and exorcism as proofs of primitiveness and backwardness are read as the strategies of Darjeeling communities to return the gaze of academic paradigms onto the state, thus leaving the government anthropologists struggling for ethnographic truth (Middleton 2015). This arises from the postcolonial recognition that anthropological practice itself is tribal.

11 *Madeshe* is a Nepali descriptor with negative overtones referring to people from the plains—minorities in the hills historically engaged in trade, artisanship, and menial labour; some are also office workers and professionals.

exoticism. Interestingly, Satyajit Ray's Bengali film, *Kanchenjunga* (1962), draws on colonial discourse to perpetuate the vision of the Darjeeling hill station (and this could be applied equally to Kalimpong) as a resort for the enjoyment of Europeans and wealthy plainsmen. Offsetting this romantic vision is the impoverishment of the region, albeit not unconnected to huge demographic changes (as presented in Kalimpong writer Bhagirat Rawat's ethno-nationalist, not entirely unromanticised, Nepali novel बास सलकी रहे छ (*The House is on Fire*) (1981) resulting from an intense exploitation of natural resources.¹²

This was fertile ground for articulating (not least in the entire corpus of Nepali literature¹³) an *ethnie* akin to the ethno-symbolic account of nationalism (see Smith 1986). Regional political parties like the Gorkha League, Pranta Parishad, and later the GNLF tapped into the discontent among the ethnic majority in the hills. The GNLF *andolan* (or movement) was by far the most visible and successful in mobilising people on identitarian lines in the 1980s. As a solution to the grievances of the Gorkhas, Subash Ghising negotiated, after a period of arbitrary violence, an autonomous Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in lieu of the earlier demand for a separate province of Gorkhaland (see Ganguly 2005; Subba 1992).

Whilst Desai's novel focuses its criticism on the ethnic absolutism and violence of the GNLF-led separatist uprising, the situation in the hills is extremely complicated, involving histories of Bengali chauvinism and colonial hill-station hedonism, Lepcha indigeneity (see Foning 1987),¹⁴ Tibetan refugee exoticism, putative *madeshi*-ness; geo-strategic gaming (with China's looming presence), the claimed Bhutanese ownership of the region, class and caste inequities, and new forms of injustice and exploitation carried through the structures of postcolonial globalisation (for Indians at home and abroad)—and all provide the background to the story narrated in *TIOL*.

12 The dominant narrative about 1986–88 *andolan* years couched in terms of grievances against the Bengal government, which gives rise to political confrontation, can be seen as foreshadowed in *Baas Salki Rahe Chha* (*The House is on Fire*). This offers a “historical” account of the life and times of the Kalimpong barrister Ari Bahadur Gurung (one of the two Gorkha members of the Constituent Assembly) along with the rise of the Gorkha League, which canvassed for more hill autonomy.

13 Agam Singh Giri (अगम सिंह गिरी), a pioneering poet who must be instanced here yet again, is seen as best representing the Gorkha people in Nepali literature. His span of writings from याद (*Remembrance*), आत्मा व्यथा (*Anguish*), आशु (*Tears*), जीवन गीत (*Life's Songs*), युद्ध र योद्धा (*War and Warrior*), and जलेको प्रतिविम्ब र रोएको प्रतिध्वनी (*Burning Images and Weeping Echoes*) articulate concerns central to the ethnic/national group, especially in the hills. See also footnote 7 and 8.

14 The Lepchas in Kalimpong are considered to be quite aware politically, culturally, and also linguistically when compared to their brethren in Sikkim, and the idea of a *mayel-lyang* (or paradisaal home) has gained increasing currency lately.

Surveying the reception

The Booker judges praised *TIOI* as “a magnificent novel of humane breadth and wisdom, comic tenderness and powerful political acuteness” (BBC News). Chairwoman Hermione Lee commended the book for its originality and humanity: “The remarkable thing about Kiran Desai is that she is aware of her Anglo-Indian inheritance—of Naipaul and Narayan and Rushdie—but she does something pioneering. She seems to jump on from those traditions and create something which is absolutely of its own. The book is movingly strong in its humanity and I think that in the end is why it won” (ibid.). The chairman of the previous year’s judges commented, “Desai’s novel registers the multicultural reverberations of the new millennium with the sensitive instrumentality of fiction, as Jhabvala and Rushdie did previous eras [...]. It is a globalised novel for a globalised world” (Sutherland in Ezard 2006). Amitava Kumar praised *TIOI*’s portrayal of contemporary globalisation for its subaltern concerns: “It is not a multicultural text-book; instead, it is marked by invention and joy. In fact, [it] can be put among the handful of representations of our moment—call it globalization, postmodernity, or contemporary conditions—from the viewpoint of its victims” (Kumar 2006). Pankaj Mishra, writing in the *New York Times*, hailed the novel along similar lines, declaring it “lit by a moral intelligence at once fierce and tender,” though marking its difference from the optimism of Smith, Kunzru, and Rushdie; “Kiran Desai’s extraordinary new novel manages to explore, with intimacy and insight, just about every contemporary international issue: globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence. Despite being set in the mid-1980s, it seems the best kind of post-9/11 novel” (Mishra 2006).

