

# WITH LOVE AND AESTHETICS: NOTES FOR AN ETHICAL TRANSLATION OF NEPALI LITERATURE

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## 1. Translation in a Multilingual Land

Central Bureau of Statistics documents list the country's 32-odd languages as being: Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Newari, Gurung, Tamang, Abadhi, Tharu, Magar, Limbu, Rai/Kirati, Sherpa, Thakali, Rajbansi, Satar, Danuwar, Santhal, Hindi, Urdu, Chepang, Thami, Bengali, Majhi, Dhimal, Jhangar, Marwadi, Kumhale, Darai, Jirel, Byanshi, Raji, English, other local languages and other foreign languages (His Majesty's Government 1999:17-31). Some languages spoken in Nepal, like upper Mustang's Tibetan Loba dialect, are not listed at all by the Bureau, or are perhaps meant to be indicated by presumably broader categories like "Sherpa". By contrast, a proposal authored by the National Languages Policy Advisory Board lists 71 languages and dialects in Nepal: 9 with scripts, 12 developing scripts, 30 lacking any script and 20 on the verge of extinction (Rastriyabhāsa Niti Sujhav Ayog 2050 v.s.:57-58). And then again, an independent document produced by the Summer Institute of Linguistics lists 125 languages in the country, apparently not differentiating between languages and dialects.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Because the SIL document gives a good sense of exactly how multilingual the Nepali experience of language can be, I list below the tongues it has identified in Nepal: Athpariya, Awadhi, Bagheli, Bahing, Bantawa, Baraamu, Baragaunle, Belhariya, Bhojpuri, Bodo, Bote-Majhi, Byangsi, Camling, Chantel, Chaudangsi, Chepang, Chhathar, Chhintang, Chhulung, Chourase, Chukwa, Darai, Darmiya, Dhanwar, Dhimal, Dolpo, Dumi, Dungmali, Dzongkha, Ghale, Northern Ghale, Southern Ghale, Gharti, Gurung, Eastern Gurung, Helambu Sherpa, Hindi, Humla Bhotia, Janggali, Jerung, Jirel, Kagate, Kaike, Kayort, Khaling, Gamale Kham, Maikoti Kham, Nisi Kham, Sheshi Kham, Takale Kham, Koi, Kulung, Kumauni, Kumhali, Nepali Kurux, Kusanda, Kyerung, Lambichhong, Lepcha, Lhomi, Limbu, Lingkhim, Lopa, Northern Lorung, Southern Lorung, Lumba-Yakkha, Eastern Magar, Western Magar, Maithili, Dehati Maithili, Majhi, Manangba, Eastern Meohang, Western Meohang, Mugu, Mundari, Musasa, Naapa, Nachering, Nar Phu, Nepalese Sign Language, Nepali, Newari, Nubri, Olangchung Gola, Palpa, Panchgaunle,



Statistics vary, then, on just how multilingual Nepal is: but it is beyond dispute that Nepal speaks many languages. It is also beyond dispute that each of Nepal's languages is influenced by others; none of the languages of the nation is "pure."<sup>2</sup>

Because bilingualism, trilingualism, and partial fluency in many languages is so prevalent in the country, translation is a vital everyday act in Nepal's national discourse. In *The Ear of the Other*, Jacques Derrida notes the complexity of the "internal translation" to which the body submits. "Like everyone," he states, "I always try, I think, to translate or to translate myself—to autotranslate" (Derrida 1985:156). Few in Nepal do not live intimately with continual attempts at auto-translation, using one language for love and another for commerce or for intellectual discussions, for government dealings, or even for simple neighborly greetings. The Nepali subject is always constituted in translation.

Surprisingly little contemporary Nepali literature tends to reflect this fact. Writers like Manu Brajaki, Sanat Regmi and Ismaili have been deliberate in writing bilingual subjects, sometimes accommodating readers with footnoted translations and at other times expecting readers to share their subjects' bilingualism. Other Nepali writers do borrow occasional phrases or expressions from national and international languages. Yet the contemporary literature of Nepal, whether in Nepali or in other national languages, largely tends towards the monolingual, depicting in effect a linguistic purity not evidenced in Nepali daily life.<sup>3</sup>

My own examination of the English translation of Nepali literature takes place in recognition of the inherent impurity of languages, and in acknowledgment of the constant translation and auto-translation within

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Phangduwali, Pongyong, Puma, Rajbangsi, Raji, Rangkas, Raute, Saam, Sangpang, Santali, Sherpa, Sonha, Sunwar, Eastern Tamang, Eastern Gorkha Tamang, Northwestern Tamang, Southwestern Tamang, Thakali, Thami, Chitwan Tharu, Dang Tharu, Deokri Tharu, Kathoriya Tharu, Mahotari Tharu, Rana Thakur Tharu, Saptari Tharu, Thudam Bhoté, Thulung, Tibetan, Tichorong, Tilung, Tseku, Tsum, Vayu, Waling, Yakha, Yamphe, Yamphu (Grimes 1996).

2 This linguistic truism is emphasized by Derrida: "There is impurity in every language" (Derrida 1985:100). For a discussion on some Persian and Arabic, Hindi, English and Tibeto-Burmese imprints on the Nepali language, see *Modern Literary Nepali: an Introductory Reader* (Hutt 1997:37-39).

3 Throughout this paper the term "Nepali literature" will refer to literature in any of the languages of Nepal. By contrast, "Nepali-language literature" will refer to literature in the Nepali language.

which the Nepali subject is constituted. It is also central to this paper's perspective that the translator is both a subject and an agent of the many migrations—scattering and gatherings both within and outside national borders—that are forming contemporary Nepal, migrations similar to those that critic Homi Bhabha describes in his own post-national experience:

I have lived that moment of the scattering of people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees, gatherings on the edge of "foreign" cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafes of city centres; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present. Also the gathering of the people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned... (Bhabha 1990b:291).

The translator of Nepali literature into English participates in one of the most significant linguistic migrations currently taking place in the country. English arrived late in Nepal in comparison to India, perhaps not coinciding with, but surely increasing with the start of dialogue with the British East India Company.<sup>4</sup> The 1802 establishment of the British Residency in Kathmandu, the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli (and the start of Gurkha recruitment by the British in India), and Jung Bahadur's 1850 visit to England must have done their part to deepen the language's hold in a few power centers. In a *Journal of Nepalese Studies* article on the translation between English and Nepali, translation specialist Govinda Raj Bhattarai mentions the influence of Perso-Arabic and Western literature on Nepali literature, beginning in this period (Bhattarai 1999:63).<sup>4</sup>

While many Nepalis abroad and a few select Nepalis in Nepal seem to have learned the language in the pre-1950 period, arguably, English did not spread roots within the country till its inclusion in the post-democracy formal education curriculum. Tribhuvan University's faculty for higher education in English was established a mere 40 years ago, in

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4 Bhattarai's article contains a valuable discussion on the history of migrations between English and Nepali languages in the literary production of the country. He mentions that while the initial translation work that took place in the 1950's was generally limited to translation into Nepali, the 1960's saw the beginning of a reversal of this trend (Bhattarai 1999:63-67).



1959. It is thus very recently that English became part of Nepal's national discourse.

Importantly, though, English has circulated in the domain of the country's most privileged classes since its arrival. Lacking any significant population for whom it is a mother tongue, the language has occupied a strange position in Nepal: powerful but sequestered, vastly influential but limited to a few centers of economic ascendancy. With the post-1950's establishment of the development industry, English has come to occupy a central and disproportionately influential position in national discourse. The fact that English is the language of communication between multinational corporations also helps entrench the language in today's Nepal. Its widespread presence today among national intellectuals, business people and powerbrokers, as well as among foreign academics and long-time expatriates, the staff of embassies, donor agencies and NGO/INGOs makes the language alien and inborn both, Nepali and not-Nepali all at once.

