



not the tutor.

The novel begins with Rishi, "originally from the town of Khaireni Tar in Tanahun district," giving history tuitions in Kathmandu and ends with Rishi preparing his room in Kathmandu to receive Binita. The rest of the story is soon taken over by the election campaign, the women's groups and their meetings at Akalaa Mai's shrine, and the party politics. The author dwells time and again on Khaireni Tar with delicate touches and evokes the atmosphere of warmth and "rich humanity" associated with it. Here people are "big-hearted," and considerate. "In times of need, they always helped each other. Inevitably, there were always a few souls willing to guide those who had lost their way" (p.9). Its landscape is

... set apart from the others by its tropical vegetation, uncommon in the hill region. Ringed by rich green rice fields and spotted with jacaranda, gulmohar and bougainvillea plants, its bazaar was slightly less drab than most highway bazars. ... Khaireni Tar was a middling kind of town where it was common, while walking through alleys, to enter a twilight of cultures: to hear the screech of Nirvana on a transistor radio while passing a group of women carrying loads of freshly scooped dung. (14-15)

The residents feel proud to belong to the town and it is here that Rishi Parajuli finds his love. The novel is, in a way, designed to capture the predicament of the person who leaves the town and finds solace only when he comes back to its folds.

Into the election fray are three parties: the UML, the Congress and the People's Party, and a lot of people busily engaged in diverse activities. The town seethes with enthusiasm; discussions are rife with betting and bickering; later, there are fights and booth capturing. Nayan Raj Dahal, a former movie star, staged by the Nepal People's Party, as its candidate is the center of attraction. Committed to public service, he stands for value-based

politics and promises clean administration, "We have yet to spread social values, build institutions and systems, which actualize democratic ideals. First we have to rescue party politics from those who use it to fulfill their greed." His commitment and affable personality endear him to his voters. He earns their respect, but loses the election to his Congress rival. The novelist leaves a big question mark here: can noble ideals alone win the vote? Is it fair to adopt other means?

Giridhar Adhikari, a former district president of the People's Party is denied party ticket. He reels under humiliation of rejection and spends his days in inebriation. An alcoholic and a dismissed Bank Manager, Giridhar fights the battle on two fronts: at the political level with his rivals and at the personal level trying to fight off his alcoholism. Om Gurung is a former British Gurkhas serviceman who runs a school and works for the party. Rishi Parajuli, the history tutor and protagonist has been a leftist activist who stages a comeback. He is a modest man with few wants, though he is often "overwhelmed by the hardness of his life, its abjection and lack of charity" (p.57).

Manjushree Thapa draws her women characters with loving care and understanding. There is Binita, the widowed sister-in-law of Nayan Raj, who has reduced her wants to almost nothing. She is an epitome of simplicity and self-effacement. She is running a tea shop and has to deal with her male customers daily but she carries herself with dignity. "In all the years since she'd opened her tea shop in Khaireni Tar, she had maintained reserve with strangers and townspeople alike. A lone woman, still young, draped in a gray widows' fariya, a woman unloosened from the custody of men: she tried to ward off critical voices by subduing herself" (p.7). This is a recognizable picture of the subcontinental woman. But, Binita is not dumb. She is one of the active members of the Mothers' group and here she conducts herself well. There are other women, young and not so young, painted lovingly: Madhu,

Gaumati, Sani and a whole lot of them whose aspirations, and struggles add a new dimension to our understanding of the Nepali women.

The author is particularly impressive when she describes the men and women at work in their fields, resting, cracking jokes, feigning annoyance and enjoying what life holds out to them. The portrayal of harvest, for example, is authentic and reminiscent of Hardy's Wessex farm hands in their fields:

The rice fields had ripened, the stalks were golden brown, and the sky a deep blue. Flocks of parakeets roved the skies. Poinsettia was in bloom. Sickles glinted in the hands of the youth and love songs rang in the air. The harvest had begun. In the fields surrounding Khaireni Tar, bands of girls and boys went to work (p. 227).

Such effortless writing is a plus point of the book. But this cannot be said about her style on the whole: there are passages that are marred by bland tone and the flat, reportage-type expression. The descriptions of the election campaign are too lengthy and boring. However, the author's ability to spot tiny patches of humor in daily happenings is enlivening.

Thapa guides the readers through the turbulence of Khaireni Tar successfully. The elections are held despite bomb blasts, and other disturbances; the danger is deflected; the winners return to the capital jubilantly; people get down to their routine expecting that the promises made during elections would be fulfilled. The novel ends on a note of hope and cheer despite confusion, corruption and disorder. As Chiranjibi asserts, "There are ideal to follow. Small and gleaming visions which survived brutal attacks ... the vision of true democracy: one person free, then another one, and another. For if the world was corrupt, it was also ... at the core, noble" (pp. 423-24). If one could stand its bulk, it is a readable work, as it offers a significant insight into our neighboring country.

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