



Consumerism in Samrat Upadhyay's *Buddha's Orphans*

Suman Pokharel

Research Scholar,

Nepal Open University

sumanpokharel@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8431-4540>

Received: June 05, 2025

Revised & Accepted: July 06, 2025

Copyright: Author(s) (2025)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Abstract

Background: In the novel *Buddha's Orphans* (2010), the Nepali-American novelist Samrat Upadhyay (b. 1964) captures the notion of consumerism prevalent in Kathmandu city from the 1950s to the early 2000s. The author's presentation regarding the protagonists' longing and desire for material goods provides a wide area to explore in relation to the theme of consumerism.

Method: This study employs Jean Baudrillard's concept of consumerism to observe the consuming habits of the characters throughout the novel. This study applies the close reading and the textual analysis approach as a methodology to explore consumerism within the text.

Result: The study reveals that most of the novel's characters are driven by the societal concern about consumerism. The novel's characters struggle to maintain societal status through their belongings.

Conclusion: The protagonists Raja and Nilu in the novel are aware of society's consumer habits. They continuously try to create identity through the things they have won. The desire to elevate their social status motivates them to work hard, and by the end of the novel, they successfully achieve it.

Novelty: The aim of getting more, consuming more, and showing more is the perfect way to observe the theme of consumerism in the text. The characters are anxious about their social reputation, so they compete to maintain their living standards through their consumption habits, which helps us to delve into the depth of consumerism in the novel.

Keywords: Consumerism, culture, fashion, materialism, social status



Introduction

[Samrat Upadhyay's *Buddha's Orphans* \(2010\)](#) depicts how merit prevails in Kathmandu. The issue raised in this text is that consumer culture has become the city's dominant culture and has assumed a status marker role for its people. The person who can collect an increasing amount of materials is considered prestigious in the city space. The belief that happiness depends on wealth and possessions is highly valorized in this concept. The urban space is filled with shopping malls, restaurants, movie theaters, and branded shops, encouraging customers to spend as much money as they can afford. Sometimes, people engage in extravagance due to social pressure to maintain prestige. Competition for social status has raised the material culture in the city area. The showcase habit of people has hampered the lifestyle of middle-class people. They cannot afford all the required materials, but they have to invest their money unwillingly due to social pressure.

Financial stability is a significant concern for consumer habits. If there is a lack of wealth to spend on materialistic goods, the problem arises, as seen in the novel's protagonists, Raja and Nilu. They are drawn to society's consumer culture and want to live their lives accordingly. However, they find it challenging to fulfill their needs with the desired materials after marriage. They do not have enough money to eat in restaurants as they did before the marriage and decide to struggle in Kathmandu city. Many ups and downs follow in their lives, and later, they get a successful lifestyle. They become financially strong and have a house and a loving family in Kathmandu. The ultimate desire of their lives is to be wealthy and maintain social status.

Contemporary Readings of *Buddha's Orphans*

Many critics have approached [Upadhyay's *Buddha's Orphans* \(2010\)](#) with different perspectives. The text is observed through a diaspora, an English writer of foreign origin, Kathmandu as the center of writing, a multigenerational story, realism, a political story, and Indian representation in the writing of Upadhyay. All these perspectives have their limitations in the study.

Upadhyay is a Nepali-origin American writer who writes about Nepali society and culture. His writing captures the originality of the Nepali lives. In that sense, many critics review Upadhyay's work as Nepali diasporic literature. [Adhikari \(2024\)](#) writes:

Samrat Upadhyay is a leading figure in Nepali diasporic literature. His works, such as "Arresting God in Kathmandu" and "Buddha's Orphans," offer nuanced perspectives on cultural assimilation and the identity struggles faced by the Nepali diaspora. Upadhyay's characters often find themselves caught between two worlds, illustrating the complexities of navigating cultural differences. His writing provides a rich tapestry of stories that reflect the challenges and triumphs of the Nepali diaspora in the United States. (p. 7)

Nostalgia and longing are integral to diasporic literature. The person who lives in a foreign land remains mentally in his/her birthplace. Writers far from their motherland usually write about their home, society, and country. In that sense, [Adhikari \(2024\)](#) further says, "Samrat



Upadhyay's 'Buddha's Orphans' illustrates this nostalgia through vivid descriptions of Nepali culture and the emotional ties to the homeland"(p. 9). Upadhyay's other texts are also related to Nepali society, and he aims to disseminate Nepali culture and tradition worldwide through his writing.