This split dynamic is not unique to Nepal. Transplanted in the sub-continent before British rule and thriving on colonialism, English has become, in the post-colonial period, invasive throughout South Asia, growing side-by-side with and often grafting with other "indigenous" languages.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the fact that its speakers share a class rather than an ethnic identity, English has been cultivated widely enough for Salman Rushdie to call it an Indian language (Rushdie 1997:54). By this measure English is equally Romesh Guneseckara's Sri Lankan language and Bapsi Sidhwa's Pakistani language and the language of other former British colonies. By this same measure it is also a language belonging to all nations now, the language not just of administration and global discourse but of national and international currency, the dollar standard against which other languages value and devalue. A country like Nepal thus finds itself speaking English with increasing urgency. The 1980's and 1990's proliferation of English-medium "boarding schools" throughout the nation is one obvious testament to this fact.

This context of current-day linguistic migrations—and the language politics it implies—raises important ethical questions for the translator of

Nepali literature into English. I will return to these questions at the end of this paper, after examining, first, the ethical considerations that arise out of translated language itself.

## 2. The (Mis)Translation of Nepali Literature

Following Laxmi Prasad Devkota's 1950's English writings and translations, the translation of Nepali literature into English seems to have flowered in the 1960's. Some pioneering translators from that early period include Tirtha Raj Tuladhar, Madhav Lal Karmacharya, Tejratna Kansakar and Madhusudan Devkota. The 1970's saw the appearance of new translators like Tanka Vilas Varya and Sondra Zeidenstein. The Royal Nepal Academy also began to contribute towards translation efforts at this time, with undertakings such as the 1975 publication of *Seven Poets* edited by Tulsi Diwas and translated by Daman Raj Tuladhar and Daniel Khaling.<sup>6</sup> In the 1980's, translators such as M Harun Ansari, Shailendra K Singh, Greta Rana, Yuyutsu RD Sharma and David Rubin began to make further contributions, and in the 1990's there has been a steady increase in the translation of Nepali literature into English, with translators like Keshar Lall, Tara Nath Sharma, Michael Hutt, Abhi Subedi, Padma P. Devkota, Wayne Amtzis, Larry Hartsell, Pallav Ranjan and Para Limbu among others making selections of classical and contemporary literary works from Nepal available to the English reader. Ann Hunkins, Shanti Mishra, Maya Watson, Mary Des Chene, Samrat Upadhyaya and myself are newer literary translators entering the field. Presumably, the translation of Nepali literature will continue to increase in the coming decades, through both public and private initiatives.<sup>7</sup>

Anyone who has grappled with the task of translation has experienced the difficulties posed by grammatical variations between languages, by

5 In *The Rhetoric of English India* Sara Suleri (1992) makes an important distinction between the rhetoric of English India and of *colonial* English India. This is a useful document for those who might too hastily equate the import of English with colonialism.

6 Bhattarai is critical of the role of institutions such as the Royal Nepal Academy and Sajha Prakashan in the early translation of Nepali literature into English. Till his article's 1999 publication date, he notes that the Academy has published only four such books—"Hardly one work a decade in average"—and Sajha only one. He does mention that the Academy, in particular, is currently making greater efforts on this front. He also mentions the prominent role that various diplomatic missions have played in the translation of Nepali literature into foreign languages (Bhattarai 1999:67-69).

7 For a more extensive listing of Nepali literature in translation, see the bibliography prepared by Mary Des Chene and Bhaskar Gautam (this issue). Bhattarai's article also contains a good survey of the translation of Nepali poetry and prose into English (Bhattarai 1999:68-73)



incompatible vocabularies, syntaxes and grammars, by differing connotations to similar words, by unfamiliar social, cultural and historical references, by local idioms and expressions, by metaphors and onomatopoeic words, by complex intertextual narratives, and by the varied inflections, rhythms and tones possible in different languages. These difficulties are not mere challenges to be overcome; in fact they stump the very enterprise of translation. To give just one example of a structural failure of translation: a translated text is rarely able to show the imprint of the many languages that exist within any original language. As Derrida points out, "At best, [translation] can get everything across except this: the fact that there are, in one linguistic system, perhaps several languages or tongues. Sometimes—I would even say always—several tongues" (Derrida 1985:100). This and other difficulties presented by translation rarely find satisfactory solutions.

There are, in language, three "tiers"—rhetoric, logic and silence—which operate in any act of translation. These tiers are described by Marxist feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as an arena in which the individual translator stages her agency. The tremendous freedom implied by this formulation requires much self-awareness of the translator-agent: "That takes a different kind of effort from taking translation to be a matter of synonym, syntax and local color" (Spivak 1993:181). Throughout this paper I will be referring to these terms—rhetoric, logic and silence—in discussing individual examples of translation. I will also be adopting Spivak's definition of the translator-as-agent in order to examine the ethical responsibility that comes with certain technical choices made in translation.

The two technical alternatives I will refer to throughout the paper are interlingual (common or literal) translation; and intralingual strategies like paraphrasing or explaining, which are aimed at revealing the less obvious meanings not expressed by the first perhaps simpler act.<sup>8</sup>

These two strategies do not always lead to success: they usually remain, in fact, inadequate to their task. For example, consider Manu Brajaki's bilingual stories: "कहिलेकाही ऊ भन्ने, भैया! कहू ल, पापी पेटके खातिर हम यी परम्परा आ ढकोसला बेच देली..." (Brajaki 2052 v.s.:89). A literal interlingual translation might capture the logic of that sentence, but

8 I adopt here Roman Jakobson's definition of the act of translation. A third alternative identified by Jakobson is to translate intersemiotically from one medium, like a visual one for example, to another, like an aural one (Derrida 1985:95, 131). This third alternative is not relevant to the discussion in this paper.

would fail to reflect its bilingualism, and thus fail to reflect its rhetorical complexity. As for intralingual strategies, there are a variety of options available to the translator including footnoting, italicizing, explaining with short asides, maybe even keeping the original language to show something of the original text's bilingualism. Yet as any translator knows, each of these options is inadequate in its own way, each disrupts the translation's rhetoric in different ways, each is ultimately flawed. I will not explore such flaws here, as examples of such will be found throughout this section.

Indeed the one truth of translation is that there can be no successful translation; all attempts at translation inevitably fail. Polysemic texts yield no fixed meanings in their original language—by extension, any "correct" translation becomes impossible. The impossibility of correct translation comes from what Derrida calls the "proper noun effect" of words, an effect inherent to each word (Derrida 1985:102). Writing *uncle*, for example, the translator creates quite another character from a Nepali मामा (*māmā*, maternal uncle) or काका (*kākā*, paternal uncle), whose identities are partly rooted in distinct family roles. To a greater or lesser extent, the proper noun effects of the words मामा and काका refuse to translate. Simply writing *maternal uncle* or *paternal uncle* in English can easily make a text sound stiff and sociological, and false to the rhetoric of the original literary work. In addition, *maternal uncle*, *paternal uncle* and *uncle* alike remain silent on the cultural identities written into the words मामा and काका. Uncle. Maternal uncle. Paternal uncle. All options are flawed, but one must be chosen. Like a proper noun, the words दफ्द and सफ्द thus bear a refusal to translate.

The proper noun effect of words forces a dilemma upon the translator because it makes texts demand: "Translate me and what is more don't translate me. I desire that you translate me, that you translate the name I impose on you; and at the same time, whatever you do, don't translate it, you will not be able to translate it" (Derrida 1985:102). It is important to realize that the translator's agency operates, then, within a field of errors. Derrida is categorical in his statement: "A translation never succeeds" (1985:124). The translator (mis)translates by choosing one "error" over another, maybe even choosing one error-system over another.

