



## Listening to Voices. An Interview with Veena Das

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*The intersection of gender with issues of political violence and subjectivity formation is a crucial and critical site of thought both for feminist theory and for anthropology. It is through a plunge into the ordinary of everyday lives that Veena Das, across her masterly work, has thought the interlinking of gender and violence, as well as the potential modes of recovery for the subject who re-becomes. She has thereby brought to anthropology and gender theory attentiveness to lived experience that dislocates oppositions of victim/perpetrator and agency/oppression. And it is by acknowledging the subject as simultaneously powerful and vulnerable that her thought reveals the richness of the collective.*

*As a theoretician of contemporary anthropology and gender studies, as well as a magnificent ethnographer of India, Veena Das has reflected, among other matters, on violence, language and the state, social suffering, pain and modes of witnessing. She has articulated a deep reading of Wittgenstein with the interpellation of ancient and contemporary Sanskrit, Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali and Urdu philosophies. Above all, underlying Veena Das' work is a profound sensibility and acknowledgment of people's realities, as well as an unbendingly compassionate attention to the human voice.*

*Veena Das is Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Anthropology at the John Hopkins University. She serves on the Executive Board of the Institute of Socio-Economic Research on Development and Democracy in India. She has also taught at the University of Delhi and at the New School for Social Research. Among many other distinctions and awards, she is a honoris causa doctor of the University of Chicago. Some of her major works include Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary (2006), Violence and Subjectivity (2000), with Arthur Kleinman and Margaret Lock Social Suffering (1997), Critical Events: an Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India (1995) and Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia (1990).*

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*In Life and Words (2006), you wrote that our theoretical impulse is often to think of agency in terms of transgression, escaping the ordinary rather than plunging into it. Where does this theoretical reflex come from?*

**Veena Das:** There is a long history of thinking that ordinary life does not require work in order to be maintained, that it has the force of habit and that it will therefore go on sustaining itself. I think part of the challenge with regard to this manner of thinking about the ordinary is a methodological one, so it is argued that methodologically one can best detect agency at moments of resistance or at moments of transgression, because of the presumption that ordinary life just goes on into the kind of flux in which it is not obvious that the act of actual agency could be located. And my argument throughout has been to state that we need to think about agency in much more complex ways. I see everyday life as a kind of achievement, not just as part of habit. I also believe that there is a certain kind of heroic model of resistance, a romance of resistance. And the kind of work that needs to be done to maintain the everyday, and the ways in which the ordinary and the extraordinary are braided together in our ordinary lives are theoretically much more difficult to understand. Throughout very extraordinary moments, all kinds of ordinary things have to continue to be done. And it seems to me that, very often, it is at this junction that we lose interest in what is at stake. By underlining that resistance can be romanticized, I do not mean that the notion of resistance is never to be appreciated, or that it never plays any role. But I want to think of moments of resistance as also integrated and carried forward into ordinary life.

*Do you think that the category of agency understood in opposition to notions of oppression or determination or victimhood is still pertinent for feminist thought?*

**Veena Das:** I think it is a much more complex category which, among others things, points towards the question of the place of the impersonal in the making of social life. We are often suspicious of metaphors of the impersonal. *Life and Words*, for instance in its chapter on rumour, tries to show the power of the impersonal. The rumours, I say, exert a kind of field of force in which people get drawn into acting in certain ways. I am increasingly interested in thinking about the impersonal, because so much of our experience, for example of modern warfare, is entangled in an on-going, chronic type of

