



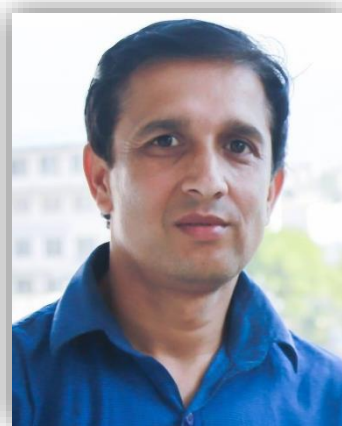
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**Book Review**

## **Book Review: 'Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy'**

### **Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy**

by **Manjushree Thapa**, 2005, Penguin Books. 260 pages. ISBN 0-67-005812-2.



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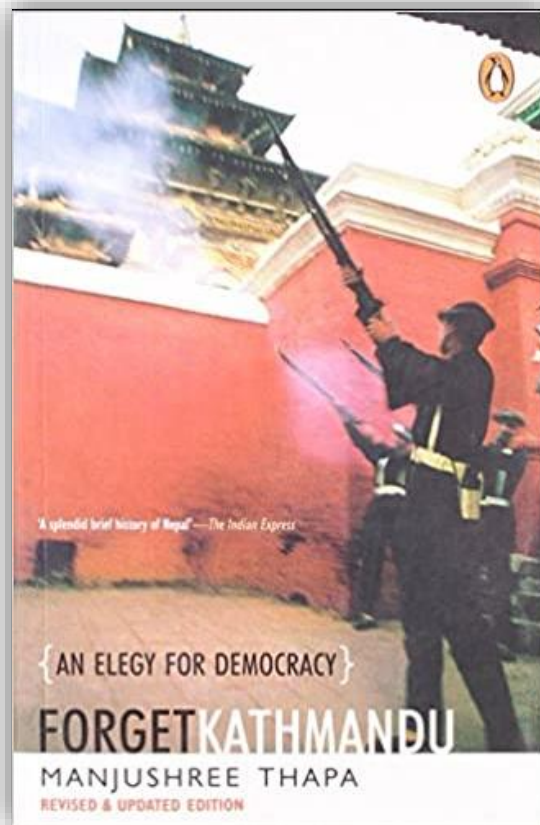
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During pandemic and panic situation of COVID19, I was locked down at a rented flat in Lalitpur. Very quiet streets and unremarkable movement of people created a kind of gloomy atmosphere in Kathmandu. On one of the locked down days, I liked to re-read “*Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy*” of Manju Shree Thapa. It was a similar panic situation to that of the Royal Massacre and people’s war. Everyone on social media appeared with their black jokes on the government and federal democracy. Though the rhetoric of democracy has become more sophisticated and complex in contemporary Nepal as the Federal Republic, similar elegy was audible among the ordinary citizens. To escape from the fear of Corona, I could not forget Kathmandu because it is the part of my everyday life. Kathmandu was like a crab which grabbed me for my livelihood and profession. Therefore, I could not leave this place running out to escape from COVID 19. Instead planning to stay with “*Forget Kathmandu*” which I read a decade ago. I picked up and started reviewing the book in the current Federal Republic Nepal.

Manjushree Thapa’s *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy* is



a narration of the author’s personal experience of present socio- political scenario of Nepal which was traced from the historical background of Shah dynasty. I thought that Thapa has been influenced by the postmodern perspective which departed the traditional way of telling history. She seemed to be an archaeologist who presented bits and pieces of stories of Democracy in many places of Nepal in a reflective way. Foucault (1984)

described archaeologist as the bricoleur who knitted the quilts of history from the common events and experience of the people. Akin to this, Thapa articulated democracy in well fabricated events in the history of Nepal. In doing so, the author rediscovered the struggles, local and specific knowledge against the historical facts. Her furnace of the history of Nepal with the personal experiences can raise the chances of multiple interpretations on the major events of the history of Nepal which lead towards the elegy of democracy of Nepal.

