Manjushree Thapa. 2016. *All of Us in Our Own Lives*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company.

Our lives are so much entangled with each other. We cannot stay away from shaping the lives of others when we are trying to shape our own. This is the basic theme of Manjushree Thapa's recent novel *All of Us in Our Own Lives*. Primarily focused on the subject of Nepali women bound by various difficulties, the story revolves basically around Ava, Indira, Sapana, and Durga. The story also concentrates around the time of the massive earthquake, the declaration of a new constitution drafted by the Constituent Assembly, and also the rural Nepali society dependent upon the development agencies. More than that, the story focuses on the inside-narrative of development aid agencies against the backdrop of underdeveloped Nepali society.

Ava Berriden is a Nepali-born young adult adopted as a child by an affluent Canadian couple. She is successfully practicing law in Canada but decides to leave it all to come to Nepal to immerse herself in a new career

with an international non-government organization (INGO). She gets more freedom in life (compared to Nepali women) but is stigmatized by several factors like identity-making in a new place and ethnic belonging-ness in Nepal. Indira Sharma represents the copy-character of a *pakkā* Nepali middle class woman reaching the zenith of her career, yet bound by the society's stereotypes towards women. She also represents how difficult it is to be a working daughter-in-law in a high-caste Hindu family.

The contrasting characters of Ava and Indira are beautifully woven together. Their cultural upbringings are so different that their lives can be beautifully contrasted. Another character is Sapana, a rural girl dreaming high to develop her community. Finally, Durga is a maid at Indira's house who is victimized. She was the eldest of six unwanted daughters of her parents. Because of poverty her father left her with Indira when he was begging for work. Once left at the Sharma household, Durga's father never came to meet her. This is a true picture of poverty in Nepali society where girls are dominated by patriarchal practices. Apart from these characters, people like Gyanu are also to be noted as he is the face of an average Nepali fellow who is destined to go to the Gulf to shape his life with few earnings. Ava and Gyanu's separate returns to Nepal have a special message. They both seem driven by longings for home, though in Ava's case, the homeland is imaginary. The presentation of these diverse characters leads us towards the belief that every individual is a protagonist of his/her life, the hero of the life narrative within which he/she is entrapped.

The novel starts with short introductory stories of the major characters. We come to flip the page with the story of Ava which lets us assume some difficulties she is going through in her life. Then Gyanu is introduced. His love affair (in Dubai) with a Filipino lady Maleah is binding. Gyanu is supposed to come home because his father is sick and, as his sister Sapana had said, "Ba needs a son to light the funeral pyre, Dai. And he wants to see you one last time" (p. 5). The story moves on introducing slices of sufferings affecting individual characters. Indira, who must balance her elite status with traditional responsibilities at home, relishes her opportunities to travel to foreign cities through her job, where she imagines lives that might have been. Likewise, Sapana is able to leave her village on a tour to other parts of Nepal funded by a local Community Based Organization (CBO). On her visit, Sapana comes to realize that "the actions of one person shape the lives of others, and ... don't all of us in our own lives shape the lives of others?

They do" (p. 12). Slowly and gradually the independent happenings of all these characters' lives are woven into a single thread to become a beautiful garland.

Each character in the novel faces the real essence of a Nepali life. Indira has risen to a high rank in the Kathmandu INGO world. She is an independent, free, and ambitious woman though saddled with a lackluster, alcohol-abusing husband and an overbearing mother-in-law. While entertaining guests in her home she is afraid to have a glass of wine for fear of violating the norms of a good Nepali daughter-in-law. Her struggles at the office also are marked by patriarchal expectations. Her mother-in-law oppresses her at home, while male colleagues try to foil her career ambitions at the office. Yet, she staggeringly struggles and wins.

Ava feels trapped in a passionless marriage and meaningless job. She quits her law firm and her career as a lawyer. She knows the fact that she does not have any connection with Nepal. However, the country had given her a name—Ava. This might be the reason why she was driven to return to her "imaginary homeland." Once in Nepal she is reluctant to reveal her Nepali origins though the reasons for her concern are never clearly stated. Entangled with the past, she happens to visit the Bal Mandir Orphanage, from where she was adopted. Later she is disturbed to find that director of the same orphanage was charged with multiple counts of rape. This incident is the reality of orphanages in Nepal, as the author has also notified that she has taken the plot from a real incident that appeared in a newspaper.

Ava struggles to make sense of the convoluted aid industry in Nepal even as she struggles to find herself in her alien homeland. But once she gets a chance to leave her office confines and visit a rural CBO, many things start to make sense. She comes to clearly understand the loopholes, waste, and hypocrisy of the aid business. She comes in contact with Indira and both of them struggle to establish themselves in the patriarchal sphere in Nepal. The character of Ava is developed in a contrasting way. Having once lived in an orphanage, she now resides in a mansion. She comes to love the village and enjoys her stay there. She feels intimacy with Gyanu and Sapana and hopes she could help them in some way. These people were, at one time, strangers. But, in course of their sufferings, they come to know that all of our lives are connected.

With the bulk of its characters female, the novel ends up depicting different elements of a larger predicament of women in Nepal. Durga, a maid

in Indira's house, represents a common figure of the victimized maid. The four main characters—Ava, Indira, Gyanu, and Sapana—move in different social spheres. Their lives have nothing to do with shaping the lives of others. But, as we keep on turning the pages, we come to know that all of us are guided and shaped by all of us. These wide explorations of characters and vivid life-sketches let us feel life's intricacies with the expectations, realities, dreams, and relations. Among all, the strongest social message is that none of us can remain untouched by the other social spheres that surround us.

Thapa's lucid, omniscient narration is to be applauded. Writing about different cultures for readers from different backgrounds requires an adept hand, for sure. The incidents which are set in different parts of the world, Kathmandu city, and rural Nepal seem to flow smoothly together. Yet, the writer's descriptions of incidents taking place in villages near Butwal could have been more clearly developed. However, Thapa, a writer who now mostly lives in Canada, has again shown good skills as a novelist in presenting all of these social realities of our country.

Thapa's views about Nepali politics, constitutional provisions, society, and perception of women have been articulated clearly either through the mouths of individual characters or the omniscient narrator. Reflecting on Nepal, Ava observes that, "the new constitution, if it were ever drafted at all, was likely to deny women equal citizenship rights. Nepali culture remained defiantly patriarchal" (p. 76). Thus the writer's views are profoundly seen throughout the book, whether in talking about women's rights or the patriarchal domination of society. Again we can have an evergreen debate—should a novelist be politically dispassionate? Or is s/he free to impose her/his personal convictions on their readers?

Few novelists have examined the aid industry's efforts to uplift the socio-economic status of poor people. But Thapa spends much of her book critically examining the cynical platitudes that pass for actions within Nepal's development aid industries. One of the characters happens to summarize the condition in a sentence: "Fuck the aid industry, all it does is enrich the global elite" (p. 107). The condition exactly matches our context.

Few Nepalis writing in English attempt to depict the real and recent face of Nepal. Unlike the hackneyed *masalā* of Nepal in decades past that we often read, here Manjushree Thapa depicts Nepal of just the last few years through her fictional lens. Her depictions of political happenings, rural people's expectations of private agencies, and the social barriers experienced

by women are disturbing but they ring true. The author (in)directly calls for needed change to this unmasked reality.

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