

## **From the Margins to the Centre: Translation of Folk, Legend and History in *The Restless Quest* by JP Cross**

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**Abstract:** Translation in the strict sense is a practice of transfer of meaning from one language system to another. However, as Shashi Deshpande in her seminal lecture “Dimensions of Translation” noted that the non-native creative writers writing in the English language are in a way translators themselves because they are translating the words of characters who do not speak English. Interestingly, translation not only involves the linguistic elements, but also the socio-cultural aspects of the text. Translation, thus, becomes a sort of transcreation, where the focus is not merely upon equivalences, but also on the cultural transfer. *The Restless Quest* is one such novel that can actually be regarded as a creative translation of oral narratives handed over the generations, through the common thread of Nepali folklore and beliefs. This paper will try to explore, as to how the very act of writing of this novel (into another social-cultural language system), becomes an act of translation or transcreation. In addition, this paper will also examine the effects of this intercultural transcreation on the history of the Indian subcontinent.

**Keywords:** *The Restless Quest*, Translation of History, legend, folklore, transcreation.

### **Introduction**

*The Restless Quest* is historical fiction set in 18<sup>th</sup> century Nepal. At that time, present day Nepal was divided into about fifty small principalities. In about the mid of this century, king Prithivi Narayan Shah of Gorkha kingdom began a unification campaign to unify these principalities. He believed that sooner or later the British forces would enter into the hills and would easily defeat these small kingdoms. In 1744, he took possession of the strategic town of Nuwakot and in 1767 captured the town of Kirtipur. Eventually entire Nepal came under his rule. After his death in 1775, the unification campaign continued and the Gorkha army reached Kangra in 1805. Finally, in 1815, the Gorkha army was defeated by the British army, putting an end to the military

ambitions of Kathmandu. This eventful epoch in the Nepali history caused a lot of pain and miseries, not only to the people of Nepal, but also to the people of the *Naya Mulk* (newly acquired hill territories from Kumaoun to Kangra).

Apart from this disturbance, life in the Nepal hills was simple and most of the people were engaged in farming and animal rearing. The main religions practiced in Nepal were Buddhism and Hinduism, but the people believed in, and were in perpetual fear of numerous demons, spirits, ogres and ogresses. They practiced a number of religious and esoteric rites to appease these extra-terrestrial elements and had blind faith in a number of superstitions. The kings were revered as the representatives of God on earth and had absolute rights in all matters within their kingdoms. The jobs of people were defined by the kings and each caste and sub caste had to perform a particular work. Even the dress they had to wear and whatever “socio-cultural usage” they had to perform was pre-defined (Shrestha 25). During this period, Nepal had economic ties with both India and Tibet. The black woollen blankets of Nepal were famous in India and Tibet. The Nepalese people bought salt, cotton and metals from the Tibetan traders passing through their country.

JP Cross was born in 1925 in London. After joining the British army in 1944, he remained in Asia for the next forty years. He spent his entire military career in a Gurkha regiment. His last posting in the British army was at Pokhara in Nepal. After his retirement, he decided to stay in Nepal and eventually acquired Nepali citizenship in the year 2015. From his interviews and the fiction he has written, one can easily surmise that JP Cross had a great love and respect for the people of Nepal. The long and intimate contact with Gurkha soldiers provided him an opportunity to learn about the history, legends, myths, folklore and also the language of Nepal. This acquired knowledge had found a voice through a number of historical fictions written by him. *The Restless Quest* is one such fiction where he tries to trail the sequence of events that had led to the Gurkha contact with the Britishers.

### ***The Restless Quest* as Intercultural Translation**

The importance of cross-cultural interaction in literary translation cannot be overemphasized. The elements of literary translation are, “... attitudes, subjective thinking, figures of speech, setting flora and fauna” (Jyothiraj 148). These elements are an important contribution in any act of literary creation. The global mass culture created by the diaspora and the mass media has

dislocated the concept of homogeneous culture. No two cultures share equal power relations and translation can occur only between two unequal cultures. For a translation like the one we are interested in, the author does indulge in strategies of domestication, but the interesting fact here is that no source language is involved and the appropriation is limited to social-cultural aspects. Octavio Paz once remarked, “When we learn to speak, we are learning to translate; the child who asks his mother the meaning of a word is really asking her to translate the unfamiliar term into the simple words he already knows. In this sense, translation within the same language is essentially not different from translation between two tongues...” (152).