In the rest of this section I will examine some of the ways in which translators of Nepali literature have "erred" over the proper noun effect of original Nepali literary texts. I will trace the persistence of the proper noun effect, and examine the range of technical solutions that translators of Nepali literature have deployed in response. In attempting these



solutions, translators stage their agency, and in the process reveal something of the desire motivating the current drive to translation.

### *The Nepali Subject in Translation*

Character names provide the most obvious examples of the proper noun effect, containing as they do much significance rooted in their original language. For example, when Govinda Bahādur Malla names his protagonist Misri in *Pallo Gharko Jhyāl*, he immediately evokes the simplicity and childishness associated with the sugar-candy *misrī* (Malla 2018 v.s.). Only the bilingual reader of Larry Hartsell's translation *The Window of the House Opposite* will get these connotations, however (Malla 1998). Similarly, the connotations of names like Gore (Koirala 1997:37-42), Kanchhi (Koirala 1984) and Lukhure (Hutt 1993:244-252) remain lost to the English reader when they do not come with explanations. Michael Hutt faces the problem of translating names in "The Murderer", Indra Bahadur Rai's story based on the confusion between an officer named Bhalu and a bear or a *bhālu*. Here, the translator's solution is to footnote the first appearance of the word *bhālu*—yet something is clearly lost by the reader's inability to participate in the original-language aural confusion between the two references to *bhālu* (Hutt 1993:224-230).<sup>9</sup>

The untranslatable of names poses problems beyond a certain flattening of language, for a character's national, ethnic and caste identities are signified by surnames. While native speakers can be expected to decipher these identities in the original text, it must be presumed that the non-native reader cannot tell the difference between a Shrestha and a Jyapu, for example, in a translated text. And so in Keshar Lall's translation of BP Koirala's story "Down to the Terai", Bhote remains just a name rather than an indication of the character's ethnic identity (Koirala 1997:37-42), while in Hutt's translation of the same story "To the Lowlands," the name comes with an accompanying footnote: "The

9 All references throughout this section are limited to four works easily available in Kathmandu's bookstores: the anthology *Himalayan Voices* by Michael Hutt, BP Koirala's short story collection *Faulty Glasses* translated by Keshar Lall, and Shankar Koirala's *Khaireni Ghat* and Govinda Bahadur Malla's *The Window of the House Opposite*, these latter novels both translated by Larry Hartsell.

characters of this story are named...Bhote, 'the Tibetan'..." (Hutt 1993:202).<sup>10</sup>

As in this example, Hutt tends to favor the use of footnotes to explain names, particularly characters' caste identities. There is however a limit to what he can explain. In his translation of Ramesh Vikal's story "A Splendid Buffalo," readers are not given caste explanations for surnames such as Dhakal, a Bahun name. While the lack of footnoting in this example helps the story read more fluently than his more heavily footnoted work, it also makes the story, which is based on specific caste hierarchies, lose much of its social context (Hutt 1993:244-252). In order to avoid just such a problem, in the translation of *Khaireni Ghāt* excerpted below, Hartsell adds an explanation not found in the original text: "A little closer, on the top of a hill, Dumja village could witness the place where the Jaisi Koiralas, Chhetri Koiralas, Upadhyaya Koiralas—all upper caste people—crowded a Majhi feast..." (Koirala 1984:24; emphasis mine). The translator's intention is clearly to make the village's caste relations read to the English audience. Interestingly, while he identifies all the upper caste characters as such, he leaves Majhi identity unexplained.

The proper noun effect is also very much in evidence when the translator comes up against the Nepali language's extensive kinship bonds. "Your father's new wife," is how Hartsell paraphrases "तेरी कान्छी आम" (Koirala 1984:9). Inadequate as this choice is, the literal option is worse: your younger mother. This would not only sound odd, it would also require an awkward explanation that the woman is the father's newest wife, one among others still in matrimony. While some translators might consider such explanations—especially those in footnotes—to be a failure in translating the original's rhetoric, others prefer them as a means to access the original's logic. In Manu Brajaki's "A Small Fish Squats by the Dhobi Khola," Hutt footnotes the meaning of the term *Bajai Āmā*, lending a stiff sociological tone to the text: "Her name is a combination of *bajai*, 'grandmother,' and *āmā*, 'mother'" (Hutt 1993:298). Translators are not always consistent in their technical choices. In "A Living Death," for example, Hutt decides not to explain the same (but differently-spelled) term *bajyai* (Hutt 1993:304).

Should the translator explain or not? Use footnotes or not? Or simply mark the original term's untranslatable with italics? Such questions also arise when kinship terms like *didī*, *dāi* etc. refer not to actual family

10 The name might also refer to someone who looks Tibetan in features, but isn't actually Tibetan.



members but to those addressed as such, as is customarily done in much of Nepal. But even this problem may be too complex to demonstrate exactly how intractable the proper noun effect of words can be. Even when a simple term like *didī* refers literally to an older sister, for example, the translator must choose between the vague but (relatively) natural-sounding term "sister" or the precise but stiff term "older sister." In a similar instance, Hartsell translates *आमै* as a very American-sounding "Ma."—mother being too stiff, and mom, mum or mommy being equally inappropriate to reflect the informality and warmth of *आमै* (Koirala 1984). By contrast, in another work, the same translator lets his characters refer to each other quite woodenly as "Mother," and "Sister-in-law" (Malla 1998). Both choices have their own successes, their own failures.

In translated Nepali literature, translators also grapple—again, sometimes inconsistently—with the problem of indicating a character's social position. Throughout *Himalayan Voices* Hutt leaves the relatively simple term *hākīm* (boss) largely untranslated, though he does footnote the more intricate terms *subbā* and *mukhiyā*: "A *mukhiyā* is a government official of the third rank; a *subbā* is a government official one rank higher than a *mukhiyā*" (Hutt 1993:217). But then, in "A Splendid Buffalo," he decides not to translate the title *dwāre*, leaving the reader ignorant of the fact that the main character is a local land tax collector (Hutt 1993:244). Such inconsistency itself reveals the confounding quality of translated language. Arguably, inconsistency may be necessary in certain cases. The term of address *हजूर* (*hajur*), for instance, which indicates so much about Nepali subjectivity, may actually require inconsistency in its translation. Depending upon its context, the term can connote master, leader, superior, boss etc. as a noun; as an expression of agreement, it has particularly slavish connotations. Hutt's repeated use of the British-smacking term "Sir" in its stead (Hutt 1993:251, 252) speaks amply of the inadequacy of interlingual and intralingual strategies to reveal both the logic and the rhetoric of the original text. Instead it is silence which comes to the fore. Silence necessarily marks the translated text.

A few final examples of the difficulties presented by Nepali subjectivity in translation:

As all translators know, expressions and colloquialisms make a character's utterances a considerable challenge to translate. A surprising number of characters greet each other with "Hello" in Hutt's translations (1993:275, 299). Occasionally they stick with Nepali expressions like "chi!" (Hutt 1993:211) while at other times they utter such translatese as "Hail Narayan" (Hutt 1993:193). Again, inconsistency marks translated

texts. While sometimes Hutt chooses a strategy of loose paraphrase, at other times he is more exacting in his search for a literal translation. One such example is seen when he grimly footnotes his word choice for the truly difficult-to-translate term *sālā*:

*Sālā pahād*: I have translated this as bastard (*sālā*) hills (*pahād*). *Sālā*, with the basic meaning of "brother-in-law," is a common term of abuse. By addressing a man as *sālā*, one implies that one has had sexual relations with his sister. The term is also applied adjectivally to any object deserving of contempt, an application that is far beyond the original meaning (Hutt 1993:156).

Here Hutt is clearly dissatisfied with his own inaccurate paraphrase; but opting for "brother-in-law hills" or marring the text (in this case, the title of a Min Bahadur Bista poem) with a lengthy explanation would obviously be much more dissatisfying. *Sālā* must then remain silent in the translated text.

