

**Niranjan Kunwar. 2020. *Between Queens and the Cities*. Kathmandu: FinePrint.**

Niranjan Kunwar's memoir begins in 1999 and ends in 2019, and in the space of approximately 300 pages, Kunwar details his experiences of work, family, love and friendship in Kathmandu and New York as a gay man. The themes that the book grapples with—coming of age, identity, belonging and the search for a sense of self—are all staples in literary memoirs, but as the first English language memoir by a queer Nepali man, the book offers a perspective that is wholly unique. Kunwar is candid about his own inner life as well as the lives of his friends and compatriots in the Kathmandu English language arts and literary scene. Readers interested in either or both of those things will find much that is compelling in the book.

The memoir opens with Kunwar's descriptions of his formative early adult years as a college student in the United States. On coming to Kathmandu after his seventh semester of college, Kunwar says: "It was a difficult homecoming because the idea of home was already complicated in my mind. I had convinced myself that there was no way I could live openly in Nepal" (p. 10). This sense of the idea of home being complicated, because of Kunwar's queerness, because of the confining nature of Nepali social norms, is one that recurs in the book. "I try to imagine myself in Kathmandu, try to envision my place within the family, but I cannot. I cannot see myself belonging here. I feel threatened in this big house. All I want is the dark green walls of my small Astoria apartment" (p. 100) in New York.

Kunwar describes the freedom and the loneliness of his life as a teacher in New York in some very evocative passages. “Hard, difficult days with short lunch breaks. A deli sandwich, a cigarette and the sweet refreshing taste of Vitamin water. The days stacked on top of each other; the weeks were relentless, unending...” (p. 87). After twelve years in the United States, Kunwar’s green card application is rejected and he decides to move back to Nepal, and the second half of the memoir describes the “return,” Kunwar’s experience finding a space for himself in Kathmandu.

While Kunwar describes the initial experience of moving back as tumultuous, he finds much to like in the city soon enough. “I was zapped by Kathmandu, the way I had been zapped by New York almost a decade earlier, the way a wide-eyed newbie gets zapped by a new city” (p. 171). Kunwar writes a column for a men’s magazine called *The Nepali Man* (TNM) under the pseudonym Charlie Chaulagain about gay life in Kathmandu, begins contributing to *La.Lit* and *The Kathmandu Post*, gets involved in organizing art exhibitions, and establishes himself as a figure in the literary scene.

Along with his professional accomplishments, we also learn about Kunwar’s complicated relationships with his family members—described with empathy, although there is a hint of condescension in some of the statements Kunwar makes—“after all, my cousins were simple people who had not experienced the world the way I had” (p. 214). He takes his friendships as seriously as he does his familial relationships, and a particularly moving section of the book is one where he describes growing apart from Arun, one of the first gay friends he makes after coming back to Nepal, someone he has relied on for emotional support. Kunwar is clear about the importance of community in his life; there are many warm and affectionate passages about people who have left a lasting impression on the writer.

The last chapter of the memoir is the weakest. Kunwar interviews LGBTQI people he gets connected to through BDS (Blue Diamond Society) and devotes a couple of pages to telling each of their stories. The idea appears to be the contextualization of Kunwar’s own experiences within other stories of queer life in Nepal, an orchestra of LGBTQI voices in addition to Kunwar’s own. The reason it is so jarring, however, is the contrast between the writer’s rich, textured account of his own life and vignettes about other people’s lives that cannot possibly do justice to the nuances of their experiences.

Kunwar is an upper class man, and the Kathmandu sections of the book in particular describe a bourgeois life. Kunwar is transparent about this and

also about the fact that wealth doesn't shield him from the psychic injuries that loved ones and society at large inflict on those with non-normative sexualities and gender identities. The book is unwieldy and even boring in a few sections—there are events that Kunwar describes without much reflection on their emotional resonance or a sense of why the reader should care—but the clear prose makes the book an overall very enjoyable read for the general reader and anyone interested in queer studies.

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