Upadhyay writes about Nepal, but he writes in English. The advantage of writing in English is that the writer can reach a vast audience. As [Upadhyaya \(2014\)](#) writes, "He is considered as the first Nepali fiction writer to be published in the West" (2014, p. 2). Upadhyay writes in English, and his works are very famous in foreign. He got the prestigious Whiting Award for his famous text, *Arresting God in Kathmandu* (2001). The writer Upadhyay gained fame for his English writing, as he is part of the academic sector in the West and has a distinctive way of presenting Nepal in his texts.

[Nelson \(2012\)](#) explores why Upadhyay always writes about Kathmandu in most texts. He further writes, "Despite being published in the 'West,' Upadhyay's subject has remained Nepal, specifically, Kathmandu. Like Woody Allen's New York, Upadhyay's fiction is deeply immersed in the social life of a single city. Despite this geographic focus, critics have consistently identified in Upadhyay's work an emphasis on universal themes that trump attention to any particular location" (2012, p. 1). It is a fact that Upadhyay writes about Kathmandu in his text. In the novel *Buddha's Orphans*, Kathmandu is also the setting for most of the story. Kathmandu is the city where the writer was born and spent his youth. In that sense, he knows Kathmandu better and can write better about it. [Leidner \(2010\)](#) describes the text as *Buddha's Orphans* (2010) is the multigenerational story of an orphan boy and the girl he is fated to love, set against Nepal's political upheavals"(2010, p. 2). The orphan boy Raja opposes Nepal's political system. He is sometimes involved in protest rallies and is imprisoned for a few days. In this regard, some critics view the novel from a political perspective.

[Mishan \(2010\)](#) writes in *The New York Times* about the novel, mentioning how it represents life in Nepal. She writes, "In ambition and heft, however, 'Buddha's Orphans' is a departure for Upadhyay. The story traverses half a century of political and social upheaval in Nepal, from the 1960s to the present day" (2010, p. 17). The novel is set in the extreme political context of Nepal. There was the direct rule of monarchy, and due to its effects, many people suffered. Throughout the novel, the protagonist also raises his voice in opposition to the rulers. [Date \(2021\)](#) searches for the depiction of India in the literary work of Upadhyay. He writes, "It is quite interesting to note here that to escape from the bitter realities of their failed married life, Upadhyay's characters have a typical tendency to turn to listen to the Indian music, particularly the ghazals by Jagjit and Chitra Sigh, the famous husband-and-wife singers of India" (2021, pp. 222-3). Nepali and Indian cultures share many similarities. Different critics have analyzed the text from their perspectives. The text is primarily interpreted from a diasporic and political perspective, as well as a multigenerational narrative. The existing critical insights cannot address the consumer culture that prevail in the novel.



Upadhyay wants to show the consumerism of Kathmandu city in his text. The consumption of many goods and foods is considered a symbol of social prestige in urban spaces.

Consumerism, Baudrillard, and Social Status

Upadhyay's [*Buddha's Orphans* \(2010\)](#) raises the issue of consumerism in the city of Kathmandu. Upadhyay highlights various events in the novel that are directly linked to people's consumer habits within the city space. Urban areas are highly praised for their consumerism. Those who can accumulate many material goods are considered prestigious individuals. The social status of the people is determined by their wealth and property in the city. The goods consumed are related to the sign value. People are more interested in unnecessary showcases of the materials than in their practical needs. Film and fashion, western movies and songs, clothing and makeup, and restaurant eating habits are areas where city people mainly invest their earnings. The availability of various goods in the city space easily attracts people to consume more and maintain their societal hierarchy.

