

Depiction of India in the Fictional Works of Samrat Upadhyay and Manjushree Thapa

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Abstract

Samrat Upadhyay and Manjushree Thapa, both are highly regarded South-Asian authors from Nepal, writing in English. Presently, both are writing about their homeland, Nepal and its society from the outside. While depicting the several aspects of the Himalayan nation, Nepal, simultaneously, both the writers have depicted India and its socio-cultural heritage in their stories and novels. The aim of this research paper is to explore the depiction of 'India' and 'Indian-ness' in the fictional works of Nepali writers, Manjushree Thapa and Samrat Upadhyay. This paper further explores the correlation between India and Nepal. The signs of actual literary awakening in Nepal, can be traced through a number of important initiatives taken by the contemporary Nepalese governments irrespective of their forms i.e. an absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy or democracy. Periodicals, like Sundari (established in 1906), Madhavi (1908), Gorkhali (1916), and the Nepali Sahitya Sammelan Patrika (Nepali Literature Association Journal, 1932), which were published from Nepali communities in India played a crucial role in the development of Nepali literature during the first twenty to thirty years of the century. Indeed, Balkrishna Sama is quoted as once having said, "What Darjeeling thinks today, Nepal thinks tomorrow" [Giri & Pariyar, 1977.p.5] (Hutt, 2007.p.8).

Keywords: Monarchy, Constitutional Monarchy, Himalayan nation, Indianness, Gorkhali

Samrat Upadhyay is a writer who lives in one world and writes about another. With the publication of his first, widely acclaimed story collection, Arresting God In Kathmandu, in 2001, Upadhyay became the first Nepali-born fiction writer writing in English to be published in the west. Presently, he teaches creative writing at the University of Indiana in Bloomington and writes novels and short stories about teachers, tutors, mid-level bureaucrats, adulterers and survivors of the Maoist-Royalist civil war in Nepal. The New York Times recently placed him in the same firmament of South Asian writers as Mohsin Hamid, Kiran Desai, Monica Ali, Arundhati Roy and Siddhartha Mukherjee (Hirschfield, an interview with the author, June 24, 2014. online). Another highly-respected Nepalese female author writing in English, Manjushree Thapa was born in Kathmandu in 1968. Her

first book, Mustang Bhot in Fragments, was a travelogue to then restricted areas along the Nepal-Tibet border was published in Nepal in 1992. Thapa's first novel, The Tutor of History was published in 2001 (Penguin Books India). It is the first major novel in English emerged from Nepal. She divides her time in Toronto and Kathmandu. Presently, Thapa is living in Toronto-where she now makes her home half the time as she is now a permanent resident of Canada.

The signs of actual literary awakening in Nepal, can be traced through a number of important initiatives taken by the contemporary Nepalese governments irrespective of their forms i.e. an absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy or democracy. A tradition of formal journalism was established in 1901 when the Rana ruler Deva Shamsher, who seems comparatively liberal, established Gorkhapatra (Gorkha Paper). This newspaper is the official organ of the Nepalese government, and during the first thirty years of its existence it was the only periodical publication to be produced within the kingdom. Thus it provided a much-needed platform for the publication of poems, stories, and articles. During the tenure of next Rana ruler, Chandra Shamsher (1901-1929), Gorkha (later Nepali) Bhasha Prakashini Samiti (Gorkha Language Publication Committee) is established in 1913.

Until the 1930s, some Nepalese poets and writers who wished to escape the over-bearing censorship of their work had to publish, and even live in Indian cities mostly in Banaras and Darjeeling. Periodicals, like Sundari (established in 1906), Madhavi (1908), Gorkhali (1916), and the Nepali Sahitya Sammelan Patrika (Nepali Literature Association Journal, 1932), which were published from Nepali communities in India played a crucial role in the development of Nepali literature during the first twenty to thirty years of the century. Indeed, Balkrishna Sama is quoted as once having said, "What Darjeeling thinks today, Nepal thinks tomorrow" [Giri & Pariyar, 1977.p.5] (Hutt 8).

It is quite interesting, to note here that to escape from the bitter realities of their failed married-life, Upadhyay's characters have a typical tendency to turn to listen the Indian music, particularly the ghazals by Jagjit and Chitra

Singh, the famous husband-and-wife singers of India. Here are some ghazals, which Deepak Misra, a character from his first story-collection, *Arresting God* in Kathmandu, prefers to listen during his most frustrated and miserable conditions and moments, while facing his failed marriage:

If separated after meeting, we won't sleep at night.
 Thinking of each other, we'll cry at night.
 This night I have to stay awake till dawn:
 My fate is etched like this.
 Sorrow has entered my heart.
 Stars, why don't you fall asleep?
 (Upadhyay 2014. pp.51-55)

Such a brilliant and an appropriate use of references from Indian Classical music and ghazals by a Nepali author in his short fiction, strongly highlights the emotional significance of 'Music' and 'Art' in a troubled, disturbed human-relationship of the society. At the same time, it also points out the correlation and similarities between the Indian and Nepalese social mentality and realities.

