



A Lacanian Reading of Select Stories from Samrat Upadhyay's *Arresting God in Kathmandu*

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Abstract

Background: Samrat Upadhyay's *Arresting God in Kathmandu* is a foundational work in Nepali fiction in English, often analyzed through postcolonial and diasporic lenses. While critics have noted its exploration of sexuality and the tension between tradition and modernity, a significant gap exists in applying a psychoanalytic framework to understand the fundamental drivers of the characters' motivations and psychological fragmentation.

Objective: This study aims to perform a Lacanian psychoanalytic reading of two stories from Upadhyay's collection—"The Limping Bride" and "This World." Its primary objective is to examine how the characters' desires are rooted in a constitutive "lack," how their pursuit of an ever-displacing "object of desire" leads to psychological fragmentation, and why they ultimately acquiesce to the societal "Symbolic Order."

Methods: The research employs a qualitative textual analysis, using the theoretical framework of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic registers—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The stories are categorized thematically to provide a focused examination: "The Limping Bride" is analyzed through the theme of infidelity, and "This World" through identity crisis and the idealization of the Other.

Analysis: The analysis reveals that characters like Hiralal ("The Limping Bride") and Jaya and Kanti ("This World") are trapped in a cycle of desire driven by a foundational lack. Their attempts to achieve wholeness through an idealized Other (the Imaginary) are consistently thwarted as the object of desire is perpetually displaced. This internal conflict, set against the



rigid norms of Nepali society (the Symbolic), results in profound psychological fragmentation, which is often precipitated by a traumatic encounter with an inassimilable truth (the Real).

Conclusion: The study concludes that Upadhyay's characters are emblematic of a postmodern psyche caught between traditional values and modern, individualistic desires. Their futile pursuit of fulfillment highlights the Lacanian axiom that desire is inherently metonymic and insatiable. Despite their rebellions, their ultimate submission to the Symbolic Order underscores the powerful internalization of societal laws, revealing a profound commentary on the human condition within a rapidly evolving socio-cultural landscape.

Implementation: The findings of this research contribute to the critical discourse on Upadhyay's work, moving it beyond established thematic readings. This Lacanian framework can be implemented in further analyses of South Asian and diasporic literature to explore universal psychological conflicts within specific cultural contexts. It also provides a valuable model for literary scholars and students to deconstruct character motivation and societal conflict in narrative fiction.

Keywords: Lacanian Psychoanalysis, desire and lack, symbolic order, psychological fragmentation, Samrat Upadhyay.

Introduction

The critical reception of Samrat Upadhyay's work, particularly his landmark debut *Arresting God in Kathmandu*, has largely centered on its pioneering status as the first major work of Nepali fiction in English (Adhikari, 2008). Scholars frequently frame it within postcolonial and diasporic studies, praising its intimate, non-exotic portrayal of modern Kathmandu. As Hutt (2007) observes, Upadhyay's "relentlessly domestic" focus offers a crucial counter-narrative to political upheaval by exploring the inner lives of ordinary citizens (p. 45). The dominant critical themes identified are the exploration of sexuality and transgression, the conflict between spiritual tradition and material modernity, and the interplay of the sacred and the profane (Poudel, 2024). While his psychological realism is widely celebrated, the critical conversation has only recently begun to advance beyond these foundational themes. This creates a significant gap, as no research has undertaken a psychoanalytic excavation of the constitutive lack underlying his characters' desire, their repeated failures to achieve their objects of desire, and their ultimate acquiescence to the Symbolic Order. It is this gap that the present study aims to address.

This paper employs the framework of Lacanian Psychoanalysis in Samrat Upadhyay's *Arresting God in Kathmandu*, focusing on two stories selected out of the collection of nine stories. Furthermore, these stories have been categorized under specific themes to make the study more concise and clear. The themes discussed here are infidelity and identity crisis as a cause leading to the idealization of the other. The story, "The Limping Bride" has been studied under the theme of infidelity. Likewise, the story, "This World" has been examined through the lens of identity crisis and the concomitant tendency to idealize the Other.



Although, for the purpose of readability, I have categorized the chapters under themes, the common and recurring elements in both the stories are how the foundation of characters' desires are based on the 'lack or void' they experience in life, and how their 'object of desire' continuously gets 'displaced' or 'deferred' leaving them utterly fragmented within themselves. Therefore, this study contends that Samrat Upadhyay's *Arresting God in Kathmandu*, presents characters caught up in the mire of their imagined selves and the symbolic demands of the Nepali society. It reveals their unconscious desires that have been based on or are results of lack/void they experience in life which continuously gets displaced/deferred leaving them fragmented within themselves as illustrated in Jacques Lacan's theory of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Each story reflects either on the constant debacle of desire and fragmentation of the subject, or the ineffable trauma of the Real.

