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Rewriting the Movement from the Margin in Translation

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Abstract:

The plight of Indian Nepalis, even in the 21st century, remains unacknowledged within mainstream social, political, and literary spheres. They continue to face challenges related to their identity and sense of belonging within the Indian nation-state. Furthermore, the cultural and linguistic isolation they encounter complicates their efforts to represent themselves. Historically, Indian Nepalis have been represented first through the colonial knowledge system and later through dominant elite structures in post-colonial India. However, in recent times, there has been a conscious shift towards self-representation through their literary works, particularly in translation. In this context, translation has emerged as a significant tool through which Indian Nepali writers articulate their suppressed voices within the mainstream discourse. This paper examines how translation functions as a form of rewriting that enables writers like Chuden Kabimo to rewrite their marginalised histories and challenge hegemonic narratives in *Song of Soil*: *Fatsung*.

Keywords: Translation, Rewriting, Gorkhaland Movement, Identity, Marginalisation.

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Introduction

The term identity originates from the Latin word *idem,* which means "the same": at the same time, it also implies both similarity and difference. Therefore, for any individual, identity is something unique that distinguishes them from others. On the other hand, it also reflects on the relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind. As far as national, cultural, and gender identity are concerned, one's identity becomes a matter of what one shares with others. Therefore, "identity is basically about *identification* with others whom we assume are similar to us …, at least in some significant ways" (Buckingham 1). As far as Indian Nepalis/Gorkhas are concerned, they have always identified themselves as Indians. However, due to a lack of acceptance and recognition from the mainstream, they continue to face challenges and obstacles with regard to their identity. Anthony Smith states:

> Those identities are rarely questioned and who have never known exile or subjugation of land or culture, have little need to trace their "roots" … Yet theirs is only an implicit and unarticulated form of what elsewhere must be shouted from the roof-tops: "We belong, we have a unique identity, we know it by our ancestry." (qtd. in Hutt 29)

Therefore, the demand for statehood, as expressed through the Gorkhaland Movement and the Movement for the recognition of Nepali Language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, signifies a desire for recognition and acceptance of their Indian Identity (Dhamala 173).

The demand for political recognition among the Indian Nepalis/Gorkhas has been a recurring theme in Darjeeling's history since the mid-nineteenth century. These aspirations have repeatedly taken the form of ethnic and regional movements, each marked by a deep sense of exclusion from the cultural and political mainstream of both West Bengal and India. Despite their long-standing presence in India, the Gorkhas have often been positioned as outsiders, subjected to systemic marginalisation and denied full recognition as Indian citizens. This marginality has led to sustained calls for the creation of a separate state, 'Gorkhaland', by

regional parties such as GNLF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) and GJM (Gorkha Janmukti Morcha) in the Hills. However, it is important to note that the demand for the Gorkhaland Movement mainly aimed to create a separate state from West Bengal to affirm their Indian identity (Subba 13), because:

> The Indian National History, in fact, has grossly underplayed, if not overlooked, the story and contribution [of the Gorkhas]… many stories of lesser known groups like Gorkhas has been either left out altogether or narrated in such a way that they have become a case of a misconceived identity… As a result Gorkhas, instead of being *better known* have become *lesser known* and even worse, *wrongly known* community in India. (Shrestha 8–9)

Therefore, they believe that 'Gorkhaland' is necessary to affirm their legitimacy as Indian citizens. Like many other ethnic movements in India, the Gorkhaland Movement is viewed as a response to marginalisation, victimisation, and oppression by the dominant culture.

Background of the novel *Song of the Soil*

In recent years, *Song of the Soil*: *Fatsung by Chuden Kabimo,* meaning 'Story of the Soil' in Lepcha, has emerged as a significant contribution to the corpus of Indian Nepali literature. The novel is set against the backdrop of unresolved identity and historical erasure, serving as a powerful literary meditation on memory, belonging, and political struggle. It was originally written in Nepali and translated into English by Ajit Baral. The novel narrates the experiences and sufferings of those affected during the turbulent years of the 1986 Gorkhaland Movement (commonly known as *Chayse Ko Andolan* in Nepali). The story opens with the narrator's return to his hometown after hearing of his friend Ripden's death, and later with Ripden's search for his father, Norden, who disappeared during the movement.