violence in which it becomes very difficult to separate the victims and the perpetrators. Everybody gets implicated in some ways. Sometimes acts which are moral acts, might have been performed by people who otherwise you might not think of as embodying moral virtue. And conversely, ordinary people could be drawn into performing atrocities. It becomes problematical to hold onto our conventional categories of presuming that we can distinguish between the ethical or the moral person versus the unethical person. That is why I am very interested in conceptualizing agency in much more complex ways. In many situations you cannot decipher which particular individual has this specific responsibility because it is the coming together of various forces that produces a particular action. Furthermore, if you reflect on the opposite of agency, you can find notions of patience and of passion, two instances where you allow things to happen to you but that are not to be equated with passivity. So in that sense, it seems to me that we are called upon to think about these issues in more subtle ways than as a simple notion of resistance to oppression. First and foremost to identify what is oppression is extremely hard. To give you an example, I know that to identify something like slavery as immoral or unethical will not require a lot of thought today: it seems self-evident that we cannot readily consent to slavery. Whereas we do consent to things like, let us say, eating meat. But, if I begin to acknowledge those who take issues of animal suffering seriously, then it seems to me that I cannot that easily dismiss the fact that I have not given as much thought to certain categories of the ethical because I live in an environment in which it is considered normal to eat meat. If I start to take seriously those who consider animal suffering to be unbearable, just as earlier some people at least found slave suffering to be unbearable, then I have to cultivate humility about even naming and identifying what would constitute oppression, or violence. It does not mean that I am paralyzed, but it is to say that we perform our political actions with full understanding of fallibility and nuance.

*Continuing on the idea of the complexity of oppression, you recount in *Life and Words* the story of a woman named Shanti, who you say is a woman occupying a patriarchal discourse. Can you talk more about what you mean by “occupation by women of a patriarchal discourse”?*

**Veena Das:** Let us take the specific example you quote. Shanti was a woman whose sons had been killed, but who had two daughters in whom she could not bring herself to invest any kind of emotion. Now, I could have stated generally that the situation illustrated patriarchy. However, I would thereby have forgotten that other women behaved differently in the same social world, that other women had tried to awaken Shanti's concern for her daughters, that some women form a different relationship to the question of what is it to be a woman in a patriarchal society than other women. It seemed to me that there was a certain power, of an almost hallucinatory quality, in Shanti's mental prison. And the others contributed to fix her in it rather than allowing her to break free from it. That is why I started to consider anew my presumption about the person who is speaking to me. Very often, we indicate in a simplistic way: *This* is the voice of women, or *this* is the voice of the victim. But sometimes some more powerful voice may be speaking through, like in ventriloquism. I remember once talking to a woman who was trying to tell me something about an event, and as she told her story, she would consciously correct herself and say “No, no it was like this, like this.” Then she realized that she had no memory of the event itself, because her story had been so overwritten by her husband's interruptions of what had actually happened, that she could not get to her own memory of it. Such a situation points to the

complexity of issues like intimacy and violence. In understanding domestic violence, for example, it is difficult to grasp what happens when violence is also part of the intimacy and is not named as violence – from a woman who endures her husband’s slapping her to sadomasochism. I want to be attentive to the difficulties of these kinds of situations, without being completely paralyzed by them. And, the only way I can do that is by zooming in on the work of time, because if one puts forward one’s view in the world, even if it’s fallible, then other voices will join, either to correct or to amplify, or to revise one’s view. I find a great solace in the notion of the collective, which is not to say that I allow the collective to completely dominate my voice, but I cannot think about finding my voice without imagining what it is to find my voice in company of others.

*Does the work of time blur the separateness between oneself and the other?*

**Veena Das:** It both blurs it and allows me to revisit the question again and again: when and how do I recognize this voice to be mine? It is not simply a question emanating from some egoistic or completely individualistic notion. Recognizing a person’s voice means recognizing the separateness of a person even in the scene of belonging.

*So can we uphold notions of “women’s voice” or of “feminine voice”?*

**Veena Das:** I tend to think that there are feminine regions of the self, which could reside both in men and in women. Just as I also think that our comprehension of the human has to be posed in relationship to the inhuman or the non-human. The important questions for me are: what is it to sense myself as animal? Or, what is it to sense myself as man? What is it to sense myself as woman? Or what is it to sense myself as machine? So I would say it is not automatically given that woman’s voice comes from a person who is inhabiting the body of a woman, because it has more to do with the experience of being a woman, and experience does not speak directly, it is often eluding. The question of woman’s voice is on one hand a question of one’s relation to oneself and on the other hand an historical one. For me, feminism is important because it made certain possibilities available. We can never take for granted that some words are women’s; voice is never given, but it has to be made possible