This study applies [*Baudrillard's* \(1998\)](#) concept of consumerism to approach and analyze the theme of the literary text. According to Baudrillard, modern society is dominated by consumption; people consume goods not for practical needs but for symbolic value. Consumption of goods is directly related to status and identity in society. A close reading of the novel *Buddha's Orphans* is conducted to interpret and analyze consumerism within the text.

Consumerism in *Buddha's Orphans*

Upadhyay's [*Buddha's Orphans* \(2010\)](#) explores the theme of consumerism in Kathmandu city from the 1950s to the early 2000s. The city is not portrayed as modern as it is today, though we can see the gradual process of modernity and consumer culture in Kathmandu through this text. The most significant portion of the text is set in Kathmandu, and most characters are also from the same city. Role of the commodity in the day-to-day life of characters, their materialistic longings for maintaining a standard of living, property transfer, anxiety for prestige and social competition based on materialistic goods, fashion sense of the characters, and the local economic condition of Kathmandu at that time are the sides observed through the lens of consumerism.

Structurally, Upadhyay divides the novel into two sections, each comprising a book. Under the two books, there are three parts each, and in each part, there are subtopics that correlate with the stories in the plot. The story of the orphan baby boy starts from book one, part I, and the topic 'Orphan.' The setting of the story is 1962 Kathmandu. A few months old, the baby was abandoned by his mother, and the elderly man Bokey Ba found him. He takes the baby to Kaki, who sells grilled corn on the pavement of Rani Pokhari. When they search for the child's mother but are unsuccessful in getting his mother, Kaki takes the responsibility to look after the child and gives him the name Raja. The duty of Kaki continues to raise the child as if it were her own and sell corn. When Raja was six years old, one day, he brought a man as a customer for Kaki's corn.



The man named Ganga Da offers Kaki a housemaid job and a place to live in his own house so that Raja can attend school. Kaki accepts the proposal for the sake of the boy. When they start to live at the house of Ganga Da, his mentally disturbed wife, Jamuna, makes a close bond with Raja. She was a childless woman, so the presence of Raja in her family made her happy. She shows her affection to Raja as if he were her own son, which makes Kaki jealous, and she withdraws Raja from school, taking him to the house of Muwa, where she works as a servant. Muwa, the recently widowed woman, has started to consume alcohol, which makes her forget her responsibilities. She has a four-year- daughter, Nilu, who attends a private school, St. Augustine's. Though Muwa restricts Nilu from playing with the lower-class child Raja, she ignores her mother. Raja and Nilu spend time together playing and learning things from the book. Nilu helps Raja to read the textbooks. One day, Raja fled to find Ganga Da's house and arrived there. Ganga Da, to control his wife's erratic mood swings, believes that Raja's presence in his family is essential, so he bribes officials to create documents that prove Raja is their son.

Many years later, when Nilu got suspended from her school, she complained about it to her mother, but in her drunken state, she could not respond to the problem of her daughter. Nilu thinks a great deal about Raja as she grows up. She goes in search of Raja in the Lainchaur area and finds him. They got close to each other, got married at a temple, and started their new journey without informing their parents. They stay in a cheap rented room and make good relationships with their landlady's daughter-in-law, Bhairavi. Their life moves ahead happily, but the condition of Ganga Das' wife worsens due to Raja's absence. Nilu's mother disapproves of Nilu being with a person from a lower social class. Nilu gets a job in school, but Raja's job is unstable. He works briefly in a bookstore and later as an editor for a travel magazine. They give birth to a baby boy, Maitreya. Later, Ganga Da meets them and offers them a place to stay in his new house, where they settle. Their son dies due to a fever, which leads to long grieving for Nilu. Raja proposes that they stay separately for a while to improve their condition. As Nilu's depression worsens, she sees the image of her son everywhere. The separation from Nilu leads Raja to live with a younger musician, Jaya. Nilu is aware of Raja's betrayal, and she becomes jealous, using a young man, Shiva, as part of her revenge in front of her husband, who is also her boyfriend. Book One concludes the story up to here.

