

**BOOK REVIEWS**

*The Tutor of History* by Manjushree Thapa. Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2001. 442pp.

*Arresting God in Kathmandu* by Samrat Upadhyay. Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Mariner Original, 2001. 191pp.

Reviewed by Sarah LeVine

In her acknowledgements Manjushree Thapa assures us that although Khaireni Tar, a town on the Kathmandu-Pokhara highway in western Nepal and the setting of her first novel, *The Tutor of History*, actually exists, the community she portrays is "entirely fictional". Be that as it may, Ms Thapa describes the town and the people who live there with such skill, so charmingly, and in such minutely observed detail that her fictional universe rapidly becomes our reality. The focus of the novel is a parliamentary election campaign conducted by the People's Party of Nepal, a "small inconsequential party of disgruntled intellectuals" whose modest goal is to be included in a national coalition government. Rishi Parajuli, the tutor of history of the title, is a native of Khaireni Tar who, as a student before the revolution of 1990, belonged to an underground communist party and was once jailed for participating in a pro-democracy demonstration. Now, with his activist days only a distant memory, he "flounders" in Kathmandu where, by tutoring recalcitrant adolescents for their School Leaving Certificate exams, "he earns what he can in a city that begrudges opportunities to migrants like him." He is aware that "in his birth village he had a fuller identity—he was so-and-so's grandson, son-and-so's son, a member of a select caste and class—but in Kathmandu he [is] anonymous, a slip of a man like all the others, a shadow moving against a wall and disappearing when the sky [clouds] over." After an absence of twelve years, he sometimes thinks about returning to Khaireni Tar, a "good place" in which "each house has an archeology of its own". But, knowing he would have to face "the accusation of his father and reproach of his mother, the tenacious orthodoxy of village society, he [can] neither move backward nor...spring forward." Then one evening in the diner where he customarily takes his meals, he encounters the schoolmaster who, many years earlier, led him, as an idealistic schoolboy, into underground politics. Recruited by his old mentor as an "undercover agent" for the United Marxist-Leninist Party, Rishi goes back to his home district to work on the People's Party campaign. His mandate is to "split the vote", that is, to secure the defeat of the National Congress Party, the UML's principal adversary, by creating an illusion of popular grassroots support and thereby pulling NC voters away to the People's Party.

But although Ms Thapa offers a powerful critique of grass-roots electoral politics in Nepal, for her, this is a side issue. Her main concern is with personal transformation. In Khaireni Tar, the headquarters of Tanahun District, "a rich humanity" awaits us. "In fact there [is] so much humanity it [is] a challenge to attend to each individual life." Ms Thapa faces this challenge most successfully. She has us engage with half-a-dozen major and dozens of minor characters many of whose lives are changed irrevocably by the election campaign of Nayan Raj Dahal, the People's Party candidate. As a star of the 1970s silver screen, Nayan Raj Dahal once portrayed the revolutionary hero of the hit movie *Ma Mānche Hun*; in the 1990s he retains his movie-star looks—including his jet-black hair—and is at once grandiloquent, reassuringly self-controlled, reflective, and compassionate. For the duration of the campaign he lodges with his sister-in-law, Binita, the widow of his brother, a professor, with whom, as a seventeen-year-old college student, Binita eloped. Rejected by her natal family and, following his death in an accident, ignored by her husband's, she is "a lone woman, still young... a woman unloosened from the custody of men" who has "tried to ward off critical voices by subduing herself." Until the advent of Nayan Raj, she has been running a teashop and living a threadbare life with her little daughter Tripti and orphaned teenage cousin sister, the lovely Sani. Giridhar Adhikari, district chairman of the People's Party, ex-bank manager and drunkard, feels "weighted down by his lurid materiality, the crusty dried saliva of his self". For him, the advent of Nayan Raj provides—at least for a while—a redemption. His closest friend, Om Gurung, former Rifleman of the British Gurkha's Second Regiment whose "face [is] wide and radiant and always poised for laughter", returned from Hong Kong determined to better his own town; now, having poured his life savings into the English-medium Pure Hearts Boarding School which he envisioned as having "standards as high as any school in Kathmandu", he divides his time between attending to his financially disastrous investment and, to his wife's despair, responding generously to claims on his attention and resources made by all and sundry in Khaireni Tar. Jummawal-baaje, former revenue collector, founding member of the People's Party, husband of two, father of many; Chiranjibi Joshi, highly successful building contractor of anti-capitalistic persuasions; Shankar, blind shopkeeper and conspirator; Phool Devi, Binita's intrusive neighbour; Harsha Khadka, Sani's rejected suitor, with his "look of distressed rapture"—these and many other deftly drawn characters, from every social level from rich Bahun to Dalit sharecropper entangled in debt, crowd into Ms Thapa's tale.