The concept 'elegy' for me is modernist where people usually lament on the loss such as democracy and some other heritage. Let me give an example of a famous American Poet Whitman's (1865) "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" which describes the loss of Lincoln in American society where people found themselves without a leader. An 'elegy' does not stand for an individual mourning but for the demise of democracy. It is, therefore, the collective perception of Nepali people instead of the very personal experiences of the author. Elegy is a funeral song sung on a death of an individual not for democracy or any political assumption. In an elegy on democracy, Manjushree

Thapa does not clearly mention the time when the democracy in Nepal was born. I, therefore, come to conclusion that democracy in Nepal died before its birth after reading *Forget Kathmandu*. Thapa sometimes urges the shared public voices of Nepal detaching with mainstream interpretation of history as if she is assimilating the voice of common people creating a different history as an archaeologist.

There are seven chapters and a few photographs associated with the themes of each chapter in *Forget Kathmandu*. A map of Nepal is also presented in the beginning of the book which assists readers to get a clear idea of the locations in Nepal.

The First Chapter, *Introduction: Reading Nepal*, gives common glimpses of Nepal during the royal massacre of Narayanhiti Palace to the Maoist Insurgency. Politics in Nepal is interwoven with uncertainties and chaos. Common people as well as educated, even like the author herself, could not understand and predict the Nepali politics at that moment. However, great potentialities of Nepal like Shangri-La and Mount Everest are doomed by political instabilities. Absolute monarchy and extreme Maoism were growing up and the

mainstream political parties CPN (UML) and Nepali Congress lost much ground in the politics. People were highly suffering from extreme left and extreme right. The country continued its downward journey, special became of Maoist insurgency and local elections could not be held for years (p. 3).

The Second Chapter “Dipendra did not do it” showed the collective consciousness of people. She presented herself as a structuralist to sympathize Dipendra. “The coup that did not happen” shows the great public insight and opinion on the royal massacre. She explores the common opinion and social value system of Nepalese people who strongly believed the King as the reincarnated God and his son cannot take such inhuman step against his own family. She gives the true picture of the media which helps to cover the news of the royal massacre independently to inform that people were in a crucial state and cannot cover the news of royal massacre. The first was the BBC’s unconfirmed reports after eleven hours of the massacre that declared King Birendra and his family members died. It was hardly believed that Dipendra led the royal massacre. The news spread fiercely in national and international territories, but government, the Royal

Palace and the Royal State Council did not address the massacre.

The interpretation of the massacre is described in the “Fatalist and Conspiracy Theorists” under the second subtitle of the second chapter. Thapa analyses the Nepalese psychology and reaches the conclusion that some people believed in astrology soothsayers and palm reading interpreted as fatalist whereas who understand Nepali politics and its history interpreted the royal massacre on the basis of the conspiracy theories because the whole history of Nepal is led from conspiracy right from the beginning of its modern history. It seemed that Thapa was influenced by Bista (1991) to claim Nepali politics has been guided by the fatalism and development.

“We don’t need a murder king”, the next subtitle clearly shows the collective unconsciousness of people agitating against King Gyanendra who was appointed as the king of Nepal. Crowds are seen in the street raising voice against King Gyanendra and very irrational preventive steps were taken from the government like blackout, telephones cut off leading to the undemocratic realm of the ruling government. “The politics of the spectacle” narrates the archaeological history written from the

government with the formation of three-man investigation committee to find the ins and outs of the murder of King Birendra seemed so ridiculous for people. At the same time, a press statement of the Maoist indirectly charged King Gyanendra to be the murderer of the whole family of Birendra. Collective sympathy of people towards King Birendra led the nation in the state of further uncertainties. Moreover, the government was gradually becoming more tyrannical after it had issued the ordinance to control the agitated groups of people in the name of national unity. The media were also restricted to publish news and opinions freely. Similarly, "And the Truth Eludes" explains the 200 pages report which claimed that Prince Dipendra was the murderer of his own family with automatic machines showing discontent with his family member regarding his love affair. These all events are, however, hardly believed by the common people.

