

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Echoes of Home: Exploring Identity in Manjushree Thapa's *The Tutor of History*

Sanchita Mallick

Abstract

This paper explores the intricate dynamics of identity and belonging within the context of a strife-ridden Nepal of nineteen-ninety one, as illustrated in Manjushree Thapa's novel *The Tutor of History* (2001). The narrative centers around Rishi Parajuli, a Nepali man who is internally dispersed and who struggles hard to grapple with his sense of selfhood and identity amid the disorienting realities of power games, corruption and loss. The character of Binita also stands out as a foil to Rishi and as one who challenges the male dominated space of belonging to build her own identity on her own terms. The paper highlights the different characters' constant struggles with their particular Nepali origins, familial ties and the surrounding complications as well as the broader socio-political upheaval in Nepal, particularly during the Maoist rebellion. It successfully utilizes the Foucauldian concept of space as discussed in the article entitled "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" (1984) to discuss the events at Khairani Tar, Kathmandu. The place objectifies a moving space of which the characters will always remain an inextricable part no matter where they go in future. The event of 'election' in the text also plays a vital role. It brings all the characters together for a cause and makes them inhabit, in Foucauldian terms, a "floating piece of space", a postmodern space, and this is modern Nepal like any budding nation searching for stability that is a never ending process.

Keywords: Identity, Displacement, Marginality, Spatiality, Postmodernism.

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Nepal has always been a “fogged mirror image of western dreams---- a mirror quicksilvered with tall mountain stories, some fantastic tales of Kew and a Cat Stevens song about Kathmandu” (Thapa 46). The place has always been portrayed as a land of fabled, soulful dreams divinely surrounded by the silvery Himalayas. But this serene image of the land to the outside world is too good to be real. It is true that the Himalayas geographically cut off the region from the larger world, and that politically too the land and its people have followed the principle of self-imposed isolation. Thapa thus writes in her essay, “Reaching one’s own people, Reaching the world” (2001): “[i]t opened its doors to the world only in the nineteen-fifties, and in many ways it [still] remains a sequestered land” (67). But, these facts cannot belie the sordid actualities of life in Nepal. In fact, the country has a history of long and civil wars, and the Maoist insurgency has further rent the country apart. In the essay *Nepal: The Politics of Failure* (2006), Barbara Crossette thus rightly observes that:

Today’s Nepal has regressed, politically, by nearly half a century. On one side stands an unloved, autocratic, accidental king, Gyanendra, with his inept and lawless army, and on the other side an extreme armed Maoist movement of almost unimaginable brutality and terror. Electoral politics, a free media, and the civil and human rights so proudly fought for are being largely swept away [...]. (69-70)

In *The Tutor of History* (2001) Thapa recreates the uncertainties and failures of ordinary lives striving hard to reclaim a sense of fulfillment and selfhood. And, here, the present article

attempts to show how the characters inhabit an ‘intangible site’ which transcends all binaries and boundaries constructed by human reasoning to organize or comprehend the factual world of one’s existence. In this interstitial space of interconnected lives, the identity of an individual can no longer be pinpointed in relation to any one concept or site of his/her interaction. And, thus, this space of existence is invariably characterized by an element of fluidity and elusiveness.

The novel opens with the voice of the third-person narrator introducing the reader to the strife-ridden Nepal of nineteen-ninety one—“[...] this rocky scrap of land that brothers squabbled over without an end” (13)¹ and to the protagonist, Rishi Parajuli whose very “[p]resence in the city was slim. In his birth village he had a fuller identity--- he was so-and-so’s grandson, so-and-so’s son, a member of a select caste and class-but in Kathmandu he was anonymous, a slip of a man like all the others, a shadow moving against a wall and disappearing when the sky clouded over” (13). Just like the clouded sky, Rishi is filled with gloom. He is a reluctant man and prefers to remain safely shelled within his thoughts. As the rain begins to patter hard, Rishi too finds it difficult to move forward in his daily life of fixed chores. The rain also introduces the reader to another significant character of the novel, Giridhar Adhikari, son of Baburam Adhikari. Giridhari also looks up at the pouring sky, but the beating rain has an altogether different effect on his ‘vodka-soaked’ self. Quite fittingly, he thus exclaims “if all this rain were vodka there’d be no need to rove Khaireni Tar’s brew shops, no need to sneak drinks when no one was looking, [...].There’d be no blame or censure hurled his way. Ho. Giridhar gave into the vision” (14) passionately. An inebriated, alcoholic person, he is incidentally the chairman of the district party office. He belongs from a respectable family but due to his spoiled habits and incompetent nature, the people of the town have crowded him out of its space of significance. He is also fired from the position of a bank manager. He, thus, now wastes himself and remains lulled by the soft, humming buzz of lives around him. In the same

