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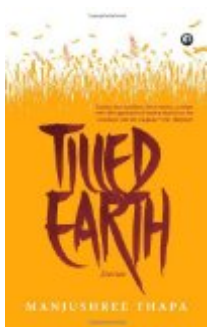
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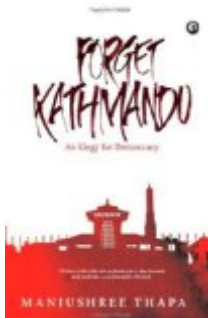
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An Interview with Manjushree Thapa



Blame it on family, on the country-of-residence-at-the-moment, on the tumultuous politics of her motherland of Nepal, but certainly Manjushree Thapa has lived a life in flux, repeatedly adjusting to unpredictability. Born in Kathmandu, she moved as a toddler to Canada (young enough to acquire English as her first language), then back to Nepal through middle school. She went to high school in Washington, DC; college in Providence, Rhode Island; and graduate school in Seattle, Washington. For now, she again calls Canada home -- albeit only part of the time -- as she regularly commutes between Toronto and Kathmandu.



Thapa's artistic life, too, has gone through substantial development: her initial interest as a teenager in visual art eventually led her to earn a photography degree at RISD, the Rhode Island School of Design. But when she returned to Nepal after graduation in 1989, Thapa found that her artistic pursuit limited her to "exclusive social circles," and she wanted broader engagement. Her life-long love of literature led her gradually to her own writing, which she did in between working for various NGOs in rural Nepal -- employment she considered more "socially useful." She began with nonfiction, discovering her activist voice and capturing the injustices she witnessed as a part of her everyday life in Nepal. She turned to fiction to make sense of the tragedies from which she could not turn away. And then she headed stateside to the University of Washington for her MFA in 1996 to further hone her art -- Fulbright Scholarship in hand -- to study with such established mentors as Shawn Wong ([American Knees](#), [Homebase](#)), David Shields ([Reality Hunger: A Manifesto](#)), and Maya Sonenberg ([Voices from the Blue Hotel](#)).

She's been living a global writer's life ever since. Over the last two decades, she's published four nonfiction and three fiction titles. She's also written countless pieces for newspapers and

magazines worldwide including the usual high-profile suspects, *The New York Times*, *London Review of Books*, *Hindustan Times*, and so many more. In addition to her own words, she gives voice to other Nepali writers through literary translations -- yes, she's fluent in Nepali, as well as proficient in French and Hindi.



Thapa's newer publications include a short story collection, [*Tilled Earth*](#), and a novel, [*Seasons of Flight*](#). Her latest nonfiction is a collection of essays on Nepal's Maoist insurgency and peace process, [*The Lives We Have Lost*](#). She's also translated the works of forty-nine fellow Nepali writers in [*The Country Is Yours: Contemporary Nepali Literature*](#).

Last month, Thapa curated "Nepal's Many Voices" for the highly regarded international literature webzine, *Words Without Borders*. She was clearly the obvious choice as she is without parallel among Nepali women writers, even as she is both the leading voice among and outspoken champion of contemporary Nepali literature. As such, perhaps Thapa's most recent high-profile literary endeavor was not on the page, but on celluloid, as she wrote the Nepal segment of the highly successful film *Girl Rising*, which debuted last year. The centerpiece for a global campaign of the same name focusing on girls' education, *Girl Rising* the film features nine girls from around the world, whose stories were written by world-renowned writers with intimate links to their respective countries, with segments narrated by Hollywood royalty including Meryl Streep, Alicia Keys, Anne Hathaway, and Cate Blanchett. For Nepal, Thapa's "girl rising" was Suma, who was sold into slavery as a young child, and survived; she sings hauntingly of her experiences with strength and inspiration.

I caught up with Thapa just as she was returning to Toronto via the Adirondacks -- "the colors are changing; it's spectacular!" -- from Ithaca, New York where she spoke at Cornell University about her novel-in-progress, titled *All of Us in Our Own Lives*, and "Imagining Interdependence." She's awirl with movement once again, heading back to Kathmandu for a month or more... here, there, everywhere.

With all the world-wandering you've done, your travel schedule never seems to hit a lull. How do you divide your time between Nepal and the West?

I moved to Toronto a few years ago but have kept my ties to Kathmandu as well. My parents are retired and live in Nepal. My partner is from Toronto. His family is Canadian.