*What is the role of the body in the formation of the voice?*

**Veena Das:** That is really an interesting question. For me, issues of language, or issues of scepticism, which are very important in my notion of everyday life, are extremely gendered kinds of questions. They are not completely determined biologically, but there is a sense in which language absorbs the body just as the body absorbs language. We do not know the limits of what it is that being woman means, or being man means. It is not a given-ness in that sense. But I would not be able to imagine a form of life that is not embedded in corporeality. So, for one thing, my body makes me vulnerable in certain ways. Just as the fact that I am a speaking animal makes me vulnerable to language in ways in which my dog is not vulnerable to language. I think some people would say it is the fact of corporeality that connects me as a human to the inhuman, let us say to the animal. For me, it is not just the fact that there is a creaturely existence which connects us together, but that there is a way in

which the body is a repository of all these, the sense of it being a machine, the sense of it being an animal, the sense of it being woman, the sense of it being man. Then, this is not infinitely flexible. What aspects become incorporated into my sense of being in the world? I think the place of the body both as a question of vulnerability and of possibility. Vulnerability is very important in relation to corporeality. Not just that it destroys the idea of the sovereignty of the self, which for me is extremely important. But the facts that I am vulnerable to illness, that I am vulnerable to falling in love, that I am vulnerable to the idea of my death, and also that I have to live with the death of others, are all facts of corporeality, of me being a bodily being among other bodily beings. And also, the idea of the relationship between life and non-life is very important. There is not a vertical sense of discerning human life from something that is non-human. The being-machine is one instance of non-life embedded in my experience; that I could become machine-like or mechanical is a bodily experience for me. It is not just that I have sceptic thoughts that make me intellectually wonder "what if I were a machine?", it is about a deep embodied experience of myself becoming mechanical in certain situations, producing machine-like reactions, which I fear.

*From this proximity of life and non-life, do you think that women, especially through violence, are placed outside of what it is to be human?*

**Veena Das:** No, I actually do not. That is a very representational view, or view confined to representations. Sometimes, yes, you could imagine scenes of utter violence, in which the hatred of women is so strong that they are then placed as if they were outside life itself. I remember the novel *Stepford Wives*, in which husbands wanted such perfect wives that it was easier to deal with robot wives. I can imagine *that* as a scene of utter violence. Or of course Nazi camps, in which the whole appearance of totally mechanized forms of killing also created the person as bare life, but almost as what it would mean to sustain it as machine for extracting labour. But in most contexts, whatever the representations might be, experience also disrupts representations. There is something very specific about how one person comes to be in a particular position. The work is to show the precise processes at play, rather than presuming that representation automatically produces itself or actualizes in a predetermined manner.

*In Life and Words (2006) and in the article Trauma and Testimony (2003), you show how the everyday, the experience of ordinary life is a space to which we should look to recognize violence, but also a space in which persons who have lived shattering violence can re-become subjects – I don't want to use heal. Can you talk more about your thoughts on "trauma" as representation?*

**Veena Das:** I am somewhat critical of the trauma model at least as it now functions as a too readily available concept. I try to think beyond the idea of scenes of trauma as pure scenes of repression and of the unspeakability of pain. I try to see how pain is written into everyday life. In fact, I defined healing in a very strange way in these texts. The notion of healing carried two ideas: the idea of endurance, and the idea of the capacity to establish a particular relationship to death. Now, that is a very strange way of defining healing, but it really came from my very long experience of working with people who I did not start by thinking or choosing because they were the subjects of violence. But I was very struck by the ways in which pain does write itself enduringly on people's lives. It was not about a thunderous voice of pain, but about the

manners in which pain was woven into the patterns of life. So for me, being attentive to acknowledgment in relationship to pain is not a question of locating broken lives and healed ones. It is about learning to recognize both the pain, and the way that pain enduringly writes a person's relationships, and yet, remaining open to the possibility of an adjacent self, if you will, of a self coming into being. And the second idea through which I understand healing is the ability to imagine a relationship to death. In very ordinary situations. Like someone being terrified of the idea of dying in the hands of a crowd, and then learning to think that dying of illness would be a privilege, which is slowly learning to accept the possibility of normal death. These ideas are far more complicated than the application of a trauma grid. And they come from the most ordinary of people whose ways of living life have impressed on me and my work. You know, I think that ordinary people in the simple process of living their lives come to form very deep reflections on *how* they live their lives. They may not have the philosophical language, but in a certain sense it seems to me that there ought to be no distance between a true philosophy and discerning the way in which people live their lives, how they try to learn how they might inhabit worlds that are given to us with all the signs of destruction they have endured.