Silence, too, comes to the foreground in many instances of translated metaphors and similes, and in the translation of onomatopoeic words. In a 1991 *Nepalese Linguistics* article, Hutt lists such eminently untranslatable words encountered during his efforts at translation: "*saryāk suruk, gadryāk gudruk, gaḍyañ.guḍuñ...*" (Hutt 1991:21). If a comic effect is not intended, such words are perhaps best met with silence by the translator.

In the examples above, translators can be seen seeking a variety of interlingual and intralingual solutions to the problem posed by their subjects' proper noun effect. They have considerable freedom in choosing how to stage their agency. However, though they pursue, quite doggedly, the logic and rhetoric of the original text, failure is written all over their (mis)translations. The Nepali subject-in-translation that results appears as a quixotic figure, a rare hybrid species that can be sighted only in the liminal spaces between meaning and unmeaning.

### *Nepal in Translation*

The proper noun effect of words is also very much in evidence in the (mis)translation of the physical world of Nepali literature. Again, translators take many, and often inconsistent tacks to get at the logic or rhetoric they desire. Though in places Hutt footnotes geographical names like Lucknow, Ilam and Sunkosi, elsewhere he leaves places like Assam and Darjeeling unexplained (Hutt 1993). Even without inconsistencies within a single text, the physical world of Nepal reads, in translated



literature, as peculiarly displaced. The land is filled with such plants as "wild plum and custard apple trees" which may be technically accurate, but sound distinctly unfamiliar to Nepali ears (Koirala 1984:24). Alternately there may be half-translated "banyan and *pīpal* trees" in the landscape (Hutt 1993:224), or a most scientific "jamun tree (*Eugenia jambos*)" (Koirala 1997:48). The terrain of Nepal-in-translation is divided into copiously footnoted *ropanīs* and *bighās* (Hutt 1993:203, 294), and on the trails are similarly footnoted *chautāwās* and *dharamshālās* (Hutt 1993:194, 221). Some of the houses may have exotic *pujā* rooms instead of mere prayer rooms (Malla 1998:5). Their kitchens may be stocked with conspicuously translated maize-beer (Koirala 1984) or conspicuously untranslated *chiurā* (Malla 1998:3).

All of these examples show the linguistic disorientation that occurs when the physical world of Nepali literature gets (mis)translated into English. The nation, in its physicality, totters unstably between languages, between meanings and half-meanings and unmeaning. In translated Nepal literature, the physical presence of the country seems to buckle and warp.

### *Cultural Narratives in Translation*

In the translation of any literary text, perhaps it is most difficult to write in something of the cultural narratives that echo through the original work. No work of literature stands on its own, most certainly not the intertextual works of Nepali literature which often echo cultural narratives inherited from religious and secular texts, and from fables, parables, tales, expressions and common social discourse. In trying to give English-language expression to these cultural narratives, translators once again resort to footnoting, italicizing, explaining briefly, digressing with lengthy asides, or at times remaining silent. In particular, the need to explain (and the tendency to over- or under-explain) becomes most pressing when the translator faces the problem of cultural narratives.

Some examples of over-explaining come from Hutt's painstaking footnoting of any reference which threatens to remain silent to the English reader. Sometimes such footnotes are helpful, sometimes not. For example, the saying "A Brahman who has never eaten a mushroom can never know its flavor" is perhaps unnecessarily footnoted: "This proverb refers to the fact that some highly orthodox Brahmins refrain

from eating mushrooms" (Hutt 1993:194). Here, the translator appears very anxious to have cultural narratives read in his text.<sup>11</sup>

Lall displays some of this same anxiety when he footnotes the following sentence twice:

He used to go daily to the general's\* place for *chakari*\*\*.

\* Irrespective of whether they were in the army or in the civil service, members of the Rana family that held power in Nepal from 18[46] to 1951 were given military titles. Some of them were declared generals at birth.

\*\* A system in vogue during the Rana [era] that encouraged courtiers, officials, sycophants, hangers-on and the unemployed to wait upon high-ranking members of the ruling family for the sake of personal favours and employment (Koirala 1997:1).

The translator's problem is clear: if such terms are not explained, the English reader will remain deaf to the cultural narratives being told by the text. Yet there is no end to the terms that require explanation if a *full* translation of cultural narratives is desired. For example, elsewhere Lall footnotes a harangue that a male character subjects his wife to: "A typical example of male chauvinism, which sums up the relationship between men and women among certain communities" (Koirala 1997:3). The translator's intention is obviously to help the English reader read his translation with insight into "background" context of Nepali cultural narratives; yet the footnote mostly seems to point at the futility of any such attempt. Other translators eschew footnotes and weave explanations—not always deftly—into the main text. In *Khairēnī Ghāt*, Hartsell adds a whole sentence, emphasized below:

Singabire said, "O brahmin scholar, in this heat the 'buttermilk' from the beer jug would cool you off."

"You are a snake!" the Brahmin said, looking at him. (*Proper Brahmins do not take alcoholic drinks.*)

"Nowadays we have a democracy, don't we? From India itself, equality of castes has swept over us" (Koirala 1984:33).

The resulting awkwardness almost makes a case for silence while translating cultural narratives.

<sup>11</sup> In his *Nepalese Linguistics* article, Hutt indeed emphasizes the problems posed by cultural narratives, or the need for "cultural contextualization" (Hutt 1991:14).



Yet problems do arise when translators choose not to translate cultural narratives at all. In Poshan Pandey's story "Bhinājuko Swiṭar", the relationship between the character Sabita and her older sister's husband echoes typical narratives about सली भिनाजु (*sālī-bhināju*) dynamics. The Nepali reader's experience is informed by narrative expectations of sexual tension between a man and his wife's younger sisters (Pandey 2039 v.s.). However, in Hutt's translation "A Sweater for Brother-in-Law," the English reader is offered only flat terms like "brother-in-law" and "sister-in-law" (Hutt 1993:266-270). The English reader thus remains unaware of the narrative expectations of the original. The story is not just changed by this omission, the subjectivity of the original character Sabita, which rests on her being a typical *sālī*, is altered. Freed from the cultural narratives that write her, she becomes unmoored from her original identity. Her (mis)translated being drifts in silence.

### 3. The Desire to Translate

If translation never succeeds, however, neither does it ever entirely fail. There is, in each translator, a persistent desire for such successes, a desire often realized, albeit erratically, unpredictably. This desire leads her to achieve a certain logic or rhetoric during translation, to overcome silence and the constant threat of mistranslation.

Though Derrida disputes the notion that there is an "intact kernel" of meaning in words, he acknowledges that the *desire* for this intact kernel "is desire itself, which is to say that it is irreducible" (Derrida 1985:115). Without this desire to translate correctly, the translators mentioned above would not despair over the failure of meaning in their own translations. They would not use inconsistent strategies within one text, using footnotes in some places while leaving terms unexplained in others. They would not insist upon using italicized Nepali words—as though to retain the original text's true meaning—when English could suffice. They would not add explanations to their text, sacrificing its fluidity. They would not play with language till their text echoes, to their satisfaction, with cultural narratives, and they would not struggle with the fact that each word, translated, displays its own potential for unmeaning. In my own experience it is this playful possibility of failure—and the promise of an elusive success—which spurs the very desire to translate.

In the last section, I established the freedom of the translator in staging her agency, in choosing certain strategies to address the proper noun effect. In this section I will focus more closely on the kinds of desires expressed by individual translators' technical choices, or the *kinds*

of agencies staged by different translators. In order to do so I will examine two translations each of two poems. It is my claim that the four translations examined below display an overwhelming desire on the part of the translators to illustrate, to the English reader, some "true" aspect of the original text. This is to say that the driving interest is to show the "Nepaliness" of the original text to an audience assumed to be interested specifically in Nepal. The translator acts, in the process, as a guide into Nepali writing.