The readers may also find many features in the story, *This World* which reveals the impact of Indian culture and art. It seems that Upadhyay was attracted very much by Indian artists, Indian way of living and Indian heritage. As Upadhyay was admitted in *The Books Interview*, "I have traveled extensively in northern India; studied in Bombay for a year in the early eighties; and now frequently visit Kolkata as my sister lives there. I grew up on a steady diet of Hindi movies, and I think sometimes my stories have undercurrents of the dramas of Hindi movies of yore. Nepali and Indian cultures are quite similar, with similarities in food and Hindu rituals and festivals." (*The Books Interview*, an email interview posted by Chandras on Saturday, May 06, 2006 at 1:02 AM) Upadhyay's deeply rooted connectedness with Indian society and culture can be highlighted through the following extracts from the story, *This World* where Upadhyay frequently uses Indian context for the setting of his story:

Kanti spent two weeks in India. First, she went to Delhi, visited the Taj Mahal in nearby Agra. She thought of Emperor Shaha Jehan, grief-stricken by the death of his beloved queen and wanting to create a grand tomb, which, legend said, engaged the skills of twenty thousand craftsmen for more than twenty years. Kanti sat in the garden by the oblong pool that reflected the tomb. But the dust and the dry, scratchy heat of Agra soon made her want to leave, so she took a train to Bombay. (Upadhyay, 2014. p. 152)

Again, Upadhyay mentions about the world-famous,

beautiful 'Banarasi saris' embroidered with golden thread, one of the famous Indian costumes worn by Kanti for the preparation of bride-viewing ritual. The author's attraction for Indian Hindi movies and Bollywood-stars can be seen here when he writes: "Before he could continue, Prakash said, "Is it a master's in economics you have?" his voice was deep and guttural, like that of Amitabh Bacchan, the Hindi movie star." (Upadhyay, 2014. pp.154-155)

The social interconnections between Nepal and India are underlined in the book *Mad Country* in the story entitled 'What Will Happen to the Sharma family'. Where the Sharma family's trip from Nepal to Bombay didn't go well because the Royal Nepal Airlines' plane started acting funny after half an hour-a strange sound chocked the left wing, and the plane began to hiccup-so they had to land in Patna. As an acute observer of the social scene, Upadhyay's humorous and sarcastic way of commenting upon the various aspects of the human nature and human psyche is exactly traced here, as he writes about the activities of the Sharma family when they were travelling by plane on the next day from Patana to Bombay.

Significantly, the issue of Nepalese National Pride, the historical truth about Nepal, that it was never colonized by the British, and the cultural dispute between India and Nepal over the authenticity of Buddha's birthplace, is directly reflected in the last story of *Mad Country* as Upadhyay writes:

'I'm not from India. I'm from Nepal.' Biks pointed a stern finger at Jacob. 'Don't ever, ever call a Nepali man Indian. We were never colonized by the British.'

'No kidding!'

'And don't ever tell a Nepali man that Buddha was born in India. Unless you want to be lynched.'(244).

In the last story of *Arresting God* in Kathmandu, the act of yoga and meditation performed by Kailash-ji, signifies that how anyone, who is facing depression and grave problems in his life can sustain with the help of spirituality. This can also be considered as the strongest indicator of how Hinduism and Hindu spirituality are portrayed in Upadhyay's fiction. The extreme similarities between Nepalese way of life and Indian lifestyle can be understood through this extract. The author has also pointed out the universal significance of the great Indian tradition of practicing meditation and yoga and its relevance in modern Nepalese society.

In her story-book *Tilled Earth*, Thapa reveals a typical Nepali social tradition which resembles with the Indian

tradition to greet each-other in the evening, as she writes: "When the sky darken and halogen lights switch-on of their own accord, he hears old men and women greet each- other anew as per custom, as though a new day has begun, and indeed it always seems to have." (47).

The neighbouring countries, India and Nepal share open border. As Nimisha Jaiswal, a fellow of the International Reporting Project, rightly observes, "However, agreements between Kathmandu and New Delhi have translated into 1,751 km of open border where citizens of both countries do not require a passport, visa or work permit to cross over." She again adds, "Every day, 4,000 people cross over from Nepal to India at Rupaidiha." (Jaiswal, "Magazine: Reporting" The Hindu, Sunday, April 9, 2017 p.3.Mumbai.).