According to Jacques Lacan (2005) in *Écrits*, "the unconscious is structured in the most radical way like a language" (p. 179). Furthermore, he explains that just as in language the meaning keeps changing from one signifier to the other, human's desires continue to get displaced. Lacan highlights that "the desire is the metonymy of the want-to-be" (p. 197). This continual shifting of desires leaves human beings fragmented within themselves. Most importantly, human beings always try to construct their identities based on the patriarchal construct of the society to which Lacan calls the 'the Law of the Father' or 'symbolic order' of society. As Homer (2005) clearly states, "Lacan defines the unconscious as the discourse of the Other" (p. 44). Therefore, although human beings get pleasure in trying to do what is prohibited, they ultimately succumb to the symbolic order of society. Homer, in the context of illustrating Lacan's idea of the functioning of the unconscious and the role of symbolic order, quotes Lacan and writes,

"It is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links. It is the discourse of my father, for instance, in so far as my father made mistakes which I am condemned to reproduce I am condemned to reproduce them because I am obliged to pick up again the discourse he bequeathed to me, not simply because I am his son, but because one can't stop the chain of discourse, and it is precisely my duty to transmit it in its aberrant form to someone else" (as cited in Homer, 2005, p. 44).

This is the reason why human beings despite their multiple attempts of rebelliously breaking the social norms ultimately succumb to it.

The study seeks to explore the foundational lack behind the characters' desires, trace their failed pursuits of the object of desire, and examine why, all the characters regardless of their disposition ultimately succumb to the Symbolic Order of society.

Infidelity

To begin with, in the story, "The Limping Bride", Upadhyay has portrayed his characters in uniquely compelling ways. Rammaya, unable to restrain his eighteen-year-old son from drinking, succumbs to death from meningitis compounded by stress over his son's habitual drinking. Hiralal, who loved his wife dearly, is left alone to handle a son who proves stubborn despite the joint efforts of him and his wife. On his friend Rudra's advice, Hiralal arranges a marriage proposal for Moti. Though the girl is physically impaired, she is utterly beautiful.



Moti, initially rejecting his father's proposal, agrees to see her; unaware and uneducated about her condition, he is charmed by her beauty and consents to marry.

On the wedding night, Moti discovers her disability and lashes out, accusing his father of betrayal, while Hiralal must console his daughter-in-law, who also resents being kept in ignorance. Already enamored by her beauty, Hiralal begins to show her special attention, even taking a day off from work to spend time with her. Unknowingly, his compassion deepens into infatuation. He compares her to his late wife, admiring every act: from combing her hair to household chores, especially during his frequent afternoon breaks when he "stole glances at her face" and imagined how the deceased had admired her "soft voice," "the way her eyes gently took in the surroundings, the way she moved gracefully around the house even with her limp" (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 72). Though pleased that Moti was growing close to her, Hiralal also finds himself increasingly enchanted by her beauty beyond the limp.

His fixation grows: he listens for sounds through the bedroom wall, the sounds of intimacy between them. Even when Moti takes her to the cinema, Hiralal waits at home, longing for her return and to glimpse her happy face. As the narrator notes, "how could he explain to his dead wife how he felt toward his daughter-in-law? A tremendous feeling of guilt washed over him" (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 75). The fragmentation of his psyche becomes evident when he enters their room, kneels down to smell Rukmini's dhoti, and "pulled the dhoti to his face and rubbed it against his cheeks" (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 75). He grows possessive: when she mentions Moti encouraged her to try alcohol, "the smell of the beer was negligible, Hiralal felt his chest tighten" (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 75).

Uncontrollably drawn to his daughter-in-law, he takes another day off work and takes her to Swayambhunath. Helping her walk up the steps, he recounts Moti's childhood visits. When Rukmini asks him to describe his wife, he is "surprised at her boldness," (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 79) and refers to her mother-in-law as his late wife. She then moves closer, touching his shoulder, and asks how they resembled each other. Fearing exposure, he restrains himself from disclosing his thoughts about their likeness. Rukmini, taking his hand, asks if he misses his wife. Having crossed emotional boundaries, Hiralal, though conscious that their relationship has changed, tells her he only wants her to care for Moti. When she responds that it is more than that he wants, his hands and knees tremble. She then places her hand on his chest, rubs it, draws him close, kisses him, caresses him, and asks, "is this what you had wanted?" (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 81). He cannot answer. On returning home, he looks at his wife Rammaya's picture, and "a tremendous wave of shame washed over his body" (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 81). Unable to confront her image, he slides it under his bed. That night he does not even summon dinner, overwhelmed by guilt. He contemplates leaving the house before Moti discovers their bond. Rukmini, however, counsels him to move forward, insisting that what did happen "was bound to happen" (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 82).

The Lacanian registers—Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real—are central to the psychological dynamics in this story. Hiralal's effort to see his late wife in Rukmini illustrates the Imaginary, wherein he projects his idealized other onto her. The Symbolic manifests in the moral, familial, and patriarchal norms that generate in him guilt and a sense of betrayal when he departs from



them. Meanwhile, the Real intrudes in his visceral, unmediated sensations—trembling hands, tightening chest, forbidden desire—that evade full articulation and unsettle his inner balance. Together, these registers expose the fracture in his psyche, rooted in the enduring absence of his wife and the transgressive longing that his conditioned mind both rejects and cannot suppress.