The first set of translations examined is from an excerpt from Laxmi Prasad Devkota's much-translated play *Munā Madan*. The original is also included for reference. Before transcribing these texts so that the reader may compare them, I must note that it is not my interest to pass judgment on the different styles of translation presented below, to deem one effort superior to another. Neither has this been my intention in the examples of "errors" cited earlier. That said, I do hold that the texts selected below reflect something of the range of translation work currently being done on Nepali literature—they give a profile of the translatese being generated around Nepali literature. To select a representative sample of all available translations is not, however, my goal here. The variation in style in the translations that follow speaks to the different desires operating within these texts, and it is to these desires that I direct the reader's attention.

मुना-मदन

लक्ष्मीप्रसाद देवकोटा

मदन भोट जाने बेलामा

नछाडी जानोस् हे मेरो प्राण ! अकेली मलाई,  
मनको वनमा ननिम्ने गरी विरह जलाई,  
ननिम्ने गरी विरह जलाई !  
लोचनका तारा ! हे मेरा प्यारा ! यो जोति बिलाए,  
के भनूँ ? भन्ने म केही थिइन विष नै पिलाए !  
प्यारा विष नै पिलाए !

मनको कुरा गलामा अड्छ, अड्कन्छ गलामा,  
यो मेरो मुटु पचासबाजी घड्कन्छ पलामा,  
यो छाति मेरो चिरेर खोली नजर गराए,  
त्यो मन केही फर्कदो होला, तस्वीर खुलाए,  
आँसुमा खस्छ मनको टुक्रा, यो आँसु बोल्दैन,  
मनको कुरा मनमै बस्छ, छातीले खोल्दैन,  
प्यारा ! आँसुले बोल्दैन ! (Devkota 1996 v.s.:1)



## As Madan Leaves for Tibet

by Laxmi Prasad Devkota  
Translated by Michael J Hutt

[Muna]: Do not go, my life, and leave me alone,  
Lighting the unquenchable fire of longing in the forest of my heart,  
Lighting the unquenchable fire of longing,  
Star of my eyes, oh my beloved! If this light disappears,  
What can I say? I would say nothing, even if you poisoned me,  
Beloved, poisoned me!  
The words in my heart stick in my throat, in my throat they stop,  
This heart of mine beats fifty times a second,  
If this breast of mine could burst open, and you were shown,  
Your mind might turn back a little if the picture were revealed,  
A piece of my heart falls in my tears, these tears cannot speak,  
My deepest feelings remain in my heart, my breast does not reveal  
them,  
My love, these tears cannot speak! (Hutt 1997:129)

## Madan is about to go to Tibet

by Laxmi Prasad Devkota  
Translated by Ananda P Shrestha

[Muna]: Leave me not alone I pray, do not go my love,  
Forests of sorrow forever, set not on fire my love.  
Had I been dead my dear, I'd never have said a word,  
Was I offered poison love, I wouldn't breathe a word.  
My thoughts, my words are stuck, in my throat lie trapped,  
A nervous heart that races wild, lies within me wrapped.  
If I could only split my breast to show you what's within,  
It would change your mind a bit, and your heart would win.  
My heart with tears in pieces falls, they say not a word,  
All my thoughts within me lie, tears, breast breathe not a word.  
(Devkota 1995:20)

The contrast between these two translations is perhaps overly drastic. Hutt aims, at times unsuccessfully, for a literal translation, sacrificing rhythm and rhyme in the process.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Ananda P. Shrestha often

12 It should be noted that Hutt's translation comes from a book specifically geared at teaching literary Nepali language, as this explains his choice to favor literal translation at the expense of all rhetorical considerations. Hutt's translations in *Himalayan Voices* are not translated in this same style.

sacrifices accuracy by opting to paraphrase. Shrestha's desire to represent the aurally pleasing quality of the original *jhyāure* text<sup>13</sup> is evident from his decision to place his own translation in rhymed couplets—a form traditionally attributed much lyricism. The translator chooses to shorten Devkota's text, even omit lines, so that its wordiness and its repetitions do not mar this chosen couplet form. A "poetic" effect is surely what he attempts. No such attempt is evident in Hutt's translation. Indeed Hutt seems to go out of his way to make his translation "unpoetic," as though to make it clear that his intention is simply to offer the English reader access to the meaning of the text: no pleasure is to be sought in its rhetoric. Indeed, while discussing their individual efforts, Shrestha employs metaphors about the ineffable, while Hutt employs a fairly nonsensical metaphor which pictures Nepali literature as a geographical area that others can "access" through translation:

Shrestha:

I have followed my own light and ventured to hope that the end result is competent, sensitive and authentically poetic; and that in the process I have been true to the spirit of the original and to myself (Devkota 1995:13-14).

Hutt:

I hope that, for a few, [this book] will serve as a stepping stone to the study of Nepali literature by rendering a small number of texts comparatively accessible through the provision of notes, a glossary and, in the case of poetry, literal English translations (Hutt 1997:x).

Despite these differences, there are, in both translations, traces of a desire to show an English-reading audience some uniquely Nepali aspect of the original text. In this sense, the intention of both translators is primarily illustrative; they both stage their agencies in similar ways. While Shrestha goes to interpretive extremes to illustrate the original's musical rhetoric, Hutt seeks to show exactly the original text's logic, word for word. Neither translator translates *Munā Madan* primarily to play with the process of translation itself, to create a *Munā Madan* that can exist only in translation. The primary goal in both cases is most definitely not the kind of language play called for by Derrida when he makes the following claim:

13 A *jhyāure* is a Nepali folksong with five, ten or sixteen syllables per line. With the exception of refrains, *Munā Madan* employs sixteen syllables.



A translation puts us not in the presence but in the presentiment of what "pure language" is, that is, the fact that there is language, that language is language. This is what we learn from translation, rather than the meaning contained in the translated text, rather than this or that particular meaning. We learn that there is language, that language is of language, and that there is a plurality of languages which have that kinship with each other coming from their being languages (Derrida 1985:124).

Rather, the goal is of both translations is to illustrate some "true" aspect of the original—its truly Nepali logic, its truly Nepali rhetoric. Language is then not an end but a tool, a bridge between the Nepal in the text and the uncomprehending outside reader. The translator acts as a guide into literary Nepal.<sup>14</sup>

14 In his *Nepalese Linguistics* article, Hutt interestingly cites four different translations of the same two lines of *Munā Madan*. The contrasts are meant to reveal different errors made by those with native command of Nepali and good English, and those with native command of English and good Nepali. Because this set of comparisons offers different insight than my own pair, I take the liberty here of reproducing the different versions: Original text: हातका मैला सुनका बैला के गर्नु धनले ? साग र सिस्नु खाएको बेस आनन्दी मनले ।

MS Devkota's translation: What avails you of gold bags?/Riches got and spent./The hands are heavy with dust of riches./happiness is from Heaven sent;/To live on plain food of flour mush and nettle leaves/Is far more better.

Translation from *Seven Poets*: Riches? What does riches avail?/Riches are all so vain!/They are no better than a crust of dirt/That cling unto thy hand!/Is not a dish of nettles made/Far more a delicious thing?

D Rubin's translation: Dirty hands and golden plates/what can you do with wealth?/Better to eat greens and nettles/With a happy heart.

Hutt's translation: Purses of gold are like the dirt on your hands./What can be done with wealth?/Better to eat spinach and nettles/With happiness in your heart (Hutt 1991:22-24).

