



Where Destiny Commands: 1939-1945: A Time of Love & War

Leila Sen

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In the historical novel Where Destiny Commands, a couple makes personal sacrifices to nurse their splendid passion for each other.

Based on family lore, Leila Sen's historical novel *Where Destiny Commands* follows a marriage that was born amid war.

After her parents die, a woman finds a box of their mementos. This prompts her to find out how her parents met. The novel assumes a panoramic view to encompass their tale, covering World Wars I and II, the Armenian genocide, the British Raj, and the British Indian Army. In this historical milieu, Santi, an East Bengali surgeon in Calcutta, joins the army's Indian Medical Service in 1940; he later becomes a medical officer with the famed Gurkha Rifles battalion. As part of his service, he travels to Iraq, Syria, and North Africa; the book details these experiences in informative, if discursive, ways.

Santi's story converges with Hedeya's; she's a mother and a teacher whose family fled Turkey for Cairo, and the novel covers the brutalities that her Armenian family endured in rending terms. Such sections mix with lighter capers featuring her children, as with the tale of a mishap at the cinema. But the intervals between Hedeya's sections are long, and the language around her stories is too opulent at times.

The book progresses at an unhurried pace. When Santi at last meets Hedeya, their encounters are weighted by their collective experiences. They are nonetheless hopeful about their future, even after Santi departs for war. Throughout their extended separation, there's a sense that their love is inextricable from the realities of the wider world. Indeed, the prose takes a fateful tone to generate its momentum. Black-and-white photographs complement the couple's story, which lingers over their letters, as well as over isolated but colorful anecdotes about their family members. Musings on faith, intergenerational dedication, food, and culture are included as the couple's families band together through their suffering.

To establish its historical settings further, the Raj's waning years are filtered through considerations of Santi's place among British people. His sense of patriotism is tempered by his prudence and his conflicted feelings about living between two worlds: he is Indian but also united with the British against a mutual enemy. The novel is also thorough when it comes to its World War II descriptions, as with exchanges aboard the Gurkha Rifles' ship and regarding battles across the Middle East. More distant wartime events are also covered to flesh out people's senses of duty. The novel is appended by the reflections of the couple's daughter, who was inspired to fictionalize their story.

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KAREN RIGBY (November 30, 2022)

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