In an interview with Cross that was posted on YouTube, the editor of the video felt that “Being from two cultures means two clocks on the wall” (“Britain” 01:33). So, the novels of JP Cross are like two clocks on the walls of his creative writings. He has been living in Nepal for a considerable number of years and has been writing about the Nepalese people and its culture. His writings, hence, “... operate in a space between cultural and linguistic traditions” (Akai 179). In addition, his writings also operate between the oral narratives grounded in legends that are translated into the text (Historical Fiction). This interlanguage translation from the oral source is indeed a challenging task, as the author has to be a master of the original language. JP Cross in writing this novel has tried to negotiate the second challenge of accurately representing and communicating the Nepali socio-cultural sensibilities into the English language. As the translator of peculiarities, special qualities, myths, legends, social values, culture, traditions and the customs of the Gorkha people, the author has tried to mentally assemble the overlapping array of language-cultural systems and their subs that constitute Nepali society. The question is: How far has he been successful?

Paul St-Pierre writes, “... even an intended act of homage to the language and culture of the original can result in the opposite effect; violence can be endemic to the act of translation itself” (16). So, it is quite interesting to study the attitude of the author in translating a work of an absent author and the text (as legend folks and myths do have no particular author) to see if he has in any way inflected or altered the language of the novel. Another question which is relevant in such a translation is regarding the “cultural artefacts” (qtd. in Pierre 19) of the source culture and whether such artefacts have been reduced to “abstract entities” (Pierre 18) or not. Another

important question is regarding the degree of indulgence of the author in twisting the translation to accommodate the western audiences of his novels, as most of Cross's books are published out of Nepal and have international audiences as target readers.

The answer to these and such questions is not an easy one and requires a more comprehensive study, but on preliminary examination it is observed that the author has attempted to negotiate between the Nepali and the British culture and has made a conscious effort to produce an equal effect of both the cultures on the readers. It is a fact that the words in the target language shift when used to express the culturally loaded words of the source language. To a greater degree this shift is absent in the novel under study, possibly due to the fact that there is no original text and the author has only translated from oral narratives. Still, the intercultural translation undertaken in the text has resulted in the creation of "abstract entities" and domestication of the source culture. For example, the imagination and perspective of Chegu Dura, Rajas, the villagers, soldiers and other native characters has been represented in a way as if they have been educated in Cambridge University. When Chegu and Le Chef were imprisoned by the Raja of Makwanpur in a dungeon of the palace, Chegu tells Le Chef, "I hate to stay here for long" (126). When Pahalman (Chegu's brother-in-law and a fellow Dura) decides to go and look for Chegu, his wife says, "Husband. Lord. Half of me does not want you to go but the other half sees no other way out of resolving our quest" (219). Now who can speak such words but the characters from English classics? The rituals narrated in the novel are as if viewed by the outsider and not by the one who actually practices them. It may also have happened that whosoever told the author about these rituals and practices had himself translated these rituals into a language so as to make sense to the author.

The Nepali language, like any other language, is "loaded with crucial attitudinal, emotional, social and other semantic and semiotic messages" (D'Costa 255) like "tone of voice, rhythm, intonation, register, body language, facial expression and body language" (Achai 179). Unless and until an author is able to translate these elements in the target text, he remains unsuccessful in his endeavour. Another challenge before the author in such an intercultural translation is to translate the language of the working-class oral culture to the language of the urbane and the middle-class reader. Linguistically, the Nepali language operates differently than the English

language at both the semantic and syntactic level. Hence, it is important for the author to communicate the Nepali culture in English and it is also equally essential that the author not only satisfy himself and the international audiences, but also the Nepali speaking populace. For this complicated task, it is expected that the author develops a writing style acceptable to all the stakeholders.

Though the scenes in the novel shift from the hill villages of Nepal to the residences of the Muslim royalty in Bengal, and from the British cantonments of Bengal to the French garrison in South India, the style of language throughout the novel remains the same. Except for some transliteration and loan words taken from the local languages, the words in the novel are steeped in the colonial flavour and use of archaic language is common. Even the sentiments of the local people are expressed through the native English language, causing some loss of meaning and expression. Now observe these lines from the text: “The stench was nauseating. Jackals, packs of feral dogs, flocks of vultures and crows crowed, picked at, flapped and fought menacingly over the scattered corpses on the mountain side” and also the expressions like “rats gnawed,” “fetid air,” “snowy ramparts” (242). This brevity of expression is the result of the author’s unconscious attempt to be faithful to the target language. If this fiction was written by some Nepali resident, we would have got a different semantic and syntactic style of writing; closer perhaps to the source language.