In a review of *Himalayan Voices*, Abhi Subedi similarly contrasts Laxmi Prasad Devkota's translation of his own work with Hutt's translation, which read as significantly flatter, and more prose-like. Subedi also contrasts a Devkota translation of a Kedarman Vyathit poem with Hutt's—with similar conclusions. I take the liberty of including the latter examples below:

"Ants" translated by LP Devkota: Emerging like comets from the dark holes in the sky./Chains of ants are running/Hurry scurry, helter skelter./In a desert garden./They seem to be singing the anguish of the dewdrop./On the grassplot of desire.

The next set of comparisons reveals more divergent desires:

परम्परा

वेन्जु शर्मा

कैयौ वर्ष अधिदेखि  
मेरो कोठामा  
भुण्ड्याइरहेको थोत्रो तस्वीर  
कीरा मसाले खाइसकेको  
भम्पाट तस्वीर  
बानी परेको आँखाले मात्र  
ठम्याउन सक्ने  
एउटा थोत्रो आकार  
ठिङ्ग उभिइरहेको तस्वीर  
मेरी बज्यैले पूजा गर्दै आएको  
यो तस्वीर  
मेरी आमाले सगौरभ भुण्ड्याएको  
यो तस्वीर  
आज,  
मेरो आँखामा खड्किरहेछ  
आस्थाको पनि  
एउटा परिधि हुँदोरहेछ  
विश्वासको पनि  
एउटा सीमा हुँदोरहेछ  
अब,  
आगोको रंगले  
पोतिदिन्छु यो तस्वीरलाई  
चारै कोणहरु ढपक्क ढाकिदिएर  
एउटा बल्दो सलाई  
राखिदिन्छु बीचमा  
बस्, बीचमा । (Sharma 2050 v.s.:1)

"Ants" translated by M Hutt: Coming from a dark hole./A comet in the night sky/singing, anxious for drops of water./in a straw-filled yard of thirst:/a line of ants, confused, confused,/running through the garden (Subedi 1990:209-211).

This second comparison proves, perhaps, that there can be no simple rule about how much fluency a translator needs in either the original language or the one into which the work is translated. The two articles cited in this note contain important insight for translators of Nepali literature, and deserve to be studied carefully. A *Journal of Nepalese Studies* article written by Maya Watson (1996) contains similar contrasts and also merits study by those interested in literary translation.



Tradition

by Benju Sharma

Translated by Shailendra Kumar Singh

For years  
 A picture is hanging in my room.  
 A moth-eaten picture  
 Defying its original look.  
 It was proudly hanged on the wall  
 By my mother,  
 Which my grandmother has been worshipping ever since.  
 Today my eyes can't endure it.  
 Just can't endure it!

There is a limit to everything,  
 Including the faith.  
 Time has come  
 When I must smear this picture  
 With the colour of fire  
 And reduce it to ashes  
 With a burning match-stick (Sharma 1989:35).

Tradition

by Benju Sharma

Translated by Wayne Amtzis and Manju Kanchuli

For years a picture  
 hung on the wall of my room  
 Frayed, done in by insects and rats,  
 recognizable only by those  
 who had seen it when..  
 An effaced semblance demanding to be  
 This picture  
 worshipped by my grandmother  
 this picture  
 hung with pride by my mother  
 Today, I look at it askance  
 How long must I turn towards it?  
 What solace am I to find there?  
 Now, I want  
 this picture smeared with red, effaced  
 Let flame reach the far corners  
 I place a match  
 in its midst Done with, done away,  
 in its midst (Sharma 1998:40).

More than in the earlier set of comparisons, the choices here, and the choice of errors here reveal different desires operating in the translators. Shailendra Kumar Singh's translation is a partial rendering of the contents of the original poem. Choosing to remove the repetitions in the original text, changing the sequence of the lines, omitting some lines, Singh's text seems to fairly declare its intention to simply express the "message" or logic of the poem without getting caught up in its rhetoric. Wayne Amtzis and Manju Kanchuli's translation bears a greater imprint of the original's rhetoric, particularly when it repeats, as in the original, the meditation on the picture's history:

This picture	मेरी वज्रैले पूजा गर्दै आएको
worshipped by my grandmother	यो तस्वीर
this picture	मेरी आमाले सगौरभ भण्ड्याएको
hung with pride by my mother	यो तस्वीर

The repetition makes the tone of the translation echo the brooding intensity of the original. Though the Amtzis-Kanchuli translation also errs in its own ways, it is, I would argue, less illustrative in intent than the Singh translation, or than the two *Munā Madan* translations examined earlier. Craft makes all the difference here. The fluency, dexterity and language play in Amtzis and Kanchuli's rhetoric prevents their translation from being read primarily in order to gain insight into the original work or into Nepali culture or even—because the original poet is a woman—into Nepali womanhood. This poem pays greater attention than Shrestha, Hutt and Singh's translations to the reader's experience of language. By playing with sound, rhythm, repetition—by focusing on craft—it offers language as an end in itself. The reader is not asked to forego rhetorical pleasure in order to understand the poem. Neither is the reader asked to sacrifice an understanding of the logic to experience poetic rhetoric. The desire that operates in this translation is the desire for the pleasure that languages, and their kinship, can offer. Unlike in the previous translations cited here, the translators do not act as guides to authentic Nepal/Nepaliness, but rather as co-travelers to the liminal lands of Nepal in translation. They stage their agency foremost as poets investigating Nepal-in-translation.

#### 4. With Love and Aesthetics

In informal discussions, Nepali writers express a variety of reasons why Nepali literature must be translated better, and with greater frequency. To begin with, there is a desire that Nepali literature gain due recognition



within global literature: for the richness experienced by those living within Nepali languages remains almost wholly unfelt by those outside. There is also a desire that foreigners interested in Nepal—expatriates, literary-minded tourists—should be able to read its literature, and thus gain insight into or appreciation for the culture. Most existing works of translation are considered inadequate to these tasks. Other writers decry the "biased" canonization of Nepali literature in translation, pointing out the under-representation of works within the progressive tradition: future translation efforts must redress this bias. Yet others speak of having nothing to show of their work in interactions with writers who do not speak Nepali languages. There is no way for Nepali writers to establish literary dialogue with the outside world in the absence of translated texts.

Such discussions are often marked by an us-and-them dialectic, corresponding, I believe, to the illustrative impulse evidenced in Nepali literature in English translation. "They" on the outside can be guided to understand "our" literature only through translation. Such dialectics obviously obscure the many back-and-forth migrations taking place in Nepal which create "outsiders" well versed in Nepali and "insiders" whose first language is English. Indeed, in the experience of Nepalis who speak English and foreigners who speak Nepali languages (or more broadly in the experience of anyone bilingual), the us-and-them divide between two languages must give way to Derridean me-and-myself subtleties, there being no neat opposites of one and other within individual subjectivity. This lack of polarity within each individual leads Derrida to state: "One never writes either in one's own language or in a foreign language" (Derrida 1985:128).

Each translator has experienced this truth: of writing neither in one's own language nor in a foreign one. The translator should neither subscribe to an us-and-them dialectic nor approach the task of translation with primarily illustrative intent. (the latter act resulting from the former formulation). No work is free from its function as representation, of course. But it is my view that an ethical translation of Nepali literature cannot position the original text *primarily* as an inscrutable utterance that the translator will—most gallantly—help the non-Nepali reader understand. Rather, an ethical translation must centrally concern itself with creating Nepali subjectivity, landscapes and narratives in translation, offering an experience of language resonant enough, well crafted enough to pay homage to the original's rhetoric while remaining accurate enough to pay homage to its logic. Language play must be the primary concern: but this play must be conducted with humility.

"Translation is the most intimate act of reading," Spivak argues. "I surrender to the text when I translate" (1993:180).<sup>15</sup> Such surrender comes only from love for the original work, a love which demands that the translator surrender her own agency to the rhetoric of the original:

The task of the translator is to facilitate [the] love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay. The politics of translation...too often suppresses this possibility because the translator cannot engage with, or cares insufficiently for, the rhetoricity of the original (Spivak 1993:181).