pace, the reader encounters Om Gurung and his wife Asha. He is an aristocrat, a landowner and has also served in the Gurkha regiment in Hong Kong. He and Asha have married long-distance while his service in Hong Kong. For first six years, his wife “was nothing more than a colour photograph” (33) to him. He owns her like a prized possession, and even after a conjugal life of more than a decade, he marvels at her beauty and strength. But, unfortunately, their marriage does not bear the fruit of love, and so they adopt a cousin’s son, Harsha Bahadur, the *mita*-child.

Significantly enough, a huge part of the novel depicts the lives of women or *Bahun*s dwelling on the periphery and trying to uphold their endangered, precarious status. There are minor female characters like Asha, Lakshmi, Phool Devi, Thakalni-aama, Pramila, Hom Kumari, Gaumati to name a few. Their lives are only tangentially mentioned in the course of the novel. However, the text deals in detail with the eventful odyssey of Binita. She is a young widow who single-handedly runs a teashop in the conservative, patriarchal space of Khaireni Tar. She lives with her daughter Tripti and her young cousin, Sani. The reader sees how she runs the teashop by turning her back both literally and metaphorically to the men as well as to the outside world. She maintains a reserved posture with strangers and town’s people alike. A woman of free will, she makes a good use of tradition by shrewdly decorating her tea shop with life-size posters of gods and goddesses like Shiva, Parvati, Saraswati, Ganesha, Radha, Krishna, Lakshmi. This provides the commercial place with a look of sanctity and piety and thus also cleans, if there are any, thoughts of undue sexual advantages in the minds of the customers for her. Binita also attends the adult literacy class at night. And, despite her in-law’s strong and persistent disapproval for her running the shop, she remains invulnerable in her desire to defy all unjust patriarchal-familial norms. She knows how threatening even the so-called safe, domestic space can become as her husband’s own uncle, Kainlo-kaka, an epitome of fatherly affection, after her husband’s death rapes her in their house. She has felt passive

with disgust and shame. She cannot let the same thing happen to her daughter as well, and hence she decides to endure her life alone. At this critical juncture, it is Thakalni-amma, the proprietor of the Himal Lodge Restaurant Bar, who helps Binita to set up the teashop. Since then she has never approached her family members nor have entertained them any more in her space of hard earned independency and stability, both financial and emotional.

Interestingly enough, the space of Khaireni Tar vibrates with a spirit of its own. It is not just a “sleepy hick settlement”(22), a lifeless backdrop. It is a “middling kind of town” (22) that breathes of its people’s wishes and aspirations. The road side bazaar bustles with activities, and houses important buildings like a police station, high school, agriculture office, college, and even a private English medium boarding school. The English medium school is built by Om who has whole-heartedly put all his savings on it. He has wistfully named it ‘Pure Hearts Boarding School’. He believes that the school will play an instrumental role in creating awareness and will father forth a new generation of illuminated beings. He is a progressive man with a philanthropic urge. Thus, people living here have small lives but big hearts.

