

Prawin Adhikari. 2014. *The Vanishing Act: Stories*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications.

*The Vanishing Act* is a highly impressive debut collection of nine short stories by Prawin Adhikari. The stories vary in location from a village in Nepal, to Kathmandu and to California and range over time from early childhood, to student life, marriage and old age. Adhikari is an author, scriptwriter, teacher and translator based in Kathmandu. He has pursued his writing in multiple formats, including film scripts and journalism, and in both English and Nepali. Many of the descriptions in this collection are reminiscent of his series of vignettes published in *The Kathmandu Post*. Adhikari is also an assistant editor at *La.Lit* magazine in Kathmandu and, as his acknowledgements suggest, he undoubtedly benefits from being a part of a cohort of writers, artists and poets.

In *The Vanishing Act*, Adhikari portrays often tragic and lonely narrators, who quickly generate the reader's sympathy and curiosity. The stories incorporate subtle elements of the fantastic and unreal with believable and possibly semi-autographical first person narration. The stories, though not progressing in a linear fashion, can be viewed as stages illustrating the narrator's gradual self-awareness firstly in childhood through an awareness of others and shock at mortality, then in a difficult life abroad, then in unhappy middle age and marriage and, finally, in old age. Despite a persistent melancholy theme, often compounded by personal loss and confusion, many of the stories involve spirited narrators who retain optimism.

The story called 'Mayapuri,' for this reader, is the highlight of Adhikari's collection. He portrays a grown-up tragedy affecting a newlywed woman from the point of view of a child. The story takes place alongside a hydropower project and the young narrator's sexual awakening. As in the first story in the collection, 'The Boy from Banauti,' an indulged central male child narrator is made sharply aware of death through events beyond his control. The story is rendered melodramatic through this boy's eye view, as in the use of simple sentences and seen in a description of visiting a cinema hall (pp. 24–26). Adhikari evokes the loss of life through a respectful, child-centered lens which also captures the making of a widow and of the fortunate "women who now had the nasty job of persuading the less fortunate into widowhood" (p. 37).

In ‘The Boy from Banauti,’ Adhikari describes an unforgettable day from the perspective of a young male child who is skipping school. Descriptions of endless childhood reverie are interrupted by the tragic death of another child, also a distant relative. The next story, ‘Fortune,’ appears at first to describe a familiar family drama, also in a hydropower project setting. But the real centerpiece concerns an old couple and their changing relationship to the land around them. Lok Nath reminisces about “the spread of the land he knew” (p. 76), whilst development projects and the impact of money changes all that was once familiar, including his own family relationships. The tale contains drama and death but, as in many of the stories, the ending contains no resolution or filmy denouement.

‘The Messiah,’ perhaps Adhikari’s least successful story, is also the author’s most explicit engagement with recent politics in Nepal. The story mingles the nation’s post-1990 political disappointment with the disappointments of a left-leaning political activist. While elements of the narrator’s story are engaging, the complaints about Nepali politics may sound a little too familiar to many readers.

Both the stories called ‘The Game’ and ‘Stamp and Signature’ deal with unhappy middle-aged government officials in Kathmandu. In ‘The Game,’ Harihar is made to feel social shame and utter foolishness after neglecting his wife and misjudging her unhappiness. In ‘Stamp and Signature,’ Sunil’s ambitions to build a house and please his family become tied to corruption. Adhikari cleverly elaborates the inner thoughts and tensions of Harihar and Sunil as they struggle whilst striving to maintain outward respectability. As in many of the stories, Adhikari has taken great care to get the soundtrack right: the clang and rattle of a young wife cooking in a small flat in Kathmandu sounds true as does the feeling of the crowd (“subdued, on the verge of dejection, but resilient”) outside Sanchayakosh in Thamel (p. 124).

‘The Face ofCarolynn Flint’ (previously published in *New Nepal, New Voices* [Joshi and Baral 2008]) and ‘The Vanishing Act’ are two stories linked by being set in the USA. In ‘The Face ofCarolynn Flint’ the Nepali narrator, an aspiring writer and immigrant, describes a relationship he had with an older real estate agent, Carolynn Flint, whose face keeps on changing due to cosmetic surgery. The narrator is engaging, humorous and seemingly self-aware about his shoddy treatment of women in college. He tells the reader about a previous relationship: “Our son would have been named Alistair, after a dead cat. No wonder the relationship didn’t last” (p. 162). Under the

guidance of the narrator the fantastical element of Carolyn's changing face appears to fit the unreality of California and immigrant life. It also, perhaps, reflects the narrator's search for his own identity, another constant theme in the collection.

In the title story, 'The Vanishing Act,' the narrator describes his own and other immigrant lives in a city in California. The Nepali immigrant lives are put into humorous relief by the unreal appearance, at the start of the story, of Mexican immigrants who are escapees from a circus. Adhikari's narrator evokes the tragedy and small joys of his life: the tedium, the afternoons watching Hindi films, difficult encounters with the authorities, immense feelings of shame and the constant motion of immigrants searching for a better job, "enticed by half a dollar's rise in pay" (p. 198). Bhim Dai, an older illegal Nepali immigrant, feels worthless to his family, like other characters in the book, but he finds an outlet by vanishing "into the American mass" (p. 203).

The last story in the collection, 'The Condolence Picture,' returns, nostalgically, to Nepal. The narrator tells the story of finding out about an old school friend's death in an unexpected way. The narrator remembers his school days and how he bullied his dead friend before returning the reader to his present-day attempts to wish his friend goodbye. The story reflects recurring themes in the collection of loss, unhappiness, and "searching for Chetana" (p. 226).

The collection of nine stories reflects, in some ways, the worldview and life stages of a Brahman male who, while not always materially wealthy or happy, benefits from unspoken safety nets and an assumed confidence. The collection does touch on land, corruption, development, gender relations and other issues. However, the book largely avoids engagement with recent political and social changes as well as challenges to the narrator's worldview (only lamenting all politics in 'The Messiah'). A minor criticism of the collection is that, at some points, the stories reflect a (perhaps unintended) conservatism and nostalgia for an earlier Nepal. Future fiction by Adhikari may need more subtle recognition of changes occurring inside Nepal while hopefully building on this collection's outstanding characterization, dialogue and description of place.

In *The Vanishing Act* the reader quickly trusts Adhikari's gaze as he deploys technically brilliant and engaging prose. Making full use of the short story form, the stories pass swiftly over life between events. At key

moments time slows down as the narrator's aperture widens to recount memories, dramatic incidents and deaths in an absorbing fashion. Most impressively, Adhikari has written stories that are highly readable whilst not being either predictable in form or content or marred by literary devices and dazzle. The collection deserves to be widely read and re-read.

### **Reference**

Joshi, Sushma and Ajit Baral, eds. 2008. *New Nepal, New Voices: An Anthology of Short Stories*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications.

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