In *The Guru of Love*, while narrating the love-triangle between Ramchandra, his wife Goma and his pretty young tutee, Malati, the writer directly reveals the political relations between Nepal and India to set a background for his narrative. Landlocked Nepal's crucial dependence on its neighbor country, India, for its increasing demand of fuel and petroleum products since 1974 (The Hindu, Tuesday, March 28, 2017.p.11.Mumbai), is realistically portrayed in the novel, as Upadhyay writes about the public outcry over India's frequent decisions to stop its petroleum supply and to close its border to Nepal. As a result, the common Nepalese were facing the shortage of Kerosene in their homeland when their national festival, Dashain was approaching. (Upadhyay, p.18). How the routine social life of Nepalese people was frequently affected by the twist and turns in Nepal's diplomatic relations with its powerful neighbour, India, is also underlined in the novel. This is how the novel reflects an outcry in Nepalese society: "Well, Dashain is here, and people have a lot of cooking to do. All donkeys, these politicians. This hahakar, this chaos, just because our king and the Indian prime minister couldn't stand each other's egos" (Upadhyay, p.18)

How Nepalese society was being suffered from the changing diplomatic relations between Nepal and India, and how the decisions of Indian government regarding Nepal, remained dominant for Nepal and its society, is fictionalized by the writer so practically that it radiates the realism in Upadhyay's *The Guru of Love*. As it is depicted here:

Whether there was any truth to that, Ramchandra didn't know. Rumors had it that contest of one-upmanship between King Birendra and the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had led India to close most of its borders to Nepal. Supposedly each felt the other hadn't shown him

enough respect at political meetings. But most likely, Ramchandra thought, India was unhappy with King Birendra's purchase of military hardware from china, not to mention the way Nepal now required Indian workers to obtain permits. (Upadhyay, 2013.p.19)

The fictional depiction of such intense, complex diplomatic relations between Nepal and India, during the rule of then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, seems so real that it can be authenticated by the 'Editorial' column of *The Indian Express*, which reads, "In 1989, then PM Rajiv Gandhi blockaded Nepal after its government decided to build a second highway to China and purchase munitions from Beijing. His blockade devastated Nepal, and brought down its monarchy. The blockade, though, also had unintended consequences: It entrenched public suspicion of India and Nepal's leader, aware of the fate of Birendra, became even more energetic in their pursuit of access to China." (The Indian Express, December 23, 2015.p.10)

The frequent blockades imposed by India had resulted continuous shortages of fuels and other difficulties for Nepal and its people. It also triggered the feeling of suspicion and anger against India and its government, in the society of Nepal. That's why most of the times Indians were ridiculed by addressing them as "dhotis" in Nepal. As Upadhyay points out, " 'Dhotis,' the three-wheeler driver cursed, spitting out his window onto the pavement. 'They'll suck this country dry.'" he continues, "Housewives lining up to buy kerosene cursed Rajiv Gandhi, and motorists fumed and blamed the Indians, "dhoti bhais," while they sat in their cars waiting to be granted the ration of a few liters of petrol" (Upadhyay, 19). Such an extreme dependence of Nepalese society on the Indian society and their interconnections, irrespective of their temporary suspicion and anger for each other, are exactly justified by Prashant Jha, a Kathmandu born Indian journalist. As Jha observes when he recalls his childhood memories of Nepal:

He asked, 'Jha pani Kathmandu ko huncha? [Can a Jha hail from Kathmandu]. 'He is Indian.' The other immediately chimed in, 'Euta aru dhoti aayo. [One more dhoti has arrived.] (...) I smiled weakly, not knowing what either dhoti or maade meant... I joined the other in calling those with Indian-sounding surnames-Bararias, Agrawals, Mishras, Chowdhurys-dhotis, which I learnt was a generic, derogatory term to dismiss anyone 'Indian' or maades, which was short for marwaris. (Jha, 2014.pp.162-163)

Likewise, dominance of India and its politics over Nepal and its political set-up is prevalent in Manjushree Thapa's

novel, *The Tutor of History*. It can be traced where Nayan Raj is seen comparing their politics with India and declares that, "Many of our ills come from the influence of India's Bihar and Uttar Pradesh politics. In a big country there's less accountability." (p.237). On the other hand, deeply rooted caste discrimination with the untouchables is clearly disclosed in *The Tutor of History* when in a village of Kami blacksmiths, where everyone was harvesting the land of their high-caste landlords, a man angrily reacts against the bitter fact of democracy: "The same people who tell us there's democracy still say-you're polluted, don't touch us, don't come into our houses, don't use our water taps, don't defile our temples, you are low of birth. The law may say we're equal, but we still live like slaves. That's the kind of democracy we have." (p.242).

In this way, Samrat Upadhyay and Manjushree Thapa have portrayed the several aspects of India and its social life in their stories and novels. At the same time, Upadhyay and Thapa realistically depicted the correlation between India and Nepal. Close socio-cultural ties between India and Nepal and India's dominance over Nepalese day-to-day's life is prevalent in the fictional works of Upadhyay and Thapa.

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