The text sweeps fast and gains momentum as there are news of the collapse of the present government and that the country will go for a fresh election. We come to know of the workings of the People’s Party. The party advocates democracy and liberalism. Soon there is call for the name of who would get the ticket to fight the upcoming election as a representative of this party. Om proposes the name of Giridhar, and so this time he wills to invest fully both his patience and money on him. This very act of Om who knowing well the limitations of Giridhar puts his confidence on him boosts his confidence. He starts to believe strongly in his power to overcome his present state of embarrassment and uselessness. He prepares for his transformation from Giridhar, the tipsy god, to the actual figure of a saviour, thus, for the first time relishing the name’s mythic association. It is a name given to Lord Krishna when he uproots the Gobardhan Parvat to shelter the people of Brindavan against the wrath of Indra, the

god of rain and thunder. Giridhar too will save the hapless people from their deplorable condition through the magical power of ‘politics’. This will also be an atonement of his years of self-indulgence, complicity and negligence. But as the election campaigning begins, the other members of the party feels doubtful of Giridhar’s competence in actually winning the election, and so here one witnesses the arrival of a new saviour-----Nayan Raj Dahal. He used to be a cinema hero and has now retired from films. His impression on the people of the district is mainly that of a man who has lived a life of superhuman, heroic caliber but only in a reel one. Nayan means eyes, the ability to see into things, and, true to the meaning of his name, he is an insightful, perceptive person. And, in the real life too, his metal shines.

Incidentally, Nayan Raj is also the brother-in-law of Binita. In fact, Binita’s tea shop is located in the actor’s ancestral home. But, after her husband’s death, she has never heard of him and as she remains ignorant of the works of the People’s Party, it is quite unexpectedly that one fine day Nayan Raj knocks at her door and begins to stay in the ancestral place. His very presence links Binita’s domestic world to the larger, societal space. In fact, in the course of events, the teashop becomes the centre point serving various purposes of the party workers. Again, through a press release it is officially confirmed that for the “sake of democracy” (8), Nayan Raj will be running in the election from Tanahun district electorate number three. Henceforth, Binita too assumes a more constructive and significant role. Gradually, things around Binita start to change. Nayan Raj’s arrival opens the orthodox doors of the minds of Binita’s in-laws. They no longer shun her. Rather the family members take pride in her selfless dedication to the cause of the Party. She gains a new sense of identity and selfhood that is earlier missing from her existence despite the economical independence.

In keeping with the trope of movement and self-discovery, Rishi leaves Kathmandu and comes back to his birth village in Khaireni Tar. He realizes “the mistakes of youth. His passions had been uncertain, too paltry to confront life with. He had always lacked conviction;

always waited too long.” (84) He takes a yet another chance to carve a niche for himself in the world of politics. With the help of the town school master, he participates in the political campaigns of the People’s Party in his hometown. As most of the party workers gossip and discuss their strategies and party policies at Binita’s tea shop, Rishi too begins to come to the shop frequently. He meets Nayan Raj and diligently takes notes from Giridhar about the future plans of the party. One day, amidst all men, Binita notices that a man is intensely staring down at his own hands, carefully reading the fate lines of the palms. The intensity in his eye curiously attracts her. While lying in bed she fantasizes him: “[S]he saw Rishi’s lights eyes and dry, cracked lips. Men. She imagined the press of a warm chest against hers. Lips brushing her skin” (235). She falls for Rishi who too romantically admires her features and inner spirit. The romantic association between them blooms like a lily in an arid, heated land.

The text then focuses on the complexity of relationship between Giridhar and Nayan Raj. Giridhar welcomes Nayan Raj to the party. But, inwardly, he resents his selection as a candidate. He feels that ethically speaking it is he who deserves to run for the election. His inner turmoil keeps brewing up making him more rigid and arrogant. Nevertheless, he does not let his frustration on his fellow members and keeps on continuing his job of an experienced party worker. He uses his credits and takes Nayan Raj to the remote corners of the place and helps him to familiarize with the local space and its people.

