



**Role of Translation in Altering Cultural Boundaries: A Study of the English Translation of Indra Bahadur Rai's *Aja Ramita Cha* by Manjushree Thapa**

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates how the cultural turn of translation has created a conducive environment for cultural interaction in literature. Translation works as a mediation of cultures between time and space which bridges the gap between regional writings and its representation in mainstream literature. This paper attempts to consider the effectiveness of the Nepali text *Aja Ramita Cha* (by Indra Bahadur Rai, 1964) in English translation by Manjushree Thapa. The translated text is named as *There's a Carnival Today* (2017). The paper focuses on the role of English translation in mainstream Nepali culture and tradition and global readership. It attempts to examine how the translated version of the text vividly encapsulates the minute geographical details and the manoeuvrings of the regionalist flavours with the same tenderness as the original version of the novel. To that effect the exoticized land of red pandas and rhododendrons has been replaced with the flesh and blood characters and their problems of livelihood in the region, through the translated text, globally.

**Keywords:** *Translation, culture, Nepali, regional, literature.*

Indra Bahadur Rai's *Aja Ramita Cha* (1964) is set in the scenic backdrop of a small hill station Darjeeling located towards the northernmost part of West Bengal, India. The region, topographically located in the Eastern Himalayas with an average elevation of 2045 meters or 6709ft, shares national and international boundaries. Geographically secluded and culturally diverse from other states, it stands unique in terms of its culture, language, ethnicity from the rest of the Indian states. This sub-Himalayan ranges are also popularly known as 'leemayelyang' or as the land of hidden wealth and the town is referred to as 'Dorje-lyang' - the land of thunderbolt (Thapa 223).

From around 1990s, translation played an important role in interpreting culture. Initially Translation Studies under the aegis of the structuralist and post structuralist approaches, had focussed on lexical and grammatical issues only. Utmost importance was given only to the fundamental unit of translation such as words, syntax and meaning from the source text to the

translated text. The ‘cultural turn’ attempted to import the meaning further in Translation Studies, as a need was felt to interpret things beyond words. Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere in *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation* (1998) used the term ‘cultural turn’ as a metaphor and brought about a revolution in Translation Studies. They focussed on the interaction between translation and culture and dismissed all types of translation at the linguistic level. Bassnett in her essay “Culture and Translation” in the book, *A Companion to Translation Studies* (2007), wrote that the ‘cultural turn’ in translation catered to readers across cultures and allowed the cultural components to immerse into the processes of translation. Andrew Lefevere in his book *Translation Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (1992), viewed translation as a ‘rewriting of original text’ wherein the translated text interprets culture, history and politics differently. Cultural turn is a paradigmatic shift where the focus is shifted from the writer and the linguistic translation to socio-political and historical issues of the text. The words and phrases in a translation, work as bridges to communicate cultures, ideas and thoughts across boundaries. The regional and geographical boundaries crumble down with the words being interpreted in terms of culture. Thus, ‘words are bridges’ where the ideas, stories and cultures travel across time and space.

India has a unique literary landscape with its absolutely staggering multilinguistic cultures. Its diverse linguistic tradition is so complex that often the communities within a state do not have access to each other’s conversations. This gap has been greatly countered with the English translation of the regional texts. Nepali literature, for instance, remains limited within the region amidst the Nepali speaking community. This is primarily the reason for the stereotypical idea about the community as the ‘other’ or ‘tribal’. It is obvious that Nepali language and literature, often aligned with the neighbouring state of Nepal, failed to secure a prominent place in mainstream Indian academia. It does not form a core part of the academic discourse in India. This reality does not limit itself to Nepali literature specifically, but it is also true in the general context of other indigenous world literatures today. Translation Studies thus open doors to lesser-known cultures, languages and literatures.