The Third Chapter "History Exhibits" illuminates the historical reception to understand the broader critical climate of Nepalese history which shows that the historical records of Nepal which were loosely recorded and all the events of history were responsible to trace out the

present situation of Nepal as Manjushree Thapa said truth has been lost many times to speculation and easily be lost again (p. 51). She is haunted by the massacre and thus wanted to know the history of Nepal but was not satisfied with the history written in the textbooks. So, she visited the National History Museum in Chhauni, Kathmandu to get something which is not written in the books of history "as New Historicists, like Tilyard, try to establish the interconnections between the literature and general culture of a period" (Seldon, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2005, p. 181). The recent line of Shah Dynasty coming down from Prithivinarayan Shah accomplishing their own interest rather than devoted to the people shows power relations in history. So, her attempts to focus on the local and discontinuous knowledge against the claims of a unitary body of the history establishes a new historical knowledge of struggle. She presented caste and class conflict as Thakuri sub-caste of Chhetri, a warrior caste but the reality was more treacherous (p. 58). "The Age of Regent Queens" shows the situation of Nepal under the rule of queens Rajendralaxmi, Tripuradevi and Rajyalaxmi and they helped to keep the lineage of Shah Dynasty. These queens were empowered by the power and still not freed from the

male domination and could not challenge the patriarchal structure of the society.

The Fourth Chapter “The Wind and Haze” clearly depicts Nepal under the Rana Regime. It was the time of so-called construction avenue road, building, telephone and other physical infrastructure were built certain newspaper were published, schools were opened, civil and political organizations were established and raised the voice against Ranas a short of bourgeoisies’ revolution was started in Nepal which might be the effects of the WWII. “The Haze” portraits that the so-called democracy was established under the Bahun caste domination in political power. “The Monarch Takes a Stab at Democracy” shows King Mahendra and his steps to coup democracy and to establish the Panchayat system almost two years after the royal coup with a new constitution. “The State of Schizophrenia” describes how all political parties were banned and they started to campaign against the Panchayati System which was rooted down after the public revolution during King Birendra’s rule. All these historical facts show that the great kings of Nepal would have been ridiculous figures and responsible for bringing the elegy of democracy in Nepal.

The Fifth Chapter “Post Modern Democracy” began in Nepal where election, parliament, democratic government and other democratic norms were made in the paper, but the socio economically underprivileged communities never felt democracy. Government and state could not address the problem of the common people and, at the same time, the royal massacre and Maoist insurgency took place and the civil war began in the post-modern democracy. “Those in Kathmandu were mimicking MTV VJs, and those in the villages were joining Maoist” (p. 153) is a clear depiction of different upbringings of civilization in Nepal. Like Lyotard (1984) defined, postmodern keeps on going. Redefined democracy has been going on in Nepal however more chaotic, more complex and more sophisticated in paper but not in practice.

“The Massacre to Come” or the Sixth Chapter shows the instable situation of Nepal arisen with the Maoist activities in remote part of Nepal from Dailekh to Manma and the terrible situation of villagers under the two governments ruling together. This chapter is like a travel writing describing various statuses of geo physical structures of hilly region of Nepal, where the author herself assimilates with the situation. Many

Nepalese youth became typical comrades and showed great passion for reforming Nepal, especially from remote parts of Nepal.

The Seventh Chapter deals with Gynendra's initiation of taking responsibility to handle the situation which failed to address the basic needs of people and freedom they want ultimately led towards the undemocratic nation. Similarly, the "Unfinished revolution" started in Nepal with the restoration of the parliament and a new government was established. Currently, such voices are very common against the Oli Government (Nepal Communist Party has been ruling Nepal since the legislative election of 2017 during pandemic situation of Nepal in 2020).

I remember the crowd of youths who shaved their heads showing great respect to King Birendra, rallied on motorbikes in the streets of Kathmandu Valley and my grandfather was shocked at the news who had the great faith on the monarchy. So, I have asked myself many times either the democracy of Nepal will be restored or not even though the politicians are enjoying the taste of Federal Republic whereas the Terai and Madhes are in the flame of agitation demanding their rights as Thapa

describes in the "Unfinished Revolution" where the people were dying from epidemics of diarrhoea. It would be a big deal to fight against the pandemic like Corona which challenged the so-called most democratic country in the world and socialist countries of Europe. Hopefully, it should not compel one to lament on the loss of democracy in the pandemic situation.

I am influenced by the rhetoric of Thapa who links the present and past of Nepal through breaking the grand narratives of the past and creating the background for plural interpretations of the present through 'clear and vigorous prose' with reportage and analysis of covering the contemporary issues of Nepal.

## Disclosure Statement

The author declares that no potential conflict of interest exists.

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