The reception was very different in other locales. Local Kalimpong critics did not treat the book simply as fiction. In *The Guardian*, prominent lawyer Anmole Prasad¹⁵ is reported as complaining that the novel “is a one-sided account that tells you about [Desai’s own] fears about Kalimpong. The central character Sai is obviously a self-portrait and you can feel her estrangement from this dark, ominous place where Nepalese are just transient interlopers in the landscape” (in Ramesh 2006). This links Desai’s own position to that of the Anglicised Indian characters of her novel, and simultaneously responds to the discriminatory view that Gorkhas are migrants not deserving special rights. Prasad is also cited in an article in *The Telegraph* from Calcutta: “There is a tendency to show the people in Kalimpong as being faceless and Desai’s book suffers from the same infirmity [...]. It is insensitive and one-dimensional and provides a cardboard image of Kalimpong and its people” (in Bhattacharya 2006). The same

15 He is also the co-editor and a translator in *Gorkhas Imagined: I.B. Rai in Translation*, Prem Poddar and Anmole Prasad (eds.) Gangtok: Mukti Prakashan, 2009. We take the opportunity here to thank him for providing comments on a version of this essay.

article reports a soaring demand for *TIOL* in a Kalimpong bookstore after it won the Booker, and cites another critic, Prafulla Rao, a retired Indian Air Force wing commander, who complains, "She says, in her book, that people were too scared to acknowledge the non-Nepalese in the streets of Kalimpong at the peak of the Gorkhaland agitation. But this is completely wrong," and Gorkhaland was "not a communal but a political movement and those killed in the violence at the time were all Nepalese" (ibid.). A different take on matters is also presented: "It was not a very friendly place for outsiders during those days of agitation. There was an undercurrent of tension as outsiders were often perceived to be CPM agents and watched," says local social activist Samsher Ali (ibid.). The point is also made that "in today's Kalimpong, plagued by a plethora of civic and social problems, few have time or money for such books 'apart from a handful of intellectuals,' as [now disgraced] Municipal Chairman Kumai, a GNLFF leader, put it."

The writer D. B. Gurung launched one of the most vociferous attacks on Desai's novel in a review in *The Kathmandu Post*. *TIOL*, he argued, is "the result of living a bastardized life inside and out of India that Desai seems unable to acclimatize herself either in the Western milieu or of her home" (Gurung 2006). In Gurung's view, Desai "spills her black anger over everything 'Nepali' through her fictionalized characters. No, the book cannot be passed off as fiction, as it is set in real Kalimpong town, and is based on real history (highly exaggerated though) with amply close resemblances to its inhabitants and real names and descriptions of the places. This is a travelogue in every respect" (ibid.).¹⁶ He complains about the portrayal of Kalimpong's Nepali inhabitants as "crook, dupe, cheat and lesser humans" (in particular the cook and Biju) and, conflating Desai's voice with that of her characters, argues that through their dialogues she "spews venom. [...] browbeating the Nepalis" (ibid.). He also criticises what he sees as the novel's sacrilegious treatment of religious symbols, and its description of Kanchenjunga as "glowing a last brazen pornographic pink" (ibid.). Admonishing the "wise crackpots" of the Booker Committee, Gurung declares, "This book is a slander and a brazen attack on the 'Nepali community' and their dignity!" (ibid.) While vernacular Nepali dailies and magazines like *Sunchari* and *Himalaya Darpan* from the region picked up the refrain

16 The reader, especially in this case, is always already in a state of consuming the text; it is the source of integration of a particular kind of meaning for him. He occupies the "very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of, the unity of [...Desai's] text is not [in] its origin, it is in its destination" (Barthes 1977, 6). Going beyond the conventional tropes of ethnographic composition, any anthropologist or novelist worth their salt is self-consciously aware of the textual and rhetorical character of writing. Like ethnography, the form of the novel is interwoven by authorial registers; the temporality and practice of reading codifies clumps of "incorrigible assertion" (Geertz 1988, 5) and crochets them back to the author-function, where "incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental or originating contradiction" (Foucault 1991, 111). The credibility of these assertions in the reader's mind can conflate Barthes's "multiple writing" to a coherent singularity (1977, 147). See also footnote 17.

of condemnation on the basis of the novel's perceived misrepresentation of the people and the place, Bengali media outlets from Kolkata, such as *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and *Desh*, recycled chauvinist notions of the inhabitants in the hills as immigrants. There was not much to choose by way of subtle readings of a largely ambivalent narrative of a troubled region.

In a letter to the *New York Times*, an American cultural anthropologist in Darjeeling complained about the use of a citation from Desai's novel in an article on tourism. *TIOL*, she argued, cannot be used "to describe reality," and "Gorkhas [...] critique Desai's novel because it paints them as vengeful and xenophobic. Reducing the agitation to ethnic conflict plays down the problem: resources flow down but money does not come up from Calcutta. Gorkhas are responding to post-colonial exploitation, calling for land, jobs, education and facilities not available in Darjeeling" (Besky 2008). One blogger wondered, "Is Desai's insensitive treatment of the Gorkhas of Kalimpong a reflection of her own self-loathing created by a life in this milieu?" and "When the work becomes the West's main source on this region and that period in history, so much so that the New York Times quotes the book to explain current events, we have a problem" (Benedetto 2008).