The original version of the text, *Aja Ramita Cha* by Indra Bahadur Rai, published in the year 1964, depicts the story of old Darjeeling of post-independent era. Though Indra Bahadur Rai has gained national and international recognition, he has not been read widely outside Northeastern India. Through her translation, Manjushree Thapa hopes that Indian readers will “discover one of the finest writers of their country”, and will “immerse themselves

in his thoughtful, loving and occasionally anguished view” of Darjeeling (Thapa 227). The original version captures a convincing picture of life in old Darjeeling espousing the contemporary issues of the tea garden labourers agitation against the tea garden owners. The issues pertaining to identity, the lingering sense of crisis and longings of the people of this region are addressed in the text. The crushing down of the labourers agitation and the killing of tea garden workers directly corresponds to the social milieu of the time when Thapa translated the text. As Indra Bahadur Rai rightly said that ‘literature should be timeless’, it aptly fits in with the translation of *Aja Ramita Cha* by Manjushree Thapa, translated in the year 2017. The translated version can be read with its resemblance of the Darjeeling of 1964 and the Gorkhaland agitation of 2017 and the draconian measures applied by the state to stop the agitation. The text documents the tea garden labourers movements against the tea garden owners and the state machinery acting on it, wherein a small disagreement between the workers and the owners took the shape of a mass movement with the shooting down of the labourers in 1964, corresponding to the shutdown of hills for 104 days in 2017. Both the writer and the translator have realized a keen sense of responsibility towards their community to articulate about their past as they found themselves in between remembering and forgetting. Janak, the protagonist, becomes the mouthpiece of the writer when he expresses his immense desire to write a novel about old Darjeeling and says: “Someone ought to have written a novel about old Darjeeling...Darjeeling is ours and we are Darjeeling`s” (Thapa 170). There is a strong desire in the translator to map Darjeeling in global space as “Darjeeling has always loomed large in Nepali language and imagination: it has played a vital role in developing the cultural life” of the region (Thapa 229). The translation foregrounds the love for the land and the loss of stability in the Nepali speaking community. The people of the region then stood in a ‘limbo’, still looking for their roots when they couldn’t identify themselves in terms of similarity and continuity with the cultures from the mainland. The sense of loss and longing dominating the conscience of the Nepali people living in Darjeeling gets exposed with the translation of this novel.

Lefever and Bassnett believed that translation should take cultural, social and political components into its context. The novel has descriptions of the vivid landscape of Darjeeling and its adjoining areas. The description of the undulating mountains connecting Lebong to Siliguri, the greenery of Sukna forest and the vivid description of Darjeeling town makes it an exuberant read for the readers. The translation also tends to keep the regionalist flavours intact for its readers about the surreal beauty of the region. The description of the mystic hill station

is encapsulated with equal care and caution by Thapa as in the original text. The description of Darjeeling town from Jalpahar hills can be visualized vividly in the following lines:

Darjeeling town lay sprawled out before his eyes... the small red and green wood houses on the Singmari hill on the way north... The clock on the four faced Capital towers showed that it was almost six o'clock... Darjeeling's fashionable homes and offices were in that area.... The expanse of Chowrasta was also somewhere around there... At the center stood chowk bazar, with countless black dots milling around. Furthest away in the hazy distance were the Falelung and Sandakpur mountain ranges. The dazzling Himalayas were even whiter and more attractive in the background. (Thapa 68).

The setting of the novel is often exoticized as a scenic hill station with its snow-clad mountains, picturesque tea gardens and diverse Himalayan biodiversity. It is mostly romanticized as a place of mountains, orchids and rhododendrons. The translation of this work attempts to nullify such a popular assumption about Darjeeling. It tends to serve the world with the flesh and blood characters, the real individuals and the challenges of their livelihood which works as a way of appropriation of popular narratives about the romanticized land. The characters in the novel have been selected meticulously from Nepali households and picked from the streets of Darjeeling which give the reader a vivid and convincing picture of the lives of the people in the hills. The novel addresses the issues of tea garden workers and their marginalisation in their own native land; the exploitation of tea garden workers by tea garden owners in terms of low wages and extensive working hours. Seven tea garden workers were arrested and put on trial when they asked for a raise in the wage and better working hours. They were framed for attempting to murder the manager of the tea estate: "For this offence, the estate had launched a case against seven of its workers in the session court citing Section 307/34" (Thapa 158). Following the trial, "the session judge had acquitted four of the accused men, and given three- Nildhoj, Bhaire and Aitraj - hard sentence of five years imprisonment each" (Thapa 178). The translation of this work provides the ground realities of the people living in the region, their aspirations and apprehensions in global space. The issue of the migrants from Nepal as indentured labourers in the tea gardens posing threat to the stability of the indigenous community is addressed here. Bhudev, the eminent political leader in the novel, observes that people from Nepal, "year after year, migrated over to settle in Darjeeling and Assam" (Thapa 68). The racial hatred and violence because of these complex issues of migration etc, are voiced poignantly in the novel and voiced aptly in the translated text. The popular discontent among the people in the hills enveloped the region in the dark mist of violence, "The following day