Spivak goes on to argue for a translator's intimacy with the original language, and she even suggests that it would be "a practical help if one's relationship with the language being translated was such that sometimes one preferred to speak in it about intimate things" (Spivak 1993:183). Love for the original text, and intimacy with the original language are thus the first of her requirements for an ethical translation. Although she holds that the "genuinely bilingual" translator has the advantage here (Spivak 1993:187), I would suggest that the bilingual poetic/writerly rhetorical sensibility might occur more easily in collaborative efforts such as the Amtzis-Kanchuli example above. Certainly, given the poor English taught in Nepal, and given the remoteness of Nepali languages to English-language poets and writers, the convergence of these skills is perhaps rare in any one individual in today's Nepali literary community.

Spivak's second requirement for an ethical translation is that the translator be knowledgeable about the literature of the language translated from, or be "sufficiently in touch with what is going on in literary production in that language". The translator must be "capable of distinguishing between good and bad writings...., resistant and conformist writings" (Spivak 1993:188). The parallel drawn here between good and bad/resistant and conformist reveals, of course, Spivak's own position: resistant writing constitutes good writing. Given a choice of translating from a wide field of Bengali literature, she opts for the work of Mahasweta Devi over the writings of more conventional women writers and of equally or more resistant men writers:

I remain interested in writers who are against the current, against the mainstream. I remain convinced that the interesting literary text might

15 Spivak's article addresses specifically third world postcolonial feminist translation. I have abstracted from this context, without, I believe, misappropriating her basic intention to address the ethics of translation.



be precisely the text where you do not learn what the majority view of majority cultural representation or self-representation of a nation state might be (Spivak 1993:189).

My view is that words like "good" must be allowed their due polysemia: literature that occupies a "good" space in one local context may not do so in another local context. (Think, for instance, of the goodness of progressive Tij songs circulating in Nepal's minority non-Hindu communities). Scales of goodness shift perhaps with context.<sup>16</sup> Yet even if one does not subscribe to Spivak's view of good writings, she is surely making an important point: the translator must select her original text based on knowledge of the larger literary discourse that it arises from and contributes to. The translator's love for the original text is not meaningful in a lack of critical awareness of its background and context.

Spivak's writing on the ethics of translation largely define my own standard to aim for. Yet in the course of "The Politics of Translation," she makes a statement that I find myself hesitate at, though my hesitation arises from her greater emphasis on the theory rather than the craft of translation: "The understanding of the task of the translator and the practice of the craft are *related but different*" (Spivak 1993:198; emphasis mine).

I would argue, based on the examples above, that understanding the task of the translator (or the expression of this understanding) and the craft of translation may be different, but they are effectively inseparable. Even if a translator's love for an original comes from her intimacy with the language, even if a translator selects an original work based upon an understanding of the context of the work, this love can find no expression in the absence of her skill as a translator. There can be no expression of love if the translator's language lacks craft. There can be no ethics in the absence of aesthetics.

This is a simple point, but I make it with some hesitation because this is exactly the point at which many translations of Nepali literature seem to stammer and stutter. Hutt seems to best summarize the quality of the translatese surrounding Nepali literature when he writes:

16 Spivak too acknowledges: "Good and bad is a flexible standard, like all standards." She takes as an example the fact that a work that seems resistant in English might in fact function in a reactionary way in the original language (Spivak 1993:188).

A limited number of translations from Nepali literature have been produced by both [Nepalis] and foreigners to date. Those produced by Nepalis have, of course, demonstrated for the most part a thorough understanding of the original text, and are therefore valuable, but their quality and readability as literature has been marred by the translators' less than perfect command of English, their preconceptions about the kind of literary style which is appropriate and the total absence of cultural contextualization. They tend therefore to be read only by scholars of the literature, and have generally failed to reach wider literary audience outside Nepal.

Some of the translations produced by foreigners have been elegant and context-sensitive, but spectacularly inaccurate in places...(Hutt 1991:21).

To add to this, I believe I am not being unfair when I claim that—whether the translators are Nepali or foreign—few current translations of Nepali literature seem committed to the aesthetic skill and sophistication that the original works deserve. Instead, many translations can seem quite cavalier in their use of language, forcing the original's logic and rhetoric to submit to the translator's whims or limitations.

Section two of this paper established the freedom of the translator in staging her agency, while this section makes a case for the translator to act responsibly within her chosen field of errors. There are of course no fixed good and bad techniques of translation: but there are surely levels of sophistication in a translator's language play. Again, the aesthetic prowess of a translation generates its ethicality. Insofar as a translation which is unmindful of its own aesthetics displays a lack of respect for the original text, it must be considered to have lapsed in its ethics.

This said, one can not doubt the love for the original text that motivates many of the current translations of Nepali literature. Given that there is little money to be made in translating Nepali literature, and hardly any prestige to compensate, it takes a tremendous amount of goodwill, a tremendous affection for the original text, for translators to pour their efforts into the task. To claim that such efforts are not simply inadequate but actually *unethical* because they are lacking in craft is uncharitable indeed.

Spivak addresses precisely this miserliness in the context of translating third world feminist literature when she writes:

Five years ago, berated as unsisterly, I would think, "Well, you know one ought to be a bit more giving etc.," but then I asked myself again, "What am I giving, or giving up? To whom am I giving by assuring



that you don't have to work that hard, just come and get it? What am I trying to promote?" ...But surely by demanding higher standards of translation, I am not marginalizing myself or the language of the original? (Spivak 1993:187).

As such, many current translations of Nepali literature may best serve as—very valuable—guide-marks to work that at some later date, with sufficient attention to craft, might be translated with love and aesthetics. Indeed, I believe that much of the translation work done so far forms very solid ground for future ethical translation of Nepali literature. The fact that many translations are out of print or extremely difficult to locate hamper their being used in this way, of course. Even the Tribhuvan University's central library contains only a smattering of Nepali literature in translation.

Lest I sound too lofty with this talk of ethics, I end this section with an acknowledgment of the very real difficulties facing the translator of Nepali literature, myself included. To begin with, translators face very basic logistical problems finding original literary texts, which are—also—often out of print and unavailable in libraries. My own experience is that it is difficult to gain an overview of Nepali literature before beginning work as a translator. This makes it difficult to choose texts to translate—and easy to begin translating accessible work only to find, later on, that more worthy literature has been written farther afield. Critical works on literature are equally hard to come by. It is easy to begin translating a work and to find upon intimate reading, some disagreeable aspect—chauvinism, for example, or stereotyping, or subtler problems pertaining to style—embedded deeply within it.

In addition, the "you don't have to work hard" approach that Spivak mentions above seems, at times, very pronounced here. (My own efforts at translation began at the request to just "dash off" a few translations). Perhaps most translators of Nepali literature do begin in one or another accidental manner, and muddle their way through some works till they arrive at an understanding of their task, and of their own desire in staging their agency. Of course, translations published during this "learning" phase merit critical assessment. However, hostile attacks of the kind that one translator launches when snidely referring to another as "some mediocre hacks from the London School of Oriental Studies" (Devkota 1984:Introduction) can only discourage dialogue. Fawning praise leads to similar results. Somewhere in between the extremes of "everything you do is wrong" and "anything you do is appreciated" lies the possibility of peer review: this possibility is perhaps not realized as often as it should

be. Certainly, peer review rarely takes place with translation works in progress.