Thus, the intertwining of personal and collective loss in the novel transforms the hills of Kalimpong and Darjeeling into more than a mere backdrop. It symbolises contested

memories, fractured identities, and the enduring impact of political violence. Unlike Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), which reduces the movement to mere regional disruption, Kabimo explores personal stories and forgotten histories from the Hills through lived experiences. The characters in the story are ordinary people living simple lives with modest dreams. With hope and aspirations in their eyes, characters such as Norden, Nasim, Surya, the Chief, Raju Sir, and others actively participate in the movement, willing to sacrifice their lives for their homeland. They sincerely believe that the creation of 'Gorkhaland' would provide them with a safe space they could call home.

Why English Translation?

In recent years, translating their works into English has become imperative, especially for a minority community like the Indian Nepali/Gorkha community, to facilitate dialogue, because Indian Nepalis/Gorkhas usually write in Nepali. This, in turn, is problematic for the mainstream population, who find it difficult to understand Nepali. As a result, they have been linguistically isolated from the rest of India for decades. This poses a significant challenge for Indian Nepali writers seeking to reach a wider audience. At the same time, the power of English as a link language has grown widely in the contemporary situation; therefore, writing and translating regional or marginalised texts into English involves more than a means of communication with the wider audience: it is about creating a new space for visibility, and rewriting marginalised histories from the margin itself. To rewrite means to write it again, either to improve it or to adapt it differently for the target audience. To Lefevere, rewriting is "the adaptation of a work of literature to a different audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work" (Mother Courage's 235). At the same time, to Bassnett & Lefevere, translation is rewriting and "rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power" (Translation vii). Therefore, translation always takes place within a context, a history from which a text emerges and another into which it is transposed. Since translations

are not made in a vacuum and therefore cannot be an isolated activity, the original text is selected for a purpose by the translator or by those who initiate translation activity.

Lefevere believes that rewritten texts are the primary mode of consumption and appreciation of literature in modern times rather than the original, classical, canonical texts (1–2). Therefore, the focus on rewriting serves not only to expand the horizons of Translation Studies beyond linguistics and textual analysis but also to contribute to the study of literature and culture by demonstrating the value of translations. At the same time, it should be recognised that rewriting can often lead to manipulation for different reasons. This is especially evident when translating literature from oppressed, marginalised, or third-world communities into English, a process Spivak refers to as the "Politics of Translation." She further states that this type of translation often results in "translatese," (Spivak 400), which erases the identity of individuals and cultures that are politically less powerful, leading to a homogenization of very diverse voices:

> In the act of wholesale translation into English there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest. This happens when all the literature of the Third World gets translated into a sort of with-it translatese, so that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan. (Spivak 399–400)

Lefever further states that literary works are adapted to align with dominant ideological, poetic, and institutional norms. He focuses particularly on the examination of ‘very concrete factors’ like power, ideology, institution and manipulation that systematically govern the reception, acceptance or rejection of literary texts (2). Therefore, the people involved in such powerful positions are the ones Lefevere sees as ‘rewriting’ literature and governing its consumption by the general public. The motivation for such rewriting can be ideological (conforming to or rebelling against the dominant ideology) or poetological (conforming to or

rebelling against the dominant/preferred poetics) (7). Lefevere states that Edward Fitzgerald's translation of the *Rubaiya*t by Omar Khayyam is an example of both ideological and poetological manipulation (7). According to Davis, Fitzgerald believed that the Persians were inferior and so felt justified in taking liberties to 'improve' the original. Therefore, this version of the translation, translated by Fitzgerald, achieved great commercial success, as it aligned with the Western literary conventions of his time (qtd. in Jeremy Munday 199).

In contrast to the dominant narrative, books such as Kiran Desai's Inheritance of Loss present an alternative perspective on the Gorkhaland Movement. While the dominant narrative portrays Gorkha revolutionaries as heroes who sacrificed for their land, Desai depicts Gorkhas as barbaric, misogynistic, racist, and xenophobic (Sharma). Since this rebellious narrative challenged the prevailing view of Gorkhaland, it conflicted with the dominant ideology of the time. Although the novel received the 2006 Booker Prize, it was severely criticised for its depiction of the hill agitation, which included threats of book burnings (Poddar & Mealor 322). Similarly, Kabimo also expresses concerns over the ideological pressure that could have affected his writing when he expressed, "A political party is fighting for the rights of the people, becomes the enemy of the people once it assumes power… there was no atmosphere to write during that time" (qtd. in Sharma). This paper aims to analyse the novel *Songs of the Soil* through the framework of Lefevere's theory of 'rewriting' to explore how translation aids in reshaping and rearticulating the Gorkhaland Movement, beyond the official narrative.