Inevitably, Ms Thapa's Khaireni Tar and her *Tutor of History* bring R.K. Narayan's Malgudi and his *Painter of Signs* to mind. Both authors are entranced by 'their' towns and, with humour, affection, and marvelously discriminating detail, succeed in entrancing their readers. Both, having

drawn us into these circumscribed worlds, manage to convince us that we know the attachments, ambitions, and shifting moods of everyone in the community almost as well as they do. We become intimately familiar with the houses their characters live in, the gardens and fields they cultivate, the market stalls where they buy their vegetables, the trees in whose shade they rest, the views of distant hills they see as they walk down the streets and through the lanes. And both authors are unusually wise. But whereas R.K. Narayan was middle-aged when his Malgudi stories were first published and, for all the acclaim he received, remained an Indian writer with traditional concerns and sensibilities, Manjushree Thapa, who is still a young woman, combines a deep knowledge of her culture with an entirely modern perspective. Again, although English is not her first language, her deep pleasure in it is fully evident. Given this triumph, what will she write next?

From a paragraph on the back cover of *Arresting God in Kathmandu* we learn that Samrat Upadhyay, the author of this collection of stories, was born and raised in Nepal and came to the United States at the age of twenty-one. The move, at such a young age, may have been his loss if not his undoing. In any event, he seems to have lost touch with his native land; or perhaps, he left it before ever getting to know it very well. Although the stories are peppered with references to well-known spots in Kathmandu—temples, palaces, ponds, parks—he seems to place them strategically, as a non-Nepalese would do, in order to provide ‘context’, to persuade the reader that he’s ‘grounded’ and knows whereof he speaks. Of these nine stories, an illicit sexual relationship provides the focus of all but one. A married man loses his accountancy job and, as he idles away his time in a city park, encounters a female house servant, also married, with whom he has a loveless affair. A self-absorbed business consultant whose artist wife has left him, has an affair (loveless on his part, passionate on hers) with his efficient but strikingly unattractive secretary. Physically impaired Rukmini, rejected by her new hard-drinking husband, engineers a sexual encounter with her widower father-in-law. A pregnant college student hides from prying eyes in her parents’ home and, after her son is born, marries a retarded homeless man with whom, to her mother’s shock and envy, she finds full sexual satisfaction. The brazen young wife of an ailing guru parades her lovers through her husband’s house, thereby arousing the shameful desire of his faithful servant. Aditya, who has stopped making love to Shobha, the wife whom his dying mother insisted he marry, becomes obsessed with a gay actor. Kanti, a single woman, has a flagrantly public affair with Jaya, an aristocratic playboy, also single, whom she first met in America when she was getting her Master’s degree in economics at New York University. When he loses interest in her, she is initially crushed but then, emancipated as she is, returns to America to get a PhD at Duke

University. As her plane takes off from Kathmandu, she imagines herself in North Carolina, “cupping snow in her palm and crunching it to feel its texture, or walking across the campus with new friends and professors, or looking into a mirror and seeing new shadows on her face”, back in complaisant control of her destiny.

The implication in all these stories is that rapid social change consumes everyone with *angst* and expressing *angst* through illicit or at least irregular sexual encounters has become normative in urban Nepal, just as it is in the Western world which Mr Upadhyay has inhabited his entire adult life. In one story we learn how the protagonist first fell in love with his American wife: he “found her charming, although she was like many of the Nepal-crazy foreigners he knew, people who lived in the country in a romantic haze, love-struck by the mountain beauty and simple charms of the people, but grossly naïve about their suffering.” One wonders whether Mr Upadhyay too, might be “grossly naïve” about his countrymen’s suffering. Understandably, as a fiction writer, he may have decided that problems of poverty and corruption at every level, a totally inept government, and a widespread and enduring guerilla war, lie outside his range. Instead, he will focus on personal issues. But why is his focus so narrowly defined? Nepalese domestic life, like domestic life anywhere, provides a wealth of material even a little of which would have filled out these stories to good effect. As it is, there are few references to the characters’ caste, education, or even their families. We have only the sketchiest notion of where they come from and are given little reason to care where they might go. They often act impulsively and if the author has insight into their dynamics, he doesn’t share it with us. Why does Bandana-ji disappear in ‘Deepak Misra’s Secretary’? Only because the story has gone on long enough? Why, in ‘The Limping Bride’, does Rukmani sexually service her father-in-law? Only because the author wants to surprise the reader? If his intentions are more complex he does not give us the wherewithal to grasp them. Perhaps he supplies so few details out of a fear that they would bore the Western reader; or perhaps, having lived so long outside his native land, he can no longer bring them to mind.