*So what is then the place of the political?*

**Veena Das:** That is a difficult question for me. I have always had difficulty in articulating it, because for me the political is not set apart, it is closely related to the way in which one's being in the world is engaged. Of course, you have to deal with overtly political institutions such as the State, or engage in what we recognize as political action. What strikes me as very interesting in the struggles of extremely poor people with whom I often work is not that the locus of morality lies in some kind of rigidly moral individuals, but that very ordinary individuals in their ordinary acts manage to produce specific newness, precise possibilities, for instance in struggles over a particular piece of housing. Politics become the arena in which a lot of people can engage in actions of claiming for themselves particular forms of dwelling in the world. And on another field, politics becomes a question of ways in which I can express my devotion to the world, in which I belong to the collective world. Personally my devotion to the world is expressed in two activities: Very strongly in my relationship to my students, which I hold very precious and which is about detecting what forms of desire can be nourished in them. And, second, in the research that I do, which are really about a certain form of co-evalness with the people who I feel much more grounded with. I understand the political through these questions: what are the ways that the world claims you? And how do you respond to this kind of claim, from the position that you are in? For example, I have been working a lot on people who live in un-authorized colonies in Delhi. They are always under danger of being evicted, because of course from one perspective they are occupying land illegally. And yet, there is a certain manner in which they can call upon the state, and make moral claims upon the state. And the state, even though it can be oppressive, does not simply rough shod over their claims. But people have to do work in order for the state to recognize them. And it is again fascinating to see how such a situation works through micro-actions coming together to create certain forms of citizenship which would not be evident from the perspective of some high theory. We need to theorize the political to acknowledge what people manage to affirm for themselves with regard to ordinary things, a house, a ration card, admission to the local school for a child.

*Sydney Cavell (1996) wrote that such recognition, understanding and compassion for people seems to be at the root of your reading of Wittgenstein, of your interpellation of his work?*

**Veena Das:** Absolutely. You know it is a very strange relationship. On the one hand Wittgenstein does not seem such an odd philosopher from where I come from, because the questions that grip him also appear in my reading of Indian philosophy though they might be articulated in the context of ritual or mythology. Questions Wittgenstein asks are actually questions that other people have asked in different forms. Each of his scenes of instruction for example, I can produce from ritual Indian texts, for instance on the necessity to know the pain of the being of sacrifice. On the other hand, the other reason I call upon Wittgenstein is because it seems to me that people in their lives articulate his questions. It is not a theoretical claim; I just let it be shown in my work. People are *living* certain philosophical questions, however different the languages in which these are thought. Can I really look inside another person? How will I ever know the pain of the other? Am I entitled to know it? That is how Wittgenstein has spoken to me. I discovered Wittgenstein when I was probably thirteen or fourteen, and not that it made any great sense to me then, but I just loved his language at that time. It made sense. The other question then is that maybe our modern world makes it seem as if philosophy could only be done by certain professors. In the actual world, people are thinking philosophically all the time.

*Why did you choose the angle of pain and suffering?*

**Veena Das:** There are two reasons: one is that I was led to it because of the literary, mythological and ancient texts I have read, and the other is because of the type of work we do in anthropology, which is always a certain form of response to a scene of danger...