some boys stopped a Land Rover that was coming up from the plains and broke the Bengali man's eyeglasses and threw away his suitcase''(Thapa 70).The underlying current of unrest also took over the market in Darjeeling: "That evening, again came news - a few boys had barged into a Marwari trader's shop in Daronga Bazar and hurled rocks, breaking the windows and beating up the shopkeeper as well...All shops were closed.'"(Thapa 70).

The translation thus debunks the representation of Darjeeling as a remote haven or as the 'mysterious other'. This belt of Himalayas, considering its geographical remoteness, is often homogenised as a tribal area. The communities have been always attributed with the nomenclatures as primitive, animalistic and tribal. The translation of this novel tries to reconfigure the scenic hill station by tracing its historical significance. Set in the backdrop of the post-independence era, the novel talks about the British dominated Darjeeling famously known as 'Gundribazar', - which was perhaps one of the most cosmopolitan of the hill stations in India. The region shares a trade route with Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet, establishing Darjeeling as an international commercial hub. This small hill station was significant as the melting pot of diverse cultures and languages. The assimilation of different Himalayan tribes was intensified in the region with the establishment of tea gardens. The favourable location and climate of the place have been noted in various documents of British India. In 1929, Captain J.D Hebert, Deputy Surveyor-General, while examining Darjeeling wrote: "Darjeeling has many advantages, connected with a lofty range, which throws out its ramifications in every direction, a level road of any desirable extent may be cut with little trouble, it has many beautiful places in the vicinity'' (52). Considering its strategic location, Sir William Benedict requested General Lloyd to negotiate the cession of Darjeeling with then Raja of Sikkim, Chador Namgyal. In 1835, Darjeeling was granted to British India on lease from Sikkim with an inception of Darjeeling as a sanitorium. The place eventually worked as a centre to explore the northeastern frontiers as Alastair Lamb (1960) states, "The cession of Darjeeling was an event of the greatest importance in the history of northern frontier of India. Not only did it place the British in close contact with the hill states, their peoples and their politics, but also it provided a constant reminder of the possibilities of trade with Tibet.'" (Lamb 103). The novel also makes reference to the tradeline between Darjeeling and Tibet through Da Namgyal "who conducted trade in Tibet'' (Thapa 60). He was a friend of Janak with Sikkimese origin and a businessman through whom Janak sought to establish his trade link further towards North. Charles Bell also testified that "half of the entire trade between Tibet and India had passed through this thriving town. (Bell 1928: 113). In the first two decades of the present century,

Dozey saw in the Darjeeling market, “Marwaris (engaged in money lending business), Kashmiris and Punjabis (dealers in silks, skins and furs), Nepalese (dealers in turquoise wear, coral, amber, jade, ornament, kukris, knives, brass-ware), Parsees (dealers in Japanese silver-ware and men's store) as well as grocers from the plains and Bhutia pawn brokers and cheap jacks” (90). However, the translation of the novel foregrounds the post-independence scenario in Darjeeling which informs the readers about the contemporary realities of the place. Darjeeling, which once upon a time shared the glorious past as a centre of trade and commerce, today recedes to the margins. The hilly region is ‘home’ to a sizeable number of immigrants from Nepal, Tibet and China. Their pain of displacement and crisis is reiterated through the translation of the novel.