The story again moves to the present day. According to Nilu's plan to search for a daughter in America, Nilu sends her husband only. She does not go because she has a strange intuition that her daughter is already back in Kathmandu. The story develops with the presence of a young woman in a black overcoat. She rented the same room where Raja and Nilu used to stay. Bhairavi has grown older. Her grown-up children do not stay with her. She is alone. The woman in a black coat was pregnant, and Bhairavi helped her immensely. The woman turns out to be Ranjana. She got pregnant by a black man in Chicago. She could not abort the fetus, and it was her guilt that struck her to share it with others, so she left America



and returned to Kathmandu. Nilu continuously searches for her daughter in every nook and corner of Kathmandu and finally finds her at Bhairavi's house.

Most of the characters in the novel are drawn to the consumption of commodities and maintain their social status through their standard of living. Material culture and consumer culture of the then-Kathmandu city are prevalent factors in the novel. According to [Baudrillard \(1998\)](#), modern society is highly dominated by consumption, and people engage in it to maintain social status in a consumer-oriented society. He further says, "...since posing the problem in terms of the equalization of consumption is already to substitute the pursuit of objects and signs (level of substitution) for the real problems and their logical and sociological analysis" ([1998, p. 51](#)). People do not always consume goods for necessity; sometimes, the collected materials work for symbolic value. Observing society tends to lead people to purchase unnecessary things as well.

Initially, the novel portrays the daily life of the people in the then-Kathmandu city. The surrounding area of Rani Pokhari, where Kaki sells her grilled corn, is always crowded. Materials like peanuts, newspapers, combs, and mirrors are sold on the pavements. There is a Biswojyoti cinema hall where people can enjoy watching movies. The city's facilities enable people to consume more goods and services. The novel further develops the story and tells about the incidents. One day, Kaki's son accuses her of stealing money and kicks her out of the house. She leaves the house and requests that Vaishali give her a corner on the ground floor of their settlement. Vaishali's husband, Dindayal, works as a peon for "... a merchant who owned several spice and sweets shops in the city" ([2010, p. 13](#)). In the city, people's expectations are always high. They want to consume more, or else they want to earn more. Consuming more and earning more have determined the social status in the city.

The migration of villagers to the capital city in search of an easier life is observed throughout the novel. They talk about the hardships of village life. Many people are involved in small businesses in the Rani Pokhari area. It makes it difficult for Kaki to compete with them, but she ends her pavement business when she gets a servant job in Ganga Da's house. The city is not as easy as people think it is. It is brutal and complex, yet the city has many possibilities; in that sense, people migrate to the city every year worldwide. Kaki's life also faces many difficulties in surviving in the city. Her desire to provide for Raja's basic needs fails when he flees in search of Ganga Da's house, expecting a better and easier life. When Raja reaches Ganga Da's house successfully, "...Ganga Da went to Mahan Restaurant to fetch some food" ([2010, p. 69](#)). City people often prefer restaurant food to their own home-cooked meals. It is related to ease and a status symbol, indicating that they can afford to buy ready-made food from their desired place. Raja, a boy who grew up in the city, wants a quality of life that suits his existence. Ganga Da's intention to admit Raja to boarding school, many toys and bright clothes bought for Raja, and Jamuna's plea to go to the movies are examples of consumerism prevailing in Kathmandu city.

Similarly, the alcoholic and smoking habits of Muwa can also be taken as part of the consumer culture. "Consumers, retailers, property actors, and the government are considered



the main groups of strategic actors performing spatial practices in 'consumption space'..." ([Spierings, 2006, p. 17](#)). The city's residents want to enjoy and experience a variety of food and goods. The wealth left by Muwa's husband allows her to waste money on such things, which brings her pleasure for a while. Her husband was so rich that "He was the owner of one of the city's first travel agencies, housed in an office with large glass windows in Basantapur. He also owned pieces of land and shares in Jute and a substantial amount of factories throughout various" ([2010, p. 51](#)). The people of the city are expected to earn much money, so they invest in different sectors. It gives them social prestige and a good income, which they can invest in to maintain their quality of life.