I've always written about Nepal from Nepal. Some writers find it helpful to write about their country from elsewhere, from a distance. I'm not one of them; I find being there creatively inspiring. I get back to Nepal once or twice a year for long stretches, which is very important to me. And, of course, time with my family is a priority. I find my connection to Nepal -- to keep that up, to *not* write from a great distance about Nepal -- very important. I feel really rooted in Nepal, even though I spend half the year away. Nepal is where my heart is.

So is Nepal home?

Nepal is home. Toronto has been kind to me, but it's not home yet; it's where I'm living right now. I've had a very mixed upbringing -- when I was acquiring language, we lived in Canada, then Nepal. I'm very much a hybrid, rooted in Nepal but influenced by international displacement. That was a painful way to grow up, but now I'm really glad to have had exposure to both east and west. What is interesting now is that so many Nepalis have migrated west. The conversations I have with my compatriots in Toronto could easily be taking place in Kathmandu. Nepal is one of those countries where everyone is traveling and living elsewhere for a while. Nepali identity is very transnational right now.

Since your life directly affects your writing, could you talk a bit about your process, especially working in multiple genres?

I find I'm doing more and more research now. When I first started writing, I did as most writers are told: write about what you know. But that proved limited for me, because I'm interested in so many things that I don't

know much about. So I find myself doing more research for my fiction.

As for the process, it varies with different genres. If I'm writing a novel, I'll take about four to six months to produce a first draft, and then another three years -- if I'm lucky -- to revise and turn it into a book. The process can also take four or five years if I'm working on other things at the same time.

Short stories are more spontaneous for me. I really miss writing them; I haven't written any since *Tilled Earth*. My next book -- after the current novel I'm working on -- will be a collection of short stories. Sometimes, research is still involved when I write stories. For example, in *Tilled Earth* I have a story called "The Buddha in the Earth-Touching Posture," which takes place in Lumbini, in southern Nepal, where the Buddha is believed to have been born. The area is like a Buddhist theme park, filled with international monasteries -- and it's in the middle of Nepal's Muslim heartland. I researched that story in order to write it. In general, though, my stories tend to be more spontaneous, written from what I've observed and lived through.

Essays -- nonfiction -- are easier than fiction for me. The process is more straightforward; I know exactly what I'm writing about, I do the necessary research and interviews, then pull everything together. There isn't the same level of imaginative work involved. For me, fiction is the deeper, more internal, harder work. Since every novel takes three or four years, it's a really involved process. Nonfiction is a lighter experience.

And yet your nonfiction deals with extremely difficult, often violent, experiences in Nepal that you've had to face your entire life. When and how did writing become a way for you to process what you experienced?

Nepal's first democracy movement took place in 1950, but democracy lasted only a decade. The second democracy movement took place in 1990. I had just come back to Nepal after college; I was twenty-one. I was at the start of my professional life. Suddenly Nepal, which had had an absolute monarchy, had a parliamentary democracy. It was an exciting time to live through, and this was why I decided to live there after college. The country was transforming so fast. It was very compelling to witness the changes.

But before long, things were going badly. The Maoist insurgency began in 1996. I was in my mid-twenties then. At first I didn't know what the insurgency was about. I knew about the Communist movement in Nepal, but didn't realize how militant it could be. Then, June 1, 2001, after Nepal's crown prince killed nine members of the royal family and himself, the army got involved in the counterinsurgency, and that's what politicized me. With the Army's involvement, the war escalated and human rights atrocities skyrocketed.

A few years later, I got a small grant to write reportage on the war. I went to Suma [character in *Girl Rising*]'s area to do so. The Maoists had a very strong presence there, as well as the army. A lot of people from there were killed and disappeared. The army thought that the Tharu [Suma and her family are Tharu] were blanket Maoist supporters. One of the stories I reported there was about a twelve-year-old girl, Rupa Tharu [no relation to Suma], who the army killed; they thought she was a Maoist, so they came to her village, took her out of her home, and shot her point blank. I met her grieving parents. It was a very dirty war on both sides; but that killing has been impossible for me to get over.

So if you are Nepali, do you have to declare a "side"? Can you ever be neutral?

Yes, you can be neutral. There are people, particularly in the towns and cities, who are totally apolitical and uninvolved. That was harder during the Maoist insurgency, because the war intervened in people's daily lives. You couldn't just go about your own business; the war always got in the way. But for now, because the peace process is going on, it's possible to disengage and have your little life...