There is also an intricate weaving of another tale of a love-hate relationship between Sani and Harsha Bahadur. Of all the women characters it is Sani who is the most beautiful and attractive one. Her charms lie in the fact that she herself seems “oblivious to her own perfection” (39). Sani’s good name is Madhu, the sweet, ‘honey-dew’. Initially, we find her as a docile, homely young girl. Her inner space of peace and renunciation is thus rather disturbed when the Khadka boy, Harsha Bahadur, proposes to her publicly. She is outraged by his audacity but instead of documenting any strong reaction, she becomes more a withdrawn, livid

character. She enters a state of unexplained irascibility. Unlike the other girls of her age in the village, whose only concern is to get married early to lessen the family's burden, she shows abhorrence towards boys. She envies the freedom that a male child is born with. She angrily observes: "What made it possible for these uncouth boys to judge her and mock her? She hated each one of these boys. They were stupid and base but they could strut because they had power and privileges that she did not" (377). And, suddenly, it strikes her that what makes her feel repulsive is actually what she wants in life, it is "their [boys'] freeness. The freeness of the [men embodied in the space of] bazaar was something she must have" (377). She successfully registers her indignant protest by ironically choosing to marry the same ugly, weak Khadka boy, Harsha Bahadur. He has a bright prospect and he can give her the freedom she desires for her 'self': "And walking through the bazaar one day seething with resentment it occurred to her quite out of the blue that the khadka boy could give her his freeness"(377). Thus, like Binita she too refuses to tread on the path carved out by some misogynist, patriarchal socio-cultural agents. It frustrates her to see how the gender of a woman is imposed upon her as an inborn marker of inferiority and therefore subject to all kinds of maltreatment and misrepresentation to satiate the hunger of a man and meet the demands of an andocentric society.

But Madhu's life's trajectory takes a new turn as she herself gets rejected by the boy who in turn realizes the futility of his passion as the sudden realization of his moral, familial duties flushes all his earlier boyish cravings for the girl. This love-episode can be treated as an important metaphorical event in the narrative. Their moments of unrequited desires, thus, act as a maturing event that helps Harsha Bahadur to take that leap of faith which is essential for him in order to cross the threshold of innocence to experience. But, Madhu is still too naïve to understand and appreciate the nature of this transformation. As yet, she is caught between two fabricated ideological spaces, she in fact shuttles between her dual identities----on one side she is challenging the patriarchal, societal norms while on the other her protest is coded in a

behavioural pattern which is again a confirmation of yet another stereotypical notion of marriage as a way to financial and social promotion. She clings to the male-figure as a sign of her emancipation and freedom. Ironically enough, it is the indignation and resentment in Madhu that makes her to adopt the way of compromise under the seduction of the sugar-coated veneer of high name, class and position.

As the narrative proceeds further, the reader meets another local, influential person called Chiranjibi Joshi who carries an unobtrusive way about him. He is a contractor and belongs to a wealthy family. But he is down-to-earth and is rather introvert and reserve. Chiranjibi too puts himself fully in the process of election. In fact, the election stirs and activates all his dormant passions. It offers him a mode to transform his static, stagnating self into a more fulfilling one. As the date of election approaches, the party penetrates deeper into the interior of the hills for more votes. The text also shows the celebration of the biggest festivals of Nepal, Dashain and Tihar. For the occasion, the party office remains closed. The business in the bazaar also slows down. The party workers who have so long poured in the mobile space of Khaireni Tar leave the hill for their families in the other parts of the land. There follows a temporary period of nonchalance---“Nishkama kama” (337)It is worthwhile to note that the carnivalesque spirit of the election brings into people’s notice the hitherto been neglected poor plight of ethnically backward groups. For instance, the Gurungs and the Magars are not allowed to participate in Dashain. Om and Asha strongly protest against this practice and bring them in the mainstream celebration. People in fact lose their selfish, small desires in this bigger mission of attaining democracy for the nation. So, we see a metamorphosis in the titular character, Rishi, literally the private tutor of history. He is earlier shown as a man of fickle moods and cravings. But now, as he walks down to Khaireni tar he keeps a hand on “the copybook in which he’d taken notes on Giridhar. He felt suddenly unburdened....a man released from the despotism of the past. A man completely unshackled, living in a future freed