Money is the primary source of fulfilling all people's desired needs. Sometimes, money is valued more highly than social relations, the environment, and community in consumer culture. [Baudrillard \(1998\)](#) says, "Social discrimination, power and so on - those things which remain the key factors - have been shifted away from income or wealth pure and simple" ([1998, p. 54](#)). High earnings and the collection of expensive materials have been status markers in society. In this sense, the anxiety of social competition has affected the people in the city area. Raja, as a poor orphan boy, has this feeling at an underlying level; with his growing age, he desires the fulfillment of all his necessities, including a house in Kathmandu city. Raja grew up observing the attractive goods of the market but could not fulfill his desires in his childhood, so he dreamed of fulfilling them in the future.

In contrast to Raja, Nilu is born and raised in a rich family. She gets the opportunity to read in a good private school, St. Augustine's. She experienced an easy life in her childhood. The novel says:

St. Augustine's was filled with the girls from the aristocratic Rana and Shah families, some of whom still lived in the European-style mini-palaces scattered throughout the city. They spoke of silver cutlery in their houses. They described family trips they took to Hong Kong, or London, or Kashmir, where they were driven around in luxury cars as they shopped. ([2010, p. 109](#))

When Nilu reaches sixteen and remembers Raja, she searches for him in the Lainchaur area and finds him at Birey Dai's shop, discussing the king and royal family. She had never heard such talk about the king from anyone. She was in the same school as many students from aristocratic families, so she had just heard about materialism from her friends.

Before getting married, Raja and Nilu enjoyed their lives by watching movies at Biswojyoti Cinema Hall. Their adult life is full of happiness. They go wherever they like and eat whatever they prefer. "They were passing the Rum Doodle Ice Cream place near the British council and Raja took her arm and guided her inside" ([2010, p. 140](#)). The city offers a diverse range of food options. They go to restaurants with their loved ones and spend their time eating their desired foods. "In terms of material standard of living, sustained economic growth has dramatically increased spending on discretionary consumer purchases and urbanites have enthusiastically consumed globally branded foodstuffs, pop-music videos and fashion" ([Davis, 2005, p. 692](#)). Eating food outside the home kitchen is a fashion in the city



area. "They lingered in the Durbar Square area, making their way down Pie Alley. At Chi and Pie, they sat for an hour, eating chocolate and lemon meringue, drinking coffee, listening to Mick Jagger playing on the restaurant's cassette player" (2010, p. 149). Different eating stations in the city cater to a variety of tastes. People in the city consume food at their preferred place and taste. Raja and Nilu, as the city's grown couple, follow the city's outside eating culture.

Tourist areas like Thamel inspire the consumer culture of Kathmandu. "Consumer culture is premised upon the expansion of capitalist commodity production, which has given rise to a vast accumulation of material culture in the form of consumer goods and sites for purchase and consumption" (Featherstone, 1990, p. 5). After their marriage, Raja and Nilu rented a room near the Thamel area. They frequently go to Thamel to have their desired food items. "On Friday nights, Raja coaxed Nilu to the Third Eye, or K.C.'s Restaurant, and they joined other Regulars, often tourists, to drink beer or Chaange or tongba and snack on kotheys and momos" (2010, p. 173). It is due to the tourist area that Thamel usually looks busy. It is where tourists from different countries gather, sharing their cultures and blending them with Nepali culture. Western songs and dances in Thamel entertain foreigners, and they also attract city people because they are always searching for refreshments and new tastes to satisfy their moods. It is part of their lifestyle.

One of the fundamental requirements for consumer culture is access to money. "Consumption consists of human and human-induced transformations of materials and energy" (Kennedy & Krogman, 2008, p. 172). Without money, nobody can enjoy fulfilling even the most basic requirements of life. During their Thamel days, Raja and Nilu gradually found it difficult to balance their expenses with Nilu's earnings. When Raja realizes it, he seeks the job and works in a bookstore. He could not sustain himself there for long, and later, he began working as an editor for a travel magazine. After the birth of Maitreya, Ganga Da comes to visit him and proposes they shift to his new house, "It doesn't make sense that I have a house in Lainchour," Ganga Da said, "and I have a house in Chabel, but my son and my daughter-in-law and y grandchild are living in a crummy flat..." (2010, p. 211). Nilu and Raja move to the house of Ganga Da, "where the flat had already been furnished with brand-new furniture —a sofa, a dining room set, and a large bed" (2010, p. 212). The house was suitable for a small family to survive. Raja becomes happy by shifting that house, and he makes his ambition about his son and says to his wife, "We have to provide him the best life he can get. We'll send him to the best colleges, we'll make sure that he has everything he needs. We must never let him feel that he lacks anything, Nilu" (2010, p. 215). However, it is unfortunate for them that their son dies of a fever, which leads to a temporary separation between them.