As a writer, too, it's possible to be neutral, though I choose not to be. In many parts of the world, there is a strong tradition of engaged writers, writers standing witness and speaking out, which is not so much the case in the U.S. This is a strong literary tradition in South Asia. That's the tradition I'm in.

As a part of that tradition, you've given voice to forty-nine of your fellow writers as a translator, making

their work accessible to English readers! How different is your translating life from your own writing? Is your own creative process influenced by others' voices?

I love, love, love translating, and want to do even more of it in the future. When I started out as a young writer, it helped me develop my own voice to learn how to translate Nepali literature into English. It helped me find the language of Nepali experience in English. Translating is something that I'd recommend all bi- or multicultural writers to do. New creative worlds open up in between languages.

Let's talk a bit more about Suma.

Suma is Tharu, an indigenous nationality in Nepal, whose people have long been exploited as bonded laborers, almost like slaves. All *kamlari* [girls who are indentured as domestic servants] are Tharu. This is part of a traditional system of bondage specific to Tharu families in western Nepal who can't afford to support themselves. Even though the practice of bonding adults has ended, children are still indentured as servants; richer families of other castes or nationalities, and richer Tharu families as well, still continue to make children work in their homes. In general, girls tend to be bonded more often than boys, who are valued more by their families. Suma's parents were bonded as children and later as adults. Suma has four brothers and two sisters; only her youngest sibling -- a brother -- has not been through the experience of bondage.

As you spent more time with Suma, what was she like one-on-one? How did your relationship evolve?

Interestingly, I met Suma in New York, when she came for the Women in the World summit, in March 2012. We had a good amount of informal time together, over chats and meals and also more structured interviews. What struck me most about her is that the voice she has in her *kamlari* song -- a really poignant voice -- is the same voice she has when she speaks. She's very articulate.

When Suma arrived in New York she was all eyes, soaking everything in. She would ask so many questions. She was never afraid to ask about anything. She was sharp, too. Her observations were very revealing to me. For example, when we were backstage together at Women in the World for her first performance, at Lincoln Center, Suma noticed an African American woman speaker and she asked me why the woman was so dark for an American. So I told her a bit about the history of African Americans in the U.S. She nodded, "Yes, I've seen a lot of the darker people doing the smaller work." Given her own past as a *kamlari*, seeing this empowered African American woman -- who was obviously very accomplished -- clearly resonated with her. I found her so impressive. Here she was, so far from her daily life, and yet she was picking up the complexities of her new surroundings. Every day she would make all these observations, store them away to think about, and then come back to you with important questions.

When she talked about her own experience as a *kamlari* -- she uses the term "slavery" when she talks about it -- her turns of phrase were always very interesting. We were walking down a street one day and passed someone out walking a dog. In Nepal, it's rare to see a dog on a leash: most dogs run free. Suma visibly winced, and said, "You know, that's what I felt like when I was a *kamlari*... like that dog on a leash."

You mentioned the wonder of experiencing the Women in the World summit through Suma's eyes. Can you talk about that a little more?

It was fascinating to see her experience from backstage. She had performed in front of village audiences, and at rallies against the *kamlari* experience, but she'd never done anything close to the level of what she was about to do: to perform at the legendary Lincoln Center to a sold-out audience of some of the most powerful people -- especially the women -- from around the world. And yet she was completely poised.

I think it actually helped that she didn't fully understand the milieu she was in; Lincoln Center meant nothing particular to her -- it was just a performance hall in America. She knew that the people she was meeting were important, but had no scale by which to measure their importance. From her point-of-view, she was simply meeting these really nice, warm Americans who just happened to be Tina Brown, Hillary Clinton, Chelsea Clinton, and Meryl Streep. Diane von Furstenberg came over to her to compliment her Tharu dress!

Later, Suma told me that she was a bit nervous before her first performance, but she certainly showed no signs of it on stage. She had such presence on stage. She was very pleased with herself after the performance. She came over and hugged me, and just went back to being her normal self. By the end of her final performance on her last day, after she had been told repeatedly that she had done so well -- by the likes of Hillary, Chelsea, Meryl -- it finally began to sink in that maybe she had done something extraordinary. Otherwise, her performance at the Lincoln Center might as well have been any other village performance... she took it all in stride.