Writing from Germany, Satis Shroff, a diasporic Nepali critic, also complained about *TIOL*'s representation of Gorkhas: "Nepalis work under miserable conditions in India as darwans, chowkidars, cheap security personnel and the Indians have the same arrogance as the British colonialists. The judge, Lola and Noni are stereotypes, but such people do exist. It's not all fantasy" (Shroff 2007). He continues, "Her portrait of the Nepalis in Darjeeling is rather biased, but what can one expect from a thirty-six year old Indian woman who has been pampered in India, England and the USA? Her knowledge of Kalimpong and Darjeeling sounds theoretical and her characters don't speak Nepali. She lets them speak Hindi, because she herself didn't bother to learn Nepali during her stay in Kalimpong" (ibid.). He calls Desai "a supercilious brown-memsahib [...] in her attitude towards Gorkhalis and the downtrodden of her own country," and argues that with *TIOL*'s lack of "successful intercultural dialogues" and empathy for the Gorkhas, Desai has "only stirred a hornet's nest" (ibid.).

In response to the outcry, Desai's publishers emphasised the fictive nature of the book: "Desai's publishers, Penguin, say such comments are just 'individuals' opinions,' and that far from being fearful of the response in Kalimpong Desai plans to visit the area. 'We see the book as pure fiction and these views are not an issue for us or Ms Desai,' said Hemali Sodhi, head of marketing for Penguin in India" (in Ramesh 2006). But Desai's aunt, now deceased, who lived and worked as a doctor in Kalimpong, was quoted as saying she had not "told people here about my niece, or the book, or that she won an award. The book contains many insensitive things" (ibid.).

If Kiran Desai visited Kalimpong after winning the Booker, it must have been anonymously. Desai has explained her interest in writing *TIOL* as having its roots in personal history. One blogger reports an interview he conducted with Desai: "I spent parts of my childhood there [...] and I wanted

to capture what it means to grow up in such a fascinating environment, with such wonderfully disparate people [...] but at that age I had no real understanding of the issues involved. I was concerned only with my own world. [...] I wanted to depict how we never really try to understand what life is like for other people" (Singh 2006. One wonders whether in writing *TIOI* she may have inadvertently succeeded in demonstrating this). Desai is also cited in an article in the *International Herald Tribune* on the issue of the agitation: "They didn't have political and economic power [...]. It suddenly skidded into violence.' The Nepalese immigrant story, she said, parallels that of Biju in America, and of immigrant groups everywhere" (Smith 2006). We argue that the ease with which such parallels are made in *TIOI* is highly problematic.

There are, then, legitimate complaints against the reception of the book—particularly that *TIOI* is being read in the West as presenting a factual history of the region and its inhabitants—and more dubious complaints against the book itself in which the opinions of the characters are read as those of the author. However, in considering *TIOI*'s reception it is important to note that many of the places, events, and even people it depicts are real; a fact that will inevitably raise questions about Desai's own position, especially when she has acknowledged that the novel draws on her own family history. The house Cho Oyu is based on Desai's mother's house (although many journalists conflate this with her aunt's) in Kalimpong. Mon Ami also exists, as does, for example, the MetalBox guesthouse on Ringkingpong Road, and Apollo (the "Deaf" being a literary appendage) Tailors. The characters of Father Booty, the Afghan princesses, and Pradhan are based on names though not necessarily real persons. It might therefore indeed be reasonable to read the novel as an attempted ethnography of sorts—and this approach to reading is precisely what opens it up to the criticism that it lacks realism and authenticity.¹⁷ At the same time, though, such criticism reads representation in a traditional anthropological sense, and is rooted in a historicism (to borrow from Benjamin's critique of Ranke) that demands Kalimpong be portrayed "the way it really was" (Benjamin 1992, 245–255).

17 Textual strategy, whether in organising a novel or an ethnography, is inspired by "rhetorical accomplishment" (Geertz 1988, 26). "Being There' authorially, palpably on the page, is in any case as difficult a trick to bring off as 'being there' personally" (ibid., 24). This is no less a demand from the "Olympianism of the unauthorial physicist and the sovereign consciousness of the hyperauthorial novelist" (ibid., 10). "[T]he whole point of 'evoking' rather than 'representing' is that it frees ethnography from mimesis and the inappropriate mode of scientific rhetoric" (Tyler 1986, 136). "[E]xcept as empty invocations," concepts such as "knowledge," "material," "facts," and ultimately "ethnography as true knowledge" "have no parallels either in the experience of ethnographic fieldwork or in the writing of ethnographies" (ibid., 136). See also Clifford (1986).

Textual strategies

There is an irony at play in the enraged reception of *TIOL* and the issues with which the novel itself engages: the disenfranchisement of minorities and migrants. This shares some similarities with the Rushdie Affair; *The Satanic Verses* was after all precisely an attack on fundamentalisms. But where Rushdie's novel interrogated truth in its religious aspect, *TIOL* takes the truth of Gorkha ethno-nationalism as one of its critical foci. Described as "fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority" (*TIOL* 9), Gorkhas are portrayed as a marginalised group in a nationally marginalised locale; under-represented and disenfranchised in the nation in which they live. Whilst *TIOL* is attacked for its strategies of representation, it is precisely the issue of under-representation that concerns the novel—the plight of the impoverished underclass, of minorities forgotten in the Gorkha liberation struggle, and of (illegal) immigrants in the metropolitan centres of the past (England) and present (America). In attacking discourses of discrimination (ethnic nationalisms, caste and class prejudices, colonialist and derived racisms), *TIOL* strategically vocalises through its characters the myriad of prejudices directed from various groups against their various Others. Gorkhas feature as both propagators and recipients of discriminatory discourses. Prejudice is the inheritance of all groups, and there appears to be no remit to the region's long history of territorial struggles, "despite, ah, despite the mist charging down like a dragon, dissolving, undoing, making ridiculous the drawing of borders" (*ibid.*, 9).