Rewriting the Movement

Chuden Kabimo's *Song of the Soil* exemplifies what André Lefevere calls 'rewriting '- a process by which literary works are actively shaped, manipulated, and represented to fit specific ideological and institutional agendas (Translation 8). Similarly, the novel *Song of the Soil: Fatsung* could not be written or translated immediately after the Gorkhaland Movement because the ideological climate was hostile to accommodating such representations. In this

regard, Sharma informs that "No one spoke, few even dared to remember. There was no public discourse or literary engagement with the events of these epoch-making years that shaped the destiny of the region." Hence, the delay in writing and translating *Fatsung* demonstrates that literary production and translation are often governed by ideological constraints. However, with the passage of time and a shift in ideology regarding the Movement, writers such as Kabimo and Satyadeep Chettri are able to rearticulate the Movement by presenting a counter-narrative that does not romanticise the Movement but rather rewrites it from the perspective of ordinary people who sacrificed their lives for the Gorkhaland Movement.

Ram Prasad's story illustrates how ordinary Gorkhas, like him, became entangled in the Movement that ultimately led to their downfall. In the chapter "Sahid Ram Prasad," the narrator explores various aspects of the Gorkhaland Movement by depicting the beliefs of a common Gorkha like Ram Prasad, who joins the revolution driven by hope for a better future for his family. As he belongs to the lower strata of society, he believes the promises made by their leaders when they say: "Even pigs will eat nuniya (scented rice) if we have Gorkhaland" and "Every house will have a swimming pool" (Kabimo 147). Unfortunately, Ram Prasad "Neither had he eaten nuniya rice nor had he seen a swimming pool. These, for him, were dreams" (147). He had left his wife and child to join the revolution, enticed by the leaders' promises, but was unaware that he would likely fight against his brethren. Thus, the fight against the alien power eventually led to internal conflict within the same community (Nepali). However, he soon realised "that the movement was not what he had thought it to be. Everyone was in the movement for the land …he understood that some revolutionaries could attack other revolutionaries" (149). In the name of the revolution, he "first burned down the primary school in his own village. Then the Panchayat office. The library…And so he set fire to the house of his neighbour, Dil Bahadur Thapa Magar" (147). He had "Little fear in his eyes. His heart was strong, and he would accomplish whatever he was asked to do" (149). Thus, Ram Prasad's

docile and loyal nature gave political leaders an opportunity to manipulate and exploit him and others like him to achieve political supremacy over their rivals. These practices by political leaders illustrate that colonialism persists in the Hills even today.

Further, while Ram Prasad was busy in the camps, his wife back at home struggled to feed her son. Later, during the movement, as the conflict within the GVC group intensified, often manifesting as violence and counter-violence, Ram Prasad was martyred in a clash between two factions of the same political party (GVC). At the same time, his wife, back in the village, was molested and murdered by one of those factions. Eventually, "The fight was for power. That was what everyone began to understand, and thereafter, the two groups absolutely could not see eye to eye" (Kabimo 156). Hence, the feeling of hatred and revenge was so great that it ultimately resulted in the innumerable deaths of innocent people. The novel, at the end, brings forth the question, "Everyone was in the movement for the land. But why were everyone's paths different?" (149). Through Ram Prasad's story, the author illustrates the challenges of both winning and losing a battle against one's own people. In this regard, he states that "The fight with an enemy will come to an end, you will either win or lose. But can a war against your own people ever end? You neither win nor lose" (182).

Further, the chapter 'Dhara 144' also examines the conflicts that arose within the same community. Like the oppressive measures implemented by the cadres of GORAMUMO (GNLF), the leading majority party demanding Gorkhaland, pursued on the basis that anyone not aligned with GORAMUMO was anti- Gorkhaland. For example :

> The revolutionaries would go to the village and threaten the cadres of other parties into carrying their green flags. Those who didn't comply became dissenters against the community. And to become a dissenter was like requesting for your house to be set on fire. To put your life in danger. (Kabimo 50)

Therefore, the people had to choose between Green Flags and Red Flags because "It now seemed that the fight was between the red communities and the green GORAMUMU" (107). Additionally, it was believed that the communist party in the hills was against the Gorkhaland demand; therefore, they worked with CRPFS to oust the movement. This becomes evident when Raju Sir informs that "It is the members of the CPI (M) who are feeding information to the syarpis. I don't think these people who go around wearing earrings are syarpis. I think they are communist. We must do something about these guys who are troubling our people" (108).