of meaning.” (355) His name is after all ‘Rishi’ meaning ascetic, a yogi and thus recalling the icon of Lord Shiva smeared with ashes, here, incidentally the ashes of a rising society struggling hard to open its like a phoenix. The analogy also subtly hints at the philosophical nature of Rishi’s journey, for he too is a solitary, social recluse, drifting in search of an elsewhere of freedom and happiness. However, unlike Rishi, the character of Giridhar sinks more in the quagmire of his inner turmoil. Om’s love for his friend thus ultimately proves to be a thorny one and both bleed seeing the last hope of amendment gone forever. And, as Giridhar withdraws himself completely from everything around him, Chiranjibi is made the chairman of the People’s Party.

Finally, the novel announces the crucial day of election. The build up to this day is orchestrated and resonates well through the network of all lives consciously and unconsciously associated with it. The text draws to its climax as the workers of all parties frantically move between the booth and town, carrying messages and news of the latest developments in the polling stations. There is also the inevitable news of burning of ballot box, booth capturing, gang rivalries, skulls of party leaders being split to pieces, etc. The novel ends with the violent episode of bombing the People’s Party office by the Maoists thus merging the political with the personal. The long awaited Maoists finally do appear. In fact, in Thapa's novel the Maoists loom large mostly as shadowy figures in the background. It is only in the finale that they take the centre stage.

After the defeat of the People’s Party in the election, the characters find their ways to come to terms with the implacable realities of life leading them through many dramatic changes and transformations in both their physical locations and psychic space. Rishi comes back to Kathmandu, and through his associations at Khairani Tar he manages to get a job in an English medium school. He takes an apartment on rent and prepares to bring Binita and her daughter. This movement in his journey gives him a new, empowered identity. From Rishi, the private

tutor, he becomes a school teacher, a fixed job holder providing him a space of sophistication and is indeed a step forward in the evolution of his 'self'. But this forward march or climbing a step up in the social-economic ladder is questionable as it may not give him the happiness he seeks for. As the text informs, Binita resents against any kind of misappropriation of her identity. A free-thinking, intelligent and self-governed person, she defies the stereotypical role of a phallogocentrically defined woman in the patriarchal society. She feels unsure of her elopement with Rishi. Thus, here again, she holds on to the socio-cultural space of her traditionality; although at the same time, she has resumed her mission of intellectually exploring the new avenues opened to her by the education system.

Om and Giridhar's case is however more pitiful. Om's encounter with such highly developed nations like Japan, Korea to which he travelled filled him with high hope and aspirations to do something epic in his native land. But his very first experience with grass root politics is marred by crude violence. As an immigrant, he stands vulnerable in the foreign space of other nations, and again he proves to be too inexperienced in the native space as well. People of the village even mock at his mission of bringing an overnight change and thus squandering his ancestral wealth. But, it somehow enkindles in him the instinct of the 'survival ethics' typical to the West. He cherishes hopes for future like Nayan Raj and Chiranjibi.

The book therefore presents an overlapping of different socio-political and cultural spaces, and these socio-cultural sites are intertwined through the external acts of both jubilation and violence. Here, the image of 'Khairani Tar' is significant. Like the Foucauldian space as discussed in the article entitled "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" (1984), the place objectifies a moving space of which the characters will always remain an inextricable part no matter where they go in future. The event of 'election' is also potent enough. It brings all together for a cause and makes them inhabit, in Foucauldian terms, a "floating piece of space" (Foucault 9), a postmodern space, and this is modern Nepal like any budding nation searching

for stability that is a never ending process. In keeping with this postmodern spirit of the tale, all the characters are shown as part of an ever changing vortex where they incessantly dig in for resources of survival and for realising their selfhood.

NOTE

1. Thapa, Manjushree. *The Tutor of History*. Aleph, 2012. All textual quotations are taken from this edition of the book and are cited as Thapa.

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About the Author

Sanchita Mallick is an Assistant Professor, in the Department of English at Dr. Bhupendra Nath Dutta Smriti Mahavidyalaya, Purba Bardhaman, West Bengal, India. She is also a Ph.D. Scholar at Bankura University, India.