The novel opens with a scene of a raid by GNLf youths on the house of the retired judge. There is a pathos about these boys that tempers their menace; members of "an impoverished movement with a ragtag army" (*TIOL* 4) coming up to the house "embarrassed" (*ibid.*). Prejudices are voiced as news of the theft travels around town, and, at the ironically named house Mon Ami, Lola and Noni are in a state of alarm. Paranoid Lola feels no less secure at the thought of their Nepali watchman, a retired soldier called Budhoo (his name means "idiot"), though "[i]n fact, Budhoo had been a comforting presence for the two sisters" (*TIOL* 44). But if Gorkhas are presumed to be thieves in the prevailing discriminatory discourse, so are other unfortunate groups, such as those represented by the cook (the eternal, unnamed servant).

Discriminatory views of Gorkhas are presented through different voices; the cook is surprised that Gyan is to be Sai's mathematics tutor: "I thought he would be Bengali. [...] Nepalīs make good soldiers, coolies, but they are not so bright at their studies. Not their fault, poor things" (*TIOL* 73). Sai is teased by both Uncle Potty and the Swiss dairyst/missionary Father Booty for her attraction to Gyan, in a way that revives old discourses: "Goodness. Those Nepali boys, high cheek-bones, arm muscles, broad shoulders. Men who can *do* things, Sai, cut down trees, build fences, carry heavy boxes . . . *mmm mmm*" (*TIOL* 143). Sometimes such prejudices are shown to assume a shared identity between Indian-Nepalis and Nepalese citizens:

Lola: "It's an issue of a porous border is what. You can't tell one from the other, Indian Nepali from Nepali Nepali. And then, *baba*, the way these Neps multiply."

Mrs. Sen: "Like Muslims." (*TIO*L 129)

Thus, population explosion (a favourite metaphor of anti-immigration discourse) is rehearsed through the voices of these characters—slipping from an attack on one national minority (Gorkhas) to another (Muslims); this conversation turns into an attack on the special tribal rights enjoyed by the vanishing minority of the Lepchas. The appearance of the speaker's name before each utterance is a reminder that such discourses are never objective or true.

In response to Noni's partial recognition of the Gorkha cause, Lola responds, "All kinds of atrocities will go on—then they can skip merrily over the border to hide in Nepal. Very convenient" (*TIO*L 127). Lola's imagination, with its fears of a "porous border," replicates Kipling's hill station where Shimla looms as an ambiguous geopolitical space and the romantic idyll of the hills is haunted by suspicion of the nomadic racial other:¹⁸ "In her mind she pictured their watchman, Budhoo, with her BBC radio and her silver cake knife, living it up in Kathmandu along with various other Kanchas and Kanchis with their respective loot" (*ibid.*). The argument between the sisters continues:

"But you have to take it from their point of view," said Noni. "First the Neps were thrown out of Assam and then Meghalaya, then there's the king of Bhutan growling against—"

"Illegal immigration," said Lola. She reached for a cream horn. "*Naughty* girl," she said to herself, her voice replete with gloating.

"Obviously, the Nepalis are worried," said Noni. "They've been here, most of them, several generations. Why shouldn't Nepali be taught in schools?"

"Because on that basis they can start statehood demands. Separatist movement here, separatist movement there, terrorists, guerrillas, insurgents, rebels, agitators, instigators, and they all learn from one another, of course—the Neps have been encouraged by the Sikhs and their Khalistan, by ULFA, NEFA, PLA; Jharkhand, Bodoland, Gorkhaland; Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Kashmir, Punjab, Assam"

[...]

Lola: "You saw that letter they sent to the queen of England? Gorbachev and Reagan? Apartheid, genocide, looking after Pakistan, forgetting us, colonial subjugation, vivisected Nepal... When did Darjeeling and Kalimpong belong to Nepal? Darjeeling, in fact, was annexed from Sikkim and Kalimpong from Bhutan."

18 See Kipling 1889. For Kipling's Shangri La, cf. Richards 1993.

Noni: "Very unskilled at drawing borders, those bloody Brits."
 Mrs. Sen, diving right into the conversation: "No practice, na, water all around them, ha ha." (*TIOL* 128–129)