JP Cross used techniques as well as strategies of appropriations which are being exploited by skilled translators. Akai writes:

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin describe "strategies of appropriation in post-colonial writing" in/through which difference or foreignness is constructed as including such "authorial intrusions" as in-text glossing, borrowing (transcribing), inter-language, syntactic fusion/variation, code-switching and vernacular transcription. These very same strategies are labelled as translation strategies above. (190)

The very textualization of this novel is a translation of a particular epoch of Indian-Anglo-Nepali history. This is the same as, “giving meaning to experience” in the “imperial literary mode of expression” (Itwaru 2). On the surface level, the translation and literary writings seem to be in a dichotomous position, yet one complements the other. St-Pierre writes about this dichotomy in

“Translation and Writing”: “translation and writing are ... perceived as the two terms of a binary opposition, in which the first—“translation”—is negatively marked, and the second—“writing”—is positively valorised” (223). This binary opposition of writing and translation parallels the dichotomy between history and legend and just as the difference between history and legend is blurred, so is the distinction between translation and acts of literary writings. The writings about the legends, myths and the folklores of Nepal (especially by a Western author) can be termed as translation, not in the conventional sense, but under a different category of inter-cultural translation.

There are a number of instances in the novel where it becomes evident that the author has creatively re-narrated (in English) something that was already known to the Nepali people in their collective conscience from many centuries. The story of Chegu Dura alias Bhakti Thapa is a legend in itself. JP Cross had researched about this legend and creatively translated this story into English. The events narrated in the novel like the journey to Trisula lake, the eating of cockerel reserved for Baba Gorakh Nath, the saving of Chegu’s life by the Cappuccino monks, the salt test performed by the brothers of Chegu to verify the authenticity of Puspa’s (Chegu’s sister) dreams, the battle of Kirtipur, the death of Pahalman, Chegu’s encounter with Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah and Lord Clive are based on Nepali legends, folks and myths.

The author in writing this fiction relying equally on the authentic historical sources, on memories and on legends. This could be due to the reason that the author saw the Gurkha life from very close quarters, living among his foster Gurkha family. The novel traces the life of Chegu Dura of Khaje village whose ancestors were *dwarees* (door keepers) in the Lamjung, a small kingdom in the north of Kathmandu. The British in the second half of the eighteenth century were still struggling to get their feet in India, while the contemporary Mughal regime tried hard to resist the red banner. The situation was crucial and destiny could have turned either way. The British however, were favoured by luck. The historians credit the success of the British to their better management of men and material, their organizational skills, superior weaponry, well organized army and the leadership qualities of their officers, as some of the reasons for their success. The author however, gives credit to history being affected by four unrelated and obscure events: death of an insignificant woman in Lamjung who had died during childbirth, a Frenchman in Lyons caught in an act of incest, the incident of the hornet’s attack on a group of pilgrims and the

injustice meted to an innocent man by a British army officer. The historical details in the novel are authentic while the story is built on the flesh and the blood of Nepali legends.

The author writes in the introduction: “The historical bones of the story are strong and true, the flesh is as English historians have it, the blood as the Nepalese have it. The cloths as seen by me, who has seen the hill men of Nepal for 65 years...” The customs, legends, beliefs, superstitions, lifestyle, attitude and thinking of the Nepali populace is foregrounded. The cry of a jackal during the day and the death of a person across the river are suggested to be inevitable, correlated events and the superstitions like this are given legitimacy, against the well-recognized rules of logic and reasoning. The story of the novel began at the time of Chegu’s birth on an inauspicious day. This was considered as a bad omen and it foretold a dangerous future for the parents. Baby Chegu’s tiny hands covered with blood predicted difficulties and struggle for the boy in his later life. As the narrative in the novel progressed, both these predictions came true. The mother of the boy dies immediately after giving birth to Chegu and his father died while undertaking the Mata Tirtha pilgrimage near the Trishuli river. After getting permission from the Raja, Chegu’s father Balram embarks upon the religious journey with his two sons as they wanted to see the reflection of their dead mother’s face on the surface of the lake. Their journey, however, was doomed from the beginning, as the “white cockerel” that was promised to Gorakh Nath was mistakenly eaten by the family the night before the pilgrimage. The sub-human shrieking at the start of the journey spelled doom for them. The cry of the jackals during the daytime predicted death. To make matter worse, Jagati Khan, who had accompanied them, earned the ferryman’s curse for his highhandedness. Similarly, before the start of the Kirtipur campaign, the commander of the Gorkha army, Kalu Pandey, is sure about his death as after the inspection of the troops a hen had crowed like a cock, which was believed to be a terrible omen. Further, after he had performed the predawn prayers, minutes before the battle, a jackal had howled facing him. Likewise, Puspa’s dream prophesied that Chegu was not dead and it was verified by the salt test ritual.