It seemed that the rift between the GORAMUMU and the CPI (M) had escalated to the point that they would not hesitate to kill each other if confronted. In this connection, Surya states:

> We don't have our land because of the CPI (M). You must have heard Budo's speech on the cassette the other day. What will you do if you run into a snake and a CPI (M) member?" A thin boy in the air answered, "I will kill the CPI (M) member first and then the snake! (Kabimo 48)

The conflict seemed to be between the Green and Red Flag bearers in the Hills. As a result, this internal struggle within the same community led them nowhere. The novel emphasises this political phase, serving as a timely reminder that political movements often fail due to external pressures and internal disagreements.

Another incident in the novel highlights how common people like *Boju* (meaning grandmother in Nepali) and Surya were unaware of what was actually happening in the Hills. The word "Dhara" in Nepali terminology can refer to sections of the Indian Constitution as well as to sources of water. Therefore, in the chapter "Dhara 144", the word "dhara' becomes synonymous with the source of water when *Boju* is seen telling Surya, "Oh! I heard that Dhara 144 has been enforced in the bazaar… We are facing water shortages too… So I was wondering if we could get a dhara too" (Kabimo 59). This incident in the novel highlights the Hills'

deteriorating condition, in which people are more concerned with solving basic problems, such as water shortages and electricity outages, than with their identity crisis. Further, it emphasises how negligence by the State Government and local political leaders has led to this situation. Ultimately, the lack of knowledge and understanding regarding the movement was a common problem among the masses and the revolutionaries. We get a glimpse of their naivety when Surya questions himself, "Is this Dhara 144" actually a waterspout? Was that she was asking?" (60).

Eventually, the revolutionaries came to understand that the political leaders at the higher levels had reached an understanding with the State Government. Therefore, "They had nothing. No path to walk on…And no goal to reach either" (Kabimo 178). As they were ready to negotiate and compromise their demand for statehood, on the other hand, it was the ground soldiers who were on the front line to fight for the 'land', as told by an old man, " …The sacrifices you are making for the revolution; these leaders are using for their own political gains" (180). Thus, the sacrifices made by the common Gorkhas for the sake of their 'homeland' led them nowhere but rather pushed them into a quagmire of violence and bloodshed. This is exemplified by Middleton and Shneiderman, who state that the three-year Gorkhaland Movement for statehood in the second half of the 1980s, led by Subhash Ghising, resulted in 297 deaths and 1164 homes destroyed, along with the establishment of DGHC, an administrative setup with limited autonomy under West Bengal (13).

Conclusion

The incidents in the novel highlight how Kabimo challenges the official or mainstream narrative of the movement by portraying Ram Prasad not merely as a martyr who died in the movement, but as an ordinary Gorkha who was betrayed and victimised. His unquestioning loyalty, the destruction of his village under party orders, and the tragic fate of his family signify how revolutionary stories are shaped and manipulated by those in power, who led people like

Ram Prasad, Norden, Surya, Nasim, Raju Sir and many more to believe in their leaders' promises. Similarly, the fight between the Green Flag and the Red Flag symbolises how internal conflict eventually leads to the movement's failure. Kabimo further highlights the underdeveloped state of the Hills through characters such as *Boju* and Surya, who were confused about "Dhara 144", mistaking it for a water supply, thereby highlighting the negligence on the part of political leaders as well as state authorities. All these narratives contrast sharply with official narratives; therefore, the novel is not just a rewriting of the original text but also a rewriting of new stories and histories that had often been manipulated, silenced, and distorted by those in power. In Lefevere's terms, this is a form of ideological subversion in which Kabimo resists official versions and rewrites the revolution from the perspective of those sacrificed. Lastly, the novel in English translation becomes a bridge connecting local truths to global readers and, at the same time, a space for rearticulating lived experiences and forgotten stories in a world where only certain voices are heard and acknowledged.

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