

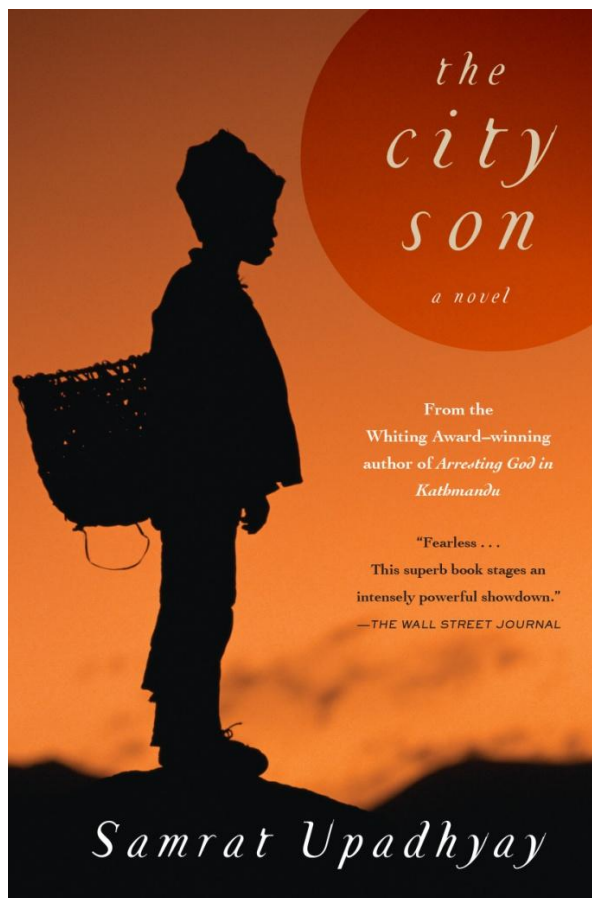


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## *The City Son* by Samrat Upadhyay

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THE CITY SON. By Samrat Upadhyay. New York: Soho Press, 2014; pp. 256., \$14.25 ISBN: 9781616953812.

Samrat Upadhyay is a well known creative writer with many short stories and novels to his credit. His first work, *Arresting God in Kathmandu* (2001), is a collection of short stories which won him the Whiting Award, followed by *The Guru Of Love* (2003), *The Royal Ghosts* (2006), and *Buddha's Orphans* (2010) among others. His last novel, *The City Son*, was published by SOHO Press in 2014 and became a finalist for the PEN Open Book Award.

Samrat Upadhyay is the first fiction writer from Nepal to be published in the West. *The City Son* is set in Nepal, amidst the rift between the city of Kathmandu and a village, delineated through the life situations of characters.

The novel begins with the trope of a helpless woman, victimized by patriarchy at multiple levels. She is a misfit within the purview of a conventional sense of beauty and suffers the betrayal of an infidel husband. In the novel, the failure of her marriage can be objectively understood as a result of her not being a 'beautiful' bride. But the story, stationed in a rural background, soon metamorphoses into a narrative of a brutal and unconventional revolt in the city of Kathmandu. The author highlights her predicament through the portrayal of the practice of polygamy which, even though it is punishable under the existing laws, has long been covertly prevalent in the country. Upadhyay

brings in an unknown and unexplored image of the society, by making the characters of his novel respond in an “out of the league” manner, which though horrific, keeps the readers engrossed.

The phrase, ‘once a victim, always an oppressor,’ fits in the lives of each character as all of them are in one way or the other, victims of a close knit, suffocating society and in the struggle to break away from it, they acquire predatory instincts, thus becoming villainous members of the same society which they were trying to escape from. Within such portrayal, the novel explores economic hardships faced by Master ji, and what turn his life takes due to entangled social customs. The novel works on the logic of causality, as the victim becomes an oppressor, presenting the crude reality of sexual exploitation, which consequently critiques the victim shaming complex prevailing in the society due to lack of awareness.

The element of mystery drives the action throughout the text. Obscurity in the form of absolute inactivity, sudden change in the behavior of Master ji and Apsara, brings in doubt the logical and instinctive behavior of a human. Didi’s madness and vengeance for the society which called her “ugly” and her husband’s infidelity for an attractive woman, heats up to her obsession for beauty. Didi, being the product of her society also begins to seek ‘beauty’ in its conventional form. It is this beauty which she could not gain for herself and now wishes to destroy those who possess it. A drastic change from the quintessential housewife, to a revengeful, voluptuous, “beautiful” mother, becomes an unforeseen aspect for the reader.

Upadhyay’s novel refuses to play in the grey area and chooses black and white pallets. Master ji and Apsara undergo a voluntary withdrawal from all the duties, responsibilities, and relationships to the point of madness whereas, Sulochana, exercises obsessive control over the household so much so that Apsara, who went against her family to marry Masterji refuses to claim her place in the same house.

Upadhyay’s genius lies in the fact that his craft acts as a prism which brings in one issue and refracts a spectrum of behavioral reactions to it. The novel being a horrifying yet engaging narrative, explores layers of madness, exile and identity crisis interwoven in close relationships, with respect to the space they belong to and the space they choose. The politics of cultural, ideological and physical space leads to the downward transposition of an ordinary family to a dysfunctional one.

“When Tarun and his mother, Apsara, arrive about an hour later, Didi is cooking in the kitchen, her back to them. She doesn’t turn to look. Amit and Sumit are playing a game of snakes and ladders in the corner, and they stop, their eyes first on Apsara, then on Tarun. The Master ji is sitting on the bed. Apsara pauses in the doorway, her hand holding a bag of spinach she was going to cook. Her instinct is to grab Tarun by his hand and leave.” Such simplicity of style to express minute details leads to a stark hard hitting understanding of the horrific events that take place as action proceeds. Use of Nepali language in between the text brings in authenticity and rootedness to the characters and the setting of the novel. Whereas the fast pace of the plot keeps the readers hooked to the novel.

Looking at the sensitivity of the issues highlighted and the web in which the characters are entangled, it can be called a social novel, because of presence of different characters, of different age groups with varied personalities. The life-like situations in the text makes *The City Son* an indulging and relatable read.