The narrative of the translated text true to its original version, minutely outlines the different social customs and traditions and pluralistic flavours of Indian diversity in the hilly town. The detailing of the Tamang ritual like ‘ghewasang’, the fondness of traditional marriages with ‘panache baja’ are vividly enumerated in the text. The food culture of the Nepali community is also detailed. The cross-cultural dietary habits like momo, chowmine, thukpa of Tibetan origin and samosa from mainland, the reference to Nepali dietary items like wheat brew, *selroti* etc. adds the regional flavors in the text. Both tangible and intangible cultural heritage has been encapsulated in its true essence in the translation. As per the sociolinguistic approach of translation, is concerned, the translator here retains her social content intact. The region inhabited by people from different cultural backgrounds: Sherpa, Yolmo, Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Magar, Subba, Tamang, and the westernization in the hills, are all captured in the translation. The replacement of traditional ‘panache baja’ with loudspeakers, the people with the air of modernity picking up the habit of drinking and womanizing enumerates the gradual loss of cultural heritage in the region. The labelling of the indigenous people of the hills as outsiders by the mainland India, and the pain it holds for them, are communicated worldwide through Thapa’s translation.

Rai’s novel has become a mouthpiece of many Nepali Gorkhas who are aligned to similar nationalist attachment with the rest of India. Janak convinces his mother about British colonialism in India and in terms of intrusion in her own household he says to his mother: “our country is our home. You tell me Aama, what would you do if a thief were to enter our home” (Thapa 4). Janak who studied in Calcutta was infused with patriotism and nationalist ideas. He is an ardent follower of Gandhian philosophy of peace and love with the touch of Bengali renaissance and modern education. Thapa’s translation therefore can be seen as a way of

representing the people in the Himalayan belt to the global reader as progressive, cross-cultural, and as being one with Indian consciousness. Further, Darjeeling's cosmopolitan character is captured in the neighbourhood of Janak: "M.K lived in a room next door. One room over, lived Ajoy Dasgupta...Fakuruddin Ahmed, the owner of the roti shop lived in two ground floor rooms directly below Ajoy Das...and next to it stood a pan shop of Kisanram...On the rest of the floor was Passang la's shop" (Thapa 26-31). This diversity in terms of people living in close proximity dismissed the popular notions about the Himalayan region. The perceived remoteness of the region is reconfigured through the translation countering the stereotypical notion of the region. This multicultural spirit is evident especially during the celebration of the festival of Holi. M.K was awestruck to see "Madhesis and even Nepalis, splashed in red dye and covered with buckets of water, looking for a chance to pounce on each other" (Thapa 33). The word 'carnival' in *There's a Carnival Today*, also hints at Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of 'carnavalesque', to celebrate difference in the Nepali community of Darjeeling. The variety and difference in terms of language, custom, ethnicity within the region accentuates the very concept of 'cultural plurality'. The translated text informs the reader about this multi-ethnic reality of Darjeeling. It is surely not a "tribal" region!

However, as the popular adage goes that 'much is lost in translation', this translation work too testifies to it. The readers often feel that they missed the flavours of certain cultural and regional anecdotes in English translation. To take up the thread from the book, the popular saying in Nepali 'bura buri ko jhagada paral ko ago', when translated in English, becomes "Everyone knows that quarrels between husbands and wives are like straw-fires" (Thapa 97) and loses its favour for the regional readers. Similarly, the popular Indian phrase for a cunning person, 'char sou bis', when it gets translated into English as 'a four twenty like you' (Thapa 85), fails to retain the humour. Despite these limitations, the translation is a commendable one. The translated text is individualist in its approach because every translator's cultural background affects the translated work directly or indirectly and everyone translates things differently. As Manjushree Thapa herself wrote about the translation: "I have taken liberty, but one that I believe is true to the author's intention to signal, but not to replicate, chauvinism" (Thapa 231). However, her translation is acknowledged by the critics and writers around the world for representing truly the social milieu of contemporary Darjeeling.

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