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Book Review

Review of *Darkmotherland* by Samrat Upadhyay

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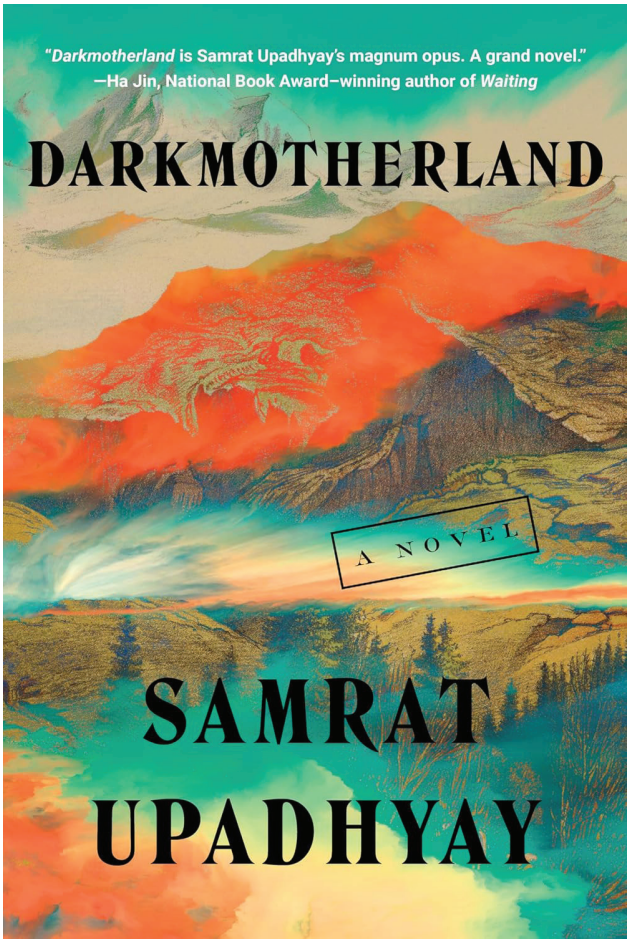

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Contemporary anglophone Nepali literature shares several characteristics. In formal aesthetic terms, most works fall under the genres of social or psychological realism, with narratives depicting how societal conventions, religion, and political changes influence an individual. Discussions of caste, gender, internal migration, and diasporic life are routinely found in these works. Realism, in short, is the stock-in-trade of anglophone Nepali writers. Samrat Upadhyay's latest novel, *Darkmotherland* (2025), however, breaks from this tradition by offering a dystopian narrative infused with magical elements. This foray into the speculative—flawed yet ambitious—signals an exciting shift in this nascent literary corpus. Notably, despite its speculative premise, the novel's representation of Nepal remains historically accurate and attuned to contemporary socio-cultural dynamics. Upadhyay offers paradoxical portraits of citizens who are politically literate and educated, yet who cling to the caste system and support corrupt, nationalist ministers. Although the writing stutters occasionally under the weight of a few incredulous and playful subplots, *Darkmotherland* stands out as a unique and noteworthy contribution.

Since his promising debut in 2001 with the story collection *Arresting God in Kathmandu*, Samrat Upadhyay has produced a critically acclaimed body of work representing the complexities of Nepali life and society. His early fiction centers on the lives of Kathmandu's flawed middle-class residents who navigate personal disappointments and conflicts—from sudden unemployment to arranged marriage with an unappealing prospect. While Upadhyay's focus has always been on domestic life, *Darkmotherland* broadens this scope dramatically in its satirical take on Nepal's political situation. The novel reimagines the country in the aftermath of an earthquake, where a presiding Home Minister enacts a coup to become Prime Minister. Through its dystopian lens, *Darkmotherland* offers a critical glance into the potential horrors that could befall a country due to unending political volatility.

Darkmotherland's focus on censorship of speech will strike a chord with Nepali readers and those interested in its history, as it reflects the practices of past rulers and the contemporary government. The narrative is not strictly mimetic, but Upadhyay frequently invokes historical precedents to ground his dystopia in Nepal's political journey. A telling example is the painting of tyrannical former PM Junga Bahadur Rana—who seized power via massacre and ruled for life—that hangs in the current PM's office. Like Rana, the current PM cannot see himself "relinquishing power" and aims to rule Darkmotherland "with an iron fist" (p. 72). His reign is marked by violent repression: homosexuality and non-Hindu religions are banned, and dissenters are quickly whisked away to labor camps. The desire to censor speech mirrors the recent attempts by the Nepali government to censor social media. Through exaggeration, Upadhyay reveals the true stakes of a corrupt and authoritarian government. Thus, *Darkmotherland*, holds a mirror to a potential dystopian future of Nepal, advancing a searing critique of Nepali governance.

Alongside this sharp criticism, the writer ironically sketches the dictatorial PM as a gay figure devoted to his cross-dressing mistress, Rozy. The representation of queerness through Rozy's character makes *Darkmotherland* stand out among anglophone Nepali literature, which often lacks such portrayals. Sketched as resilient, a queer Rozy suffers many hardships—rejection from their parents and jeered by their friends—which fuels their desire for agency. Although Rozy is disgusted by their relationship with the PM, they leverage it for social mobility and political footing. They eventually transform not only into a woman, but the deity "Darkmother," who, with public support, stages a coup. Through this transformation, Upadhyay plays with the genre of magical realism, where such irrational events are taken at face value by the characters. Foregrounding a complex queer character in such a commanding role is a major strength of the novel.

This novel, while it breaks the mold of realism dominant in anglophone Nepali literature, is not without its flaws. A major shortcoming lies in its strains of *hysterical realism*, where the worldbuilding becomes overly playful and sprawling at the expense of its verisimilitude. For instance, a popular wrestler faces a Swiss opponent conveniently named "Sweej Cheej" (Swiss Cheese) who brandishes a "Sweej Army knife" (p. 187-188). Such wordplay and quirk persistently recur in the novel, leaving one to wonder whether Upadhyay could have exercised greater authorial restraint. Similarly, the Prime Minister, known as "PM Papa," confronts a protest rally labelled "Papa don't preach" (after the Madonna song), while in another, he softly murmurs the song while pointing a gun at the character (p. 245). These ludicrous scenarios—characteristic of many postmodern novels—swarm the narrative and attenuate its more poignant moments.

Nevertheless, Upadhyay's prose is often lively and humorous. The writing is most effective when soaked with a distinct Nepali flavor, as when the police are referred to as "*poolis* uncles" (p. 17)—aptly capturing the local pronunciation through colloquialized spelling. Similarly, other Nepali words are sprinkled throughout the novel, yet they never hinder our understanding of the context.

With its plethora of character range, satirical edge, and blends of magic and dystopian elements, Upadhyay crafts an epic narrative that reveals contemporary Nepali realities and anxieties. The story is built on accurate historical foundations, where issues of caste and politics find nuance. Where the playfulness of the storytelling could be more subdued, readers of anglophone Nepali literature—or literary fiction, broadly—will find *Darkmotherland* a noteworthy departure from the dominant realist form.

Manish Pandey is a second-year PhD student in the English department at Texas Tech University. His research focuses on contemporary African and Asian speculative fiction.