Identity Crisis: A Cause to Idealize the Other

The story, “This World” revolves around the lives of the two characters, Jaya and Kanti, who become prey to their insatiable desires that constantly get displaced, leaving them fragmented. Despite having their roots connected to Kathmandu, both aspire to live the life that of the western. The way she describes her feelings of being “alienated” in her “own country” reflects her fragmented psyche (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 141). The lack that she experienced in Nepal became the foundation for her desire for the western life. Jaya whose family had returned to Nepal shared similar feelings about his native country as Kanti did and said that there was nothing “great about Nepal except for the fact that” it was their “home country” (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 141).

The common lack that they shared made them close to each other. However, they were misfits in both socio-cultural spaces: although they aspired for western way of life when in Nepal, they also craved for their belongingness to their homeland. As much as Jaya liked to party in Nepal, Kanti missed “the smell of garlic on her mother,” “the gossip with childhood friends,” “spicy Nepali dumplings” (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 148). Finally, both meet in Kathmandu at a bar and develop a passionate affair shattering the traditional Nepali notion of having physical relationship only after marriage.

Despite her mother’s warning, Kanti, a daughter of a middle-class family, who had also had two American boyfriends, now starts imagining conjugal life with Jaya, who belonged to the aristocrat Rana family. This reflects her unconscious mind resorting to the ‘symbolic order’ of society. Though she enjoys a liberal life like that of the west, she could not imagine having a live-in relationship with Jaya. Rather, she desired to achieve her ‘object of desire’ as Lacan calls it by marrying him. However, just as Lacan describes that the moment we get close to the ‘object of desire’ it gets displaced. The same thing happens with Kanti. The man with whom she had thought of spending her entire life is caught “kissing a woman” (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 151). With her desire getting displaced right in front of her eyes, something inside her breaks and makes her skeptical about true love. Disappointed, she moves back to America for her PhD. The narrator ends the story in a cliffhanger not showing any sign of satisfaction in the life of Kanti.

In “This World” by Upadhyay, the Lacanian registers of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real intertwine to expose the inner conflict of Jaya and Kanti. The Imaginary is revealed in their yearnings and identifications: both feel “alienated” in their “own country,” longing for European life, while Jaya admits there is nothing “great about Nepal except for the fact that” it is their “home country” (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 141). These idealized images—they imagine a European world as a remedy to their sense of lack—structure their desires and identity. The Symbolic is the network of cultural norms, social class, and moral expectations framing their



choices: Kanti, for example, despite enjoying a liberal western like style life, cannot bring herself to entertain a live-in relationship with Jaya; instead, she desires to “marry him,” aligning with the symbolic order of respectability, family and class. Finally, the Real intrudes in moments when fantasy and symbolic norms fail: the pivotal scene where Kanti sees Jaya “kissing a woman” (Upadhyay, 2001, p. 151) shatters the illusion, displaces her object of desire, and forces her to confront what she could not integrate—betrayal, loss, disillusionment. Thus, the story stages how their shared lack and displaced desires, shaped by the Imaginary and the Symbolic, are disrupted by traumatic Real, leaving their psyches fractured and their longings unresolved.

A Lacanian psychoanalytic reading of the stories reveals a core concern: characters driven by a sense of lack, continuously desiring to become or attain something they cannot (Tayefi, 2024; Qazi, 2011). The characters frequently act against social norms before giving in to the Symbolic Order because they are constantly torn between their conditioned roles and inner desires. After analyzing these two short stories from the perspective of Lacanian Psychoanalysis, it is observed that this internal struggle, which is based on the struggle between tradition and modernity, shatters their emotional psyche.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that a Lacanian framework provides a profound and nuanced tool for understanding the psychological depths of the characters in Samrat Upadhyay’s *Arresting God in Kathmandu*. The stories “The Limping Bride” and “This World” vividly portray how desire, rooted in an existential lack, perpetually displaces its object, leading to psychological fragmentation. The characters’ tumultuous journeys through the Imaginary and their traumatic encounters with the Real ultimately lead them back to the governing structures of the Symbolic Order, even if in a state of resignation or defeat.

Upadhyay, through his “relentlessly domestic” focus (Hutt, 2007, p. 45), thus captures a universal psychic drama within the specific cultural context of a modernizing Kathmandu. The paper concludes that the characters’ failures to find fulfillment are not merely personal tragedies but are illustrative of the postmodern human condition, where the self is constituted by a void that societal norms can mask but never truly fill. This research moves the critical conversation on Upadhyay’s work beyond thematic analysis, establishing Lacanian psychoanalysis as a vital lens for interpreting the complex interplay of desire, culture, and identity in his fiction.

Transparency Statement: The author confirms that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.

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