Though the comment on illegal immigration is ironically presented through the voice of the novel's most unreliable narrator, it nevertheless implicitly forges a link that remains unproblematised between the diasporic history of the region and the politics of contemporary migration from third to first worlds. While representing Kalimpong and its surrounding area as a real locale, the novel never properly engages in the history of the conflict there, though it readily translates issues into a global setting. Different voices produce sometimes monologically converging, sometimes polyphonic/heteroglossic accounts of events. In the passage above, the argument begins reasonably and the general history about Kalimpong is correct, but the comment on Nepali not being taught in schools is not (see Sonntag 2002, 165–178). These Anglicised Bengalis with their deep nostalgia for imperial culture suffer from a cartographic anxiety of a fissiparous nation and function as a marker of continuity between colonial and home-grown Orientalism. While *TIOL* highlights the issue of the unwillingness of local inhabitants like these to hear the claims and demands of the Gorkhas, the novel itself fails to regard its own implicit call to heed such voices.¹⁹ Moreover, the conflation of different histories of separatist violence evidenced in this passage remains unchallenged. Sai, for example, bemoans the state of the country "coming apart at the seams: police unearthing militants in Assam, Nagaland, and Mizoram; Punjab on fire with Indira Gandhi dead and gone in October of last year; and those Sikhs with their Kanga, Kachha, etc., still wishing to add a sixth K, Khalistan, their own country in which to live with the other five Ks" (*TIOL* 108).

The novel's criticism of the GNLF focuses on issues of violence and injustice inherent in the call for "Gorkhaland for Gorkhas." It addresses a politics of coercion (the forceful enlisting of the local community to support the movement (*TIOL* 192–193)), and a disavowal of Kalimpong's cosmopolitan reality. But it also questions the truth of the patriotism laying the ground for the insurgency and, more generally, whether the passions of friendship and enmity that underpin violence can ever be true. Participating in one demonstration, Gyan experiences it like a scene out of a documentary film: "the men were behaving as if they were being featured in a documentary of war, and Gyan could not help but look on the scene already from the angle of nostalgia, the position of a revolutionary. But then he was pulled out of the feeling, by the ancient and usual scene, the worried shopkeepers watching from their monsoon-stained grottos" (*TIOL* 157).

19 If Desai's paternal Gujarati grandfather was the inspiration for the character of Judge Jemubhai (see e.g. Smith 2006; Tonkin 2006; Ramesh 2006), Desai's other characters in the novel display an uncanny alignment with the dominant Bengali position against Gorkha separatist demands, leaving one wondering whether these then were inspired by the maternal side of her celebrated cosmopolitan ancestry.

This underscores the necessity of distinguishing between representation and the real (see Badiou 2007, 109). Gyan has a flash of realpolitik recognition: "The patriotism was false, he suddenly felt as he marched; it was surely just frustration—the leaders harnessing the natural irritations and disdain of adolescence for cynical ends; for their own hope in attaining the same power as government officials held now, the same ability to award local businessmen deals in exchange for bribes, for the ability to give jobs to their relatives, places to their children in schools, cooking gas connections. . . ." (*TIO*L 157).

Gyan is, in fact, the only Gorkha character featured in any detail in the novel (the cook hails from Uttar Pradesh and is not Nepali, as suggested by one critic). When Gyan, whose name means "knowledge," is accidentally caught in a demonstration for a Gorkha homeland, the inflamed passion of the crowd ignites in him a vicious hatred: "Fired by alcohol, he finally submitted to the compelling pull of history and found his pulse leaping to something that felt entirely authentic" (*TIO*L 160). It is implied that a false narrative of victimhood underlies this emotion, as he finds that, "[f] or a moment all the different pretences he had indulged in, the shames he had suffered, the future that wouldn't accept him—all these things joined together to form a single truth" (*ibid.*). As the rage of Gyan and his friends blazes, the tragedy of such anger wedded to ethno-nationalist fervour is described in more universal terms:

The men sat unbedding their rage, learning, as everyone does in this country, at one time or another, that old hatreds are endlessly retrievable.

And when they had disinterred it, they found the hate pure, purer than it could ever have been before, because the grief of the past was gone. Just the fury remained, distilled, liberating. It was theirs by birthright, it could take them so high, it was a drug (*TIO*L 161).

Gyan's mounting passion for purity resonates with both old and new forms of racism; Biju, angered by his treatment in New York, is also seen to succumb to the temptations of ethno-nationalist purity. In this way, the novel addresses the tragedy of the inescapable violence that emerges out of hatred, fabricated untruth or ignorance. Along these lines, the Gandhian strategy of non-violent resistance as a means to reveal the truth of injustice is also an attempt to contradict any obfuscation of truth by violence, discursive or otherwise. Badiou writes,

[...] there are only multiple procedures of truth, multiple creative sequences, and nothing to arrange a continuity between them. Fraternity itself is a discontinuous passion. In truth, there only exist "moments" of fraternity. The protocols of representational legitimization attempt to render continuous what is not, to give disparate sequences a single name, such as the "great proletarian leader", or

the “great founder of artistic modernity”—names that are actually borrowed from fictional objectivities.

Doubtless the epic tale in which the century revelled had its dark underside: it also required false heroes (Badiou 2007, 109).

In *TIOI* it is suggested that Ghising and Pradhan were, in this sense, “false heroes,” as Lola’s meeting with Pradhan indicates, though a difference between the two leaders is established. Pradhan

looked like a bandit teddy bear, with a great beard and a bandana around his head, gold earrings. Lola didn’t know much about him, merely that he had been called the “maverick of Kalimpong” in the newspapers, renegade, fiery, unpredictable, a rebel, not a negotiator, who ran his wing of the GNLFF like a king his kingdom, a robber his band. He was wilder, people said, and angrier than Ghising, the leader of the Darjeeling wing, who was the better politician and whose men were now occupying the Gymkhana Club. Ghising’s résumé had appeared in the last *Indian Express* to get through the roadblocks: “Born on Manju tea estate; education, Singbuli tea estate; Ex-army Eighth Gorkha Rifles, action in Nagaland; actor in plays; author of prose works and poems [fifty-two books—could it be?]; bantamweight boxer; union man” (*TIOI* 242, square brackets in original).