Since the making of *Girl Rising*, the *kamlaris* of western Nepal have launched a movement to get the government to end this practice of slavery. Suma, and many of the other former *kamlaris* whom I met while writing for this film, participated in the movement. They came to the streets of Kathmandu, and suffered police brutality, to have their voices heard. And they -- who had liberated themselves from slavery in the village -- got the government to declare the practice of *kamlari* illegal. It was very inspiring.

You're currently working on a novel that focuses on the lives of NGO workers in Kathmandu, titled *All of Us in Our Own Lives*. Might you please share a bit more about this work in progress?

I worked, early on, for NGOs in rural Nepal, and I've tapped into some of that experience for *All of Us in Our Own Lives*. I've set the story in all the different levels of the aid world in Nepal. It isn't a novel about aid, however. A novel is always, in the end, about personal quests -- so all four protagonists are on quests of their own and their lives intersect in a village where all the funding has been concentrated on a certain project.

As a part-time insider, how would you describe the foreign aid presence in Nepal?

Aid is a huge industry in Nepal. Working in the industry is one of the best jobs you can get if you're well educated, and aid often supplants the private sector in Nepal. There's a lot of money, and power, in this sector. And it's almost entirely unaccountable, to the citizens of Nepal, or to the citizens of donor countries. A lot of good has come from aid, but there has been a lot of misuse as well.

How effective is western aid?

After the democracy movement of 1990, Nepal experienced a real shift in international aid -- from providing services to focusing on rights. This rights-based approach nicely matched the process of democratization and with people's desire for empowerment. For example, in terms of caste discrimination, lots of NGOs used to build water taps in the villages, but if these villages had a population of a so-called "untouchable" caste, they wouldn't be able to use the tap. So instead of just building a water tap, NGOs used a rights-based approach to first change social attitudes. Then, when they built a water tap, everyone could use it. Without this sort of rights-based approach, aid isn't always effective.

And, this is important because more than sixty percent of Nepal's economy relies on international aid. It's important that money not just be thrown around and misspent.

Having been involved with *Girl Rising*, what are some of the direct effects of education you've seen?

Nepal's education has a big divide between the public and private systems. The public system requires a lot of improvement; and so, over the last ten to fifteen years, people who can afford a private education for their children have taken that option. The quality of the private schools is generally much better: for one, students acquire English, which is almost impossible in the government schools, and knowing English opens up the world. The quality of education in public schools is poor.

Do you think girls are getting an equal education?

Families do increasingly send their daughters to school, but if their funds are limited, the boys will be sent to private schools while the girls will go to public schools. The girls now outnumber the boys in public schools in many areas. On the surface this seems impressive, but if you look at the numbers for just the boys, you will see

much higher numbers in the private schools. So discrimination still exists. But there's an awareness that girls belong in schools, and that's a huge change.

The democracy movement of 1990 -- and even the war -- unleashed many social moments: movements for women's rights and the end of caste discrimination, movements for indigenous rights, movements for the rights of regions that had been neglected, labor rights, and gay and lesbian rights. This has been an era of civil rights movements. Suddenly there was a huge sense of people wanting their rights, and *knowing* that they should have their rights. Attitudes have really changed. Girls *want* to go to school and their parents *want* them to go to school. A lot of work remains to turn that desire into reality. But at least the desire is there now.

What are the most gaping gender differences today?

Although attitudes have changed hugely since 1990, the practice of discrimination still begins in the home, within the family. From birth on, there's a difference in what girls and boys are fed, how they're clothed, and how they're treated. The expectation of girls and boys remains very different. Prescribed gender roles are also embedded in cultural practices -- in subtle things like the role women have during festivals, for example. There is also a more overt sanctioning of discrimination. To take one small example, in the Hindu tradition, menstruating women are still considered unclean, and are segregated. So discrimination against girls starts at an intimate level, and it often comes cloaked as love. A family might arrange a really good marriage for their daughter because being married well will secure her future, but that's a very different from showing your love of your daughter by sending her to college.

It's a complicated situation. Some communities -- Nepal has more than a hundred nationalities and identity groups -- are more egalitarian than others. Women in the culturally Tibetan communities along the north, for example, are freer than the Hindu communities in the hills and plains. But even there, men tend to dominate. Every community has its own set of beliefs and customs, and you can't generalize between urban and rural, either. There is a lot of discrimination in the cities; professional women such as journalists and lawyers and those in business have to put up with intense misogyny. Discrimination is part of everyday reality for all of us. Exclusion is the norm, unfortunately.

Terry Hong writes [BookDragon](#), a book blog for the [Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center](#).




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