Conclusion

Through *Buddha's Orphans*, Upadhyay aims to demonstrate that consumerism has prevailed in Kathmandu. His formation of many characters helps to observe the intention of consuming goods in the city space. People in the city consume various materials and services



to satisfy their needs and maintain their social status. Protagonists Raja and Nilu are the central figures who dream of material well-being in the city. They even experience the tourist culture of the Thamel area and spend their leisure time visiting different places in the city. After their marriage, they represent the middle-class people of the city, and it is evident that it is challenging for middle-class individuals to fulfill all their material needs for survival. The city observes every person through a materialist perspective, and social hierarchy is determined based on the accumulation of material goods.

As city dwellers, Raja and Nilu are pressured by the social perspective of materialistic observation. They are knowingly or unknowingly involved in the race of consumerism, but in the middle phase of life, they struggle to maintain it and start earning money. The novel suggests that the city is both a space of consumer culture and a space of diverse opportunities. If continuous struggle is pursued in the city, it can lead to financial success, ultimately enhancing the quality of life. The city's environment itself fosters competition for material goods. A person with good financial conditions tends to gain social prestige. Raja and Nilu are aware of the prevailing consumerism in the city. With their extreme efforts, they can also achieve financial stability and social status. With many ups and downs in the character's lives, the writer aims to portray the harsh reality of consumer culture prevailing in Kathmandu city.

Acknowledgments

This paper is the outcome of “Rethinking Cities Across South Asia-III,” an initiative of Dr. Komal Phuyal from the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal. I express my gratitude to Prof. Dr. Amma Raj Joshi, former Vice Chancellor of Far Western University, Kanchanpur, Nepal. Prof. Joshi is the patron of the Research Initiative. I acknowledge the mentorship of Dr. Phuyal from the conceptualization stage to the final preparation of the manuscript.



References

- Adhikary, R. P. (2024). Navigating identity: Cultural continuity in Nepali diasporic literature. *Mongolian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 9(19), 1–11.
- Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The consumer society: Myths and structure*. SAGE Publications.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press.
- Date, D. M. (2021). Depiction of India in the fictional works of Samrat Upadhyay and Manjushree Thapa. *Knowledge Resonance*, (Special Issue 3), 222–225.
- Davis, D. (2005). Urban consumer culture. *The China Quarterly*, (183), 692–709.
- Featherstone, M. (1990). Perspectives on consumer culture. *Sociology*, 24(1), 5–22.
- Jayne, M. (2006). Cultural geography, consumption and the city. *Geography*, 91(1), 34–42.
- Kennedy, E. H., & Krogman, N. (2008). Towards a sociology of consumerism. *International Journal of Sustainable Society*, 1(2), 172–189.
- Leidner, L. (2010). Andrej Blatnik. *World Literature Today*, 84(5), 5–5.
- Mishan, L. (2010, September 8). Life in Nepal. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/12/books/review/Mishan-t.html>
- Nelson, A. (2012). Khatam Kathmandu: The question of place in Samrat Upadhyay's fiction. *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, 17(1), 3–23.
- Spierings, B. H. A. (2006). *Cities, consumption and competition: The image of consumerism and the making of city centres* [Doctoral dissertation, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen].
- Upadhyay, S. (2010). *Buddha's orphans*. Rupa Publications.
- Upadhyaya, P. (2014). *The question of Nepal and Nepalianness in Samrat Upadhyay's The Guru of Love* (Master's thesis). University of Bergen.
- Veblen, T. (1918). *The theory of the leisure class*. B. W. Huebsch.