When Lola complains to Pradhan about the appropriation of their land by GNLFF supporters, he declares “I am the raja of Kalimpong” and suggests she become his fifth queen (*TIOI* 244).

Another irony concerning the novel’s reception is that *TIOI* investigates literature’s potential (as well as writings in ethnography, history, etc.) to supply knowledge or obfuscate truth. Sai recognises her ignorance of the history of the region’s indigenous peoples on reading *My Vanishing Tribe* (*TIOI* 199). There is also reference to the processes of canonisation; the judge’s collection of leather-bound *National Geographics* and the Gymkhana library’s collection of newspapers serving the English-speaking community (*TIOI* 198). Along with books by James Herriot, Gerald Durrell (who grew up as a boy in the region) and on Paddington Bear, is *The Indian Gentleman’s Guide to Etiquette*, which advises Indians to “identify yourself with the race to which you belong,” and arouses a sudden rage in Sai reminiscent of Gyan’s: “A rush of anger surprised her. It was unwise to read old books; the fury they ignited wasn’t old; it was new. If she couldn’t get the pompous fart himself, she wanted to search out the descendants of H. Hardless and stab the life out of them” (*TIOI* 199). When the judge cajoles Gyan (calling him Charlie) into reciting a poem: “‘Tagore?’ he answered uncertainly, sure that was safe and respectable. [...] ‘Where the head is held high, Where knowledge is free, Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls. . . . Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let me

and my country awake.' Every schoolchild in India knew at least this" (*TIO* 109). This recitation is ironic on several levels; Gyan's own knowledge is not free (both in terms of his blinkered ethno-nationalist rage and his identity as a disenfranchised Gorkha) as he recites this prayerful plea by the canonised Bengali poet who propounds Indian nationalism.

The library in the Darjeeling Gymkhana Club (later symbolically taken over by the GNLF) houses, it seems, only English-language materials:

Of course they had *The Far Pavilions* and *The Raj Quartet*—but Lola, Noni, Sai, and Father Booty were unanimous in the opinion that they didn't like English writers writing about India; it turned the stomach; delirium and fever somehow went with temples and snakes and perverse romance, spilled blood, and miscarriage; it didn't correspond to the truth. English writers writing of England was what was nice: P.G. Wodehouse, Agatha Christie, countryside England where they remarked on the crocuses being early that year and best of all, the manor house novels. Reading them you felt as if you were watching those movies in the air-conditioned British council in Calcutta where Lola and Noni had often been taken as girls, the liquid violin music swimming you up the driveway; the door of the manor opening and a butler coming out with an umbrella, for, of course, it was always raining (*TIO* 198–199).

There is an exoticism implicitly enjoyed by these readers who, whilst rejecting colonialist representations of India, miss the irony of their taste for Englishness. The sisters' ignorance is grounded in their perception of the locale in latter-day Orientalist terms. Noni recognises their error: "The real place had evaded them. The two of them had been fools feeling they were doing something exciting just by occupying this picturesque cottage, by seducing themselves with those old travel books in the library [...] Exotic to whom? It was the center for the sisters, but they had never treated it as such" (*TIO* 247). Noni's choice of literature reflects her comparative interest in political matters: "a sad account of police brutality during the Naxalite movement by Mahashveta Devi, translated by Spivak who, she had recently read with interest in the *Indian Express*, was made cutting edge by a sari and combat boots wardrobe," and "a book by Amit Chaudhuri that contained a description of electricity failure in Calcutta that caused people across India to soften with communal nostalgia for power shortage" (*TIO* 218). But the seeming subaltern focus of these books is commuted through western eyes and the English language. Sai's shock on seeing the poverty of Gyan's home, her reluctant recognition of the cook's poverty contemptuously "exposed" (*TIO* 18) by the police who search his hut, is a true sighting of the subaltern perspective, not at a safe distance, but immediate to her own life.

At the end of the novel a more optimistic future is glimpsed as truth re-enters in the view of Kanchenjunga, which has shed its glow of "brazen

pornographic pink" (*TIOL* 223). Pink is a colour of shame, embarrassment or humiliation, of the lies and collusions leading to dispossession and violence: the judge's pink and white powder puff symbolises the shame of colonial servitude; the American green card is, "not even green. It roasted heavily, clumsily, pinkishly on [Biju's] brain day and night" (*TIOL* 190); a "pink, synthetic made-in-Taiwan" (*TIOL* 11) umbrella is left on Cho Oyu's veranda by the "[a]lways bad luck" police (*TIOL* 10); that the army, now "becoming a true Indian army" amid "rumors of increasing vegetarianism" paints its buildings "bridal pink" (*TIOL* 195), refers to the exclusionary politics of Hindu nationalism. But as Biju returns, entirely possessionless, to his father's embrace, "The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it" (*TIOL* 324). This must be read in the context of the volume of paintings by Roerich at Mon Ami (*TIOL* 44), Ray's *Kanchenjunga*, and the historical representation of the Himalayan peaks in general (Slemon 1998, 51). Exactly how this final vision of Kanchenjunga might translate into hope for the wider community of the Darjeeling hills is hard to see. In his review, Mishra comments on *TIOL*'s "unrelentingly bitter view," despite its humour:

But then, as Orhan Pamuk wrote soon after 9/11, people in the West are "scarcely aware of this overwhelming feeling of humiliation that is experienced by most of the world's population," which "neither magical realistic novels that endow poverty and foolishness with charm nor the exoticism of popular travel literature manages to fathom." This is the invisible emotional reality Desai uncovers as she describes the lives of people fated to experience modern life as a continuous affront to their notions of order, dignity and justice (Mishra 2006).

In the context of the inequities of contemporary globalisation and the returning spectre of ethno-nationalisms, it appears that only loss is finally illuminated as truth.

Questions of judgement and truth; Himalayan and metropolitan imaginings

It has been said that on Booker night, literary London is gripped by a "huge annual orgasm" (Saunders cited in *Booker* 30, 1998, 51). The prize propels a vast global marketing machine which lubricates the sale of certain cultural products, even as many of these products criticize the structures of such flows. Writers with postcolonial links today feature prominently in short-lists and among nominees. Though this indicates an engagement with themes of empire, one must be careful not to ascribe too much in the way of political import to this—nostalgia for imperial loss may also lurk within streams of current taste and literary trends.

One can hardly talk about aesthetic judgement without referring to Kant's *Critique of Judgement*.²⁰ Its stress on originality and the exemplary character of artistic production also provides the philosophical basis for judging prizes. *TIOI* does fall into a particular line as far as the history of the award goes—Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Roy's *The God of Small Things* belong to a distinct group of novels that thematise migrancy, identity, and globalisation—though the judges were keen to emphasise its originality.²¹ Rejecting neo-Kantian vocabulary as well as undifferentiated African criteria, Chidi Amuta argues that the normalisation of Western criteria in aesthetic judgement has persisted and that an aesthetic cognisant of heterogeneous literary production, reception, and evaluation is required (Amuta 1989). This, however, does not necessarily derail the Western literary imagination as the arbiter of taste. In *The Booker Prize and the Legacy of Empire*, Luke Strongman points out that we continue to use the same criteria for judging works that have swum into the horizon of the West, and that it is necessary to move beyond the paradigms that privilege the authority of the centre (Strongman 2002). Moreover, it is ironic that the Booker represents an authoritative judgement issued by the estate of Booker McConnell, which was involved in an imperial system of exploitation in Guyanese slaves and indentured labourers in sugar estates. It was with reference to this history that John Berger's famous acceptance speech, on winning the Booker prize in 1972, challenged the moral foundation of the award.²²

Following Pierre Bourdieu, whose notion of cultural capital contradicts the idea of disinterested universal models of judgement, one can argue that consecrated judges on prize-awarding committees serve ruling interests by recycling accepted tastes. Abiding by established conventions and decorum, they are priests anointing the chosen. The cultural preferences of the subaltern are naturally de-prioritised and excluded. The aesthetic values of the Bengali elite, a group which took over the colonial houses of the Kalimpong hillsides, resonate in many ways with metropolitan values. It is out of this history and Desai's perceived position that some of the local criticism of Desai's book can be seen to emanate.

As an ostensible critique of the excesses of globalisation, *TIOI* can be read as favouring a more liberal humane order in which labour is treated fairly, and in which the narrative of colonialism is interrupted by one of inclusive globalisation and justice for minorities, illegals and other migrants, as

20 While Kant's imperial cosmopolitanism has something to do with his formative relationship with the multicultural city of Königsberg, and even though the town of Kalimpong has historically lent itself to a differential, dialogic and polyvalent cosmopolitan vibrancy, this is, sadly, something paradoxically receding in its glocal moment. A vernacular *Kalimpongische Tischgesellschaft* (with many a च्या दोकान (tea-house), cafe, bar, चौतारी (stop or street corner) in the format of a wide, inclusive and argumentative Habermasian public sphere remains under threat.

21 Other Bookered imperial guilt and loss novels include Paul Scott's *Staying On* (1979) and J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973).

22 Postcolonial value served for consumption in a commercial system—and the role of the Booker—is an argument also made by Huggan (2001, 6–8).

well as the working classes. But in presenting its (liberal humanist) criticism of inequity and injustice it indulges in universalising tendencies. Whilst on one level it overturns the margin/centre dichotomy, the contrasting locales of the novel are conflated rather than held apart in productive, contrapuntal juxtaposition. The illegals of New York, for example, scurrying unseen about the city's kitchens, hiding from the authorities, and exploited by all, are figures of what Giorgio Agamben terms *homo sacer* (Agamben 1998). But an equivalence cannot but be unproblematically made between this vast population (and those queuing at embassies) and the expulsion of kindly Father Booty, who finds himself paperless in Kalimpong, though he too is exiled and faces dispossession. Interestingly, Sai's anger places blame for what she sees as the sacrifice of Booty, squarely on Gyan and "people like him" (*TIOL* 223). Nor can the history of the region's territorial upheavals be conflated with the situation of Biju and others in New York. The lack of historical specificity in the text compacts this problem. This is not a matter of accuracy, so much, as the way in which histories are presented all too briefly and through a forum of conflicting voices, which clash postmodernistically with all their various positions and prejudices. Such brevity gives a meagre sense of the complexity of issues and the depth of discrimination faced by certain ethnic groups and castes. It makes things easily consumable for the reader and does not hold with the novel's putatively implicit claim of realistically portraying a certain India (and one which overturns the exoticism of old imperialist narratives). The conflict in the Darjeeling hills becomes merely another narrative of the violence seen to tear apart the country, thus reflecting the cartographic anxieties of its central characters.