### **Toppling the Dominant Discourses of History**

The second issue this research paper seeks to examine is how this intercultural translation establishes a relationship between the Nepali history (as authentic documented record) and the novel *The Restless Quest* (as an unverified creative endeavour). Language, according to deconstructionists is fickle, untrusting, delusive, and full of paradoxes. Thus, to call history

objective, which uses the medium of language to construct itself is a paradox in itself. Hence, history per se and historical fiction stand on almost equal grounds. By relating four obscure and unrecorded incidents of minor nature with recorded history, JP Cross has unconsciously indulged in the deconstruction of history. The history here is reconstructed from the point of view of the Nepali, French and the English people. The novel tries to fill the unexplained gaps in recorded history (that is largely from the Western perspective) and tries to answer the questions that history per se could never provide. The answers to these questions are dear to all Nepali people. This is like re-writing an alternative version of history from the perspective of a relatively marginalized community or a racial group. In this sense, the very act of creation of this text becomes a site for the “deconstruction” or the “decentring” of the so-called “objective” and “scientific” history.

The main character of the novel Chegu Dura, alias Bhakti Thapa, slips in and out of his memory in the entire novel. He oscillates between legend and history. The narrative of the novel links the Nepali history with this legendary figure. The legends narrated in the novel are based on the collective memory of the Gorkha community. The various characters and events, which form the narrative of the novel, are nearer to the truth and its veracity can be verified from the official version of Nepali history. The “Battle of Plessey” was indeed fought on the banks of the Bhagirathi River. In this battle, the British army gave a crushing defeat to the Nawab’s forces. It is a well-known fact in the historical records that Robert Clive (Governor General) had bribed Mir Jafar (Commander-in-Chief of the Nawab's army) for buying the latter’s neutrality in the battle. In addition, the infamous incident of the “Black Hole” also forms part of the historical records. The author had supplemented history by narrating an interesting incident which resulted in the British army carrying the day. In this incident Chegu Durra while being trapped in homosexual lust of Siraj-ud-daula escapes from the Nawab’s camp and lands in the British camp by mistake. Here he inadvertently gave the message of Mir Kasim’s neutrality that he had picked up on the way to Mir Jafar’s camp. When Robert Clive gets this information, he exclaims: “Lad. You’ve saved the Company. You’ve saved England. You’ve saved the day. By the stroke of unbelievable luck, you’ve given the Mir Jafar message to Clive. I am he” (156). So this small incident which may have been the main reason for the success of the British in the “Battle of Plassey” had not formed a part of mainstream history. Similarly, other historical episodes, like the attack on Kirtipur and its subsequent capitulations are attributed to reasons which are



different than those provided by the official version of history. In the official history of Nepal, the three attacks on the fort of Kirtipur in 1757, 1764 and 1767 AD are well recorded. However, in *The Restless Quest* the reasons for the failure of the Gorkhas in the first two attempts have been convincingly explained. Also, the success in their third attack is attributed to the stratagem on behalf of the king. According to this plan, a number of Gorkha men disguised as peasants were sent into the valley of Kirtipur. Over a period of time, these men had assimilated with the local population and had settled well in the area. Eventually, the Gorkhas achieved success in their well-planned third attack in 1767 AD. In the battle of Makawanpur (that too found mention in Nepali history), the historians attribute Gurgin Khan's defeat to the hit and run strategy of the Nepalese forces. However, according to the narrative in *The Restless Quest*, the author attributes the success of the Gorkhas to the vital information provided by the Chegu Dura. *The Restless Quest*, hence, becomes a meeting point of history and legend. Hence, the historical narrative in the novel undergoes deconstruction, as well as the reconstruction of history.

History remains a mystery, as there are a number of unexplained gaps. Only conjectures can be drawn, but they too are not sufficient to fill these gaps as speculations cannot form a part of historical documents. However, the fictional writers are free to fill the gaps with their fertile imagination. The "incident of hornets," at a metaphorical level signifies the insufficiency of history in bringing out the truth. Cappuccino monks and Le chef tried hard to explain logically the circumstances of Chegu's fall from the cliff and the death of his father, brother and a soldier. Ultimately, when Chegu, who can