This is not all. The prevalence of self-publishing in Kathmandu, and the lack of editing facilities at publishing houses can easily promote sub-standard work. Though publishers like Ratna Pustak Bhandar have been publishing Nepali literature in translation, the content and quality of these books have largely depended upon the translator herself. In my view, a certain rush to individual glory can also operate in Kathmandu, discouraging practices such as asking for (duly credited) help, or undertaking collaborations when individual skill might not suffice. Other factors that encourage ethical lapses in translation are related to the very structure of Kathmandu's society. For example, for reasons of personal connection, the translator of Nepali literature can hardly avoid translating certain works as a gesture of goodwill to the author, putting aside more deserving works in the process. By extension, it may also be unavoidable at times to translate work that one actually finds "bad." One can hardly say no: such are the dynamics of our small inter-linked excessively courteous society.

Other translators have surely faced additional challenges. I do not suggest, therefore, that it is a simple matter for the translator of Nepali literature to stage her agency in ways that meet perfect ethical standards. Ethicality is as elusive a goal here as anywhere.

### 5. The Politics of Literary Translation

In much of this paper I have kept distance from the dialectics of oppositional politics which might pit one powerful language against a weaker one. Instead I have focused on ethical issues embedded in language itself, opting for Derridean dialectics of one-and-oneself. These dialectics—along with such terms as "migration," "erring," and "play"—suggest a certain painlessness in the interaction between languages. Yet it is undeniable that in Nepal, there are very real power imbalances between the English and Nepali languages, and between the Nepali language and other national tongues. Migration between languages does not occur here without pain. In concluding this paper I want to return to the points raised in the first section of this paper: despite the fact that there are few Nepalis for whom English is a mother tongue, the language occupies a startlingly privileged position as compared to the country's other languages. This fact, and the context of contemporary language politics, both raise ethical concerns for the English translator of Nepali literature.



First, let me place the ethical problems raised in this paper in some perspective: there is obviously a difference in the scale of ethics in acting as an agent of English in Nepal, and as an agent of—for example—the Enron corporation from the English-speaking world. With average print runs ranging from five hundred to a thousand, English translations of Nepali literature clearly have a very limited readership. Relatively small transgressions are committed by them, relatively minor ethical lapses are made. Yet it is important to remember that a readership of five hundred often equals the size of the original-language readership of the original work. Furthermore, English translations speak to a select group of national and foreign elite—in the government, non-government, national private and multinational sectors—who are well placed to determine the course of the nation. Also, in theory (though perhaps rarely in reality), they let Nepal speak to the larger world outside. To translate is to bridge the gap between Nepali literature and a select readership, to bridge the gap between the two differently-privileged (sometimes mutually exclusive) worlds of the linguistically and economically enfranchised.

No matter how much love and aesthetics the English translator of Nepali literature applies to her work—no matter how ethically she chooses to stage her agency—there is no getting around the fact that she promotes a language which tries to operate hegemonically in Nepali national discourse. What is the English translator to do about the fact that she is not just a product, but an agent of English in Nepal, helping to spread a language which easily marginalizes national languages?

Helping spread English in Nepal: naturally this sounds, to our post-Panchayat nationalist ears, like a terrible betrayal. In many instances English does overshadow other national languages. One must not forget, however, that present-day migrations between English and Nepali languages take place alongside important subversions of the English language's hegemonic functioning. The post-colonial critic Braj B. Kachru has pointed out that the indigenization of colonial English has led to distinct English "ecologies" in different parts of the world (Kachru 1995: 291). Kachru's metaphors from plant life imply a certain lack of will that I have tried to avoid in this paper, but nevertheless his point is clear: the English spoken in Nigeria differs from the English spoken in, say, Sri Lanka, or in the Philippines and forms, as such, its own loose ecology. Each grafting, each hybrid outcropping helps undermine the hegemonic functioning of the unified English language. Indeed, it is no longer controversial for Bhabha to claim: "English is no longer an English language" (Bhabha 1990a:6).

Nepal is still a ways off from indigenizing English in ways that counter the language's hegemonic potential. The presence of English in the nation has been too narrowly concentrated to allow for this. Only now, with the nascent spread of English beyond a few power centers in Kathmandu, can we even begin to consider such possibilities in earnest.

Cited below is a note by the critic Tara Nath Sharma on one of his own translation efforts, which addresses this growing possibility:

...The translator with his sincere feeling that English is the language belonging to all of us, humans, and as it has as many varieties as there are different communities using it he has taken some liberty here and there of employing the Nepalese kind which is gradually emerging and taking its shape (Sharma 1999:11).

The "Nepalese kind of English" that Sharma identifies is exactly the type of indigenized language which might subvert the power of English in Nepal. At this stage however, non-literary efforts throughout the country are doing more than literary translations to promote this kind of English. Day-to-day writings appearing in vernacular dailies and weeklies, and in magazines and locally published books are slowly beginning to indigenize English, infusing it with a Nepali flair for language. Tourism industry literature provides another example of how Nepalis accept English on their own terms. Signboards provide yet other, more vivid, examples. In theory, of course, the literary translator should be able to craft a subversive English with more technical prowess than the street-side circulator of "Nenglish"—but at this point any such possibility remains more of an idea than a reality.

Finally, it seems to me that language politics in Nepal gives rise to another important consideration for the English translator of Nepali literature. Given the complex multilingual and polyphonic discourse being carried out in the country, how is one to choose works worthy of translation into English?

Translating Nepali literature into English, one helps build an English-language canon of Nepali literature: the more times Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *Muna Madan* gets translated into English, the more deeply this work becomes entrenched in this canon. This English-language canon is actively being built, at this point, by each new publication. An analysis of the contents of this "canon" deserves close study to see which Nepal is most represented in English. From the bibliography of translated works included in this issue (Des Chene and Gautam, this issue), it is clear that there is a heavy favoring of the literature of Bahun and Newar men writing



Nepali-language and Nepal-*bhasa* literature. One may reasonably argue that such a canonization reflects reality: in all likelihood, Bahun and Newar men comprise the most highly educated groups in the nation. They are the most prolific contributors to Nepali-language and Nepal-*bhasa* literature. And yet the English translator must consider the fact of gender and caste/ethnicity privilege to judge the responsibility of selecting works to translate, to feel out her own desire in acting as a translator, and to stage her agency in ethical terms. Whose Nepal does she seek to represent to her elite readership? Which Nepal most deserves to speak the language of the powerful both within and outside Nepal?

My own view is perhaps easily inferred from the very questions I ask: today's English translator might best contribute to Nepali literature by turning her attention to literary works which serve (and are preferably but not necessarily authored by) the economically disadvantaged and the culturally disadvantaged such as women and neglected caste/ethnic groups. Equally worthy would be attention given to contemporary national language movements that foreground Nepal's multilingual character. In fact, for those who revel in the inherent impurity of languages, and who seek to investigate the kinship between similar and dissimilar Nepali tongues, the work of translation necessitated by contemporary language movements provides tremendous opportunity for creative play and innovation. Organizations which aim to promote minority languages and similar individual efforts such as those of the poet Bairagi Kainla also merit the attention of English translators of Nepali literature. Surely these are the diverse, de-centered Nepals which might speak most poignantly to the English world.

I myself find these political considerations to be slightly daunting when I think of how I might stage my agency while translating. Nevertheless I also feel that the translator of Nepali literature must take into account such political considerations. For, viewed in the most critical light, the work of the English translator is not even as admirable as generally assumed. Surely it is an anomaly that English translation claims more importance—and more public and private funds—than translation between national languages. (How often does one hear of a text being translated from Bhojpuri, say, to Sherpa? And yet surely this is vital to the development of Nepali national discourse.) It is all too easy for elite class-based English to obscure the needs of the less powerful languages of Nepal.

In conclusion, then, the English translator of Nepali literature faces many tasks ahead in seeking to work in an ethical fashion. All of the

translation work done till now forms good, solid ground upon which further ethical literary translation work may be based—but with an intimate sense of the original language, with proper inquiry into the discourse surrounding the translated text, and with a commitment to craft. In my opinion, the translator of Nepali literature into English may be best advised to apply humility to her work.

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