*Is that how you see anthropology?*

**Veena Das:** Oh certainly, I think that I could write the history of anthropology by looking at how it always comes into being in certain scenes of collapse. If you read Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), there is this wonderful moment toward the end when he says: "Yet, I exist". And Claude Lévi-Strauss, who is this fantastically interesting French philosopher, argues that in some way Lévi-Strauss's scene is a re-creation of the theatrical scene of Descartes saying "I exist." But Lévi-Strauss' statement of "Yet, I exist" is interesting because the scene is not that of a dream, but of a nightmare. I am trying to think on writing on that: anthropology has its pleasures, but it is written in scenes of danger as a certain form of talk, a certain way of being able to talk, from some place where there is a risk of precisely having to claim this "Yet, I exist." So of course there is an intellectual part to it, but there is also something I would define as spiritual, without any moralistic tone. I would not say the only way to do anthropology is to study suffering, but I am saying that there is a sense in which anthropology was often called to explain, let us say, behaviours which were considered to be irrational, outside the domain of rational civilization, etc. And in some ways, the success of anthropology often comes when it refuses that particular role. For example, Talal Asad in *Suicide Bombing* (2007) claims not to tell us why suicide bombers commit suicide bombing, but to explain to us why we are so fascinated with the phenomenon. It is an oblique reflection on our times.

*You work at the limits of language, of pain, of violence, of life itself. What is it that you see better from the human at these limits?*

**Veena Das:** Certainly, I work on the limits of the world in which I am. Any kind of production of knowledge must recognize something of a limit. Even when I do ethnography, I know that I am not being able to see and describe everything. So there is that basic sense of the limit, and then there is the sense of the limit in relationship to experience. I never have full knowledge of the basis on which I act. I am *moved* to accept certain of my actions – which does not rule away the obligation to see where may I be wrong, where is potential fallibility, where is it legitimate to ask questions about fallibility and fact, and when is it that those questions become ways of evading others. The limits of one's world can never be predicted, one has to arrive at them. There is a very nice picture of the limit in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) when he writes about how we justify following a rule: *If I have exhausted the justification, I have reached bedrock and my spade is turned, Then I am inclined to say 'This is simply what I do.'*(§ 217). My task is not to somehow break open the silence, but to work among, within it. Within the scene of *My Spade is Turned*. I actually just did a paper where I tried to show how Levinas' notion of "infinite responsibility" (1981) is very problematic for me, because it can be articulated only within a particular theological Judaic, not even Christian probably, point of view. But the idea has also a lure to it. My paper is about how, as new medical technologies become available, the imagining of the body as infinitely repairable actually puts tremendous pressure on the poor, because some forms of treatments become theoretically available, but are never going to be really available in their world – they exist only as an idealised end. Yet this possibility exerts pressure – so the poor in search of these cures are more and more indebted. The argument is that understanding that my responsibility to you cannot be infinite, because there is a certain violence, it appears to me, in this idea of infinite responsibility, but also that accepting the limits imposed on us by the world becomes a way of accepting our finitude. Now, it is not a formula, as it could be use in bad faith to decline any responsibility. So the main question becomes, really, what is it that one can both acknowledge as one's responsibility to the other, while recognizing the separateness of the other and the limits of one's powers.

*How does this critique of infinite responsibility intersect ideas of care as surveillance and control?*

**Veena Das:** By itself, by nature, care is diffused. You cannot start by defining what its particular limits are; you must discover them. Because otherwise you can imagine a nightmare scene, in which my claims to care for you become my way of actually refusing your separateness, your flesh and blooded character, your otherness.

*Can you speak more on the notion of the witness in relation to your idea of care?*

**Veena Das:** Obviously the notion of witness is very widespread. It is used in trauma discourse, it is used in humanitarian psychiatry, but I rather understand the specific forms and meanings in which it stems from particular contexts. One of these forms is the conception of women as those who are able to witness the harms that have been done, notably through mourning. There are famous genres of mourning. And mourning is not taken in a

pathological sense, but in the sense of presuming that a person, a woman, is building life already on some harms. Not by escaping, but by assimilating the violence and weaving your life in it. This view of the witness is different from the notion of witnessing and martyrdom in Christianity; it is different from the notion of witnessing as moments of great history-making (as in the Shi'a notion of *shahada*). The form of witnessing I am speaking about has a specific genealogy within the particular local world in which it comes into being. It is not just in the "local world", because such a notion of witnessing is very present in the Hindu classical texts. And in some ways it is also a concept of embodiment of events or violence; in the sense that "the witness" becomes able to let the events inhere in her. Memory is not at the level of representation, but at the level of a particular gesture with which you inhabit the world.

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