Ironically, then, the Gorkha voice is to a large degree lost or unheard. Whilst *TIOL* problematises precisely this deafness it might well—despite the strength of its criticism of the same discourses—seem a little closer to anthropological exercises of colonialist representation than is acknowledged by metropolitan audiences (though not due to all the reasons argued by enraged critics). *TIOL* can be read in one sense as an attempted ethnography of Kalimpong, with its portrayal of real locations, events, and even persons. But arguments about a wanting accuracy of description are superficial, easily repudiated by pointing to the fictive nature of the work, and serve to reinforce faith in notions of ethnographic truth and anthropological certainty inherited from colonial scientific discourses. While accusations of Desai being an unknowing outsider are merely the other side of the coin from the charge of being a native informant, this does not mean that Desai's position should remain unquestioned: Does Desai serve as an interlocutor between colonial subjects and knowledge? There are always pitfalls associated with vacillating between the privileges of global citizenship and claims to knowing a locality.

There is a case to be made that what are judged as successful postcolonial literature(s) and theory, with their overriding focus on migrancy, has clouded the subaltern perspective. Neil Lazarus, for example, has argued

that there has been a forgetting of Marxism within this field (Lazarus 1999, 13–14). The conflation of themes of migrancy, displacement, and hybridity in recent postcolonial literature—at least in many of the prize-winning books—might be considered symptomatic of this. There is a tendency by which a universalising liberal humanist rubric takes precedence over differences and historical specificities. Many celebrated texts indulge in such formulaic fantasies along a postcolonial trajectory (Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, Smith's *White Teeth*, Ali's *Brick Lane*), and many adopt a style of humour that arguably makes issues more easily digestible for metropolitan audiences. Such lists can be seen to establish a kind of continuity where, to return to Badiou on the “protocols of representational legitimization,” “In truth, there only exist ‘moments’ of fraternity.” In the canonisation of cultural products from within the rubric of the postcolonial, in the celebration and forging of a global “we” (the inclusivist strategy of liberal humanism), what gets deprioritised, all too easily, is the voice of the subaltern. What the bourgeoisie hears, when it listens, from a prized commodity is underlined by two even more recent celebrations. Despite (or paradoxically because of) its Dickensianism, *Slumdog Millionaire* succeeded at the awards precisely on account of the exaggerated feel-good factor (read: ideological numbness) it offers, where hope itself is commodified in a setting of appalling poverty. It has been argued that another Booker winner from the sub-continent, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, relies for its false verisimilitude on a non-existent quirky English that, in its attempt to articulate the small-town, Maithili or Bhojpuri-speaking Bihari subjectivity of its protagonist in a gritty globalised India, albeit one punctuated by black comedy, also remains appealingly exotic (Subhramanyam 2008).

The judgement and representation of aesthetic artefacts in metropolitan cultures, and their enshrinement through the procedures of canonisation, not only occludes their local nuances but serves to assert an ideological continuity stretching from earlier regimes of knowledge production. That local responses may, albeit unwittingly, corroborate such structures is testimony to their continued influence. Moreover, the ironies we have identified at play in the reception of Desai's novel and the novel itself, which can be and has been read as an ethnography of sorts, exposes the falsity of equivalence (i.e., a novel is a novel is a novel) upon which global capitalist cultures depend. Although this equivalence is usually established in money (as a sign of global equivalence), it is clear that aesthetic forms of semiosis and thus “meaning making” resist the hegemonic western assumptions—also inscribed in the universalising liberal humanist rhetoric of prize-giving bodies—concerning a global culture of easy cultural equivalence and exchange.

The issues we have addressed in this essay foreground the importance of revisiting questions of truth, representation and violence in the context of both global capitalist culture and, in general, in the formation of political collectivities. If Kalimpong invites us to “monstrate” and reflect, it is crucial to recall Badiou's articulation that “for a we-subject in the process of being

constituted—to demonstrate is to manifest itself. The being of the ‘we’ is displayed, but also exhausted, in the demonstration. There is great dialectical trust in this monstration. This is because the ‘we’ is ultimately nothing but the set of its demonstrations. In this sense, the real of the ‘we,’ which is the real as such, is accessible to each and every one in and by the demonstration” (Badiou 2007, 107–108). We have argued that Desai’s novel seeks to raise our awareness of issues of representative legitimacy whilst itself producing a problematic representation (or re-constitution of the we-subject) of the Gorkha movement. In the light of the arguments above, the discrepancy of *TJOL*’s reception in the local and metropolitan cultures unfolds ironically, and somewhat inevitably, as yet another violent inscription to be read alongside its own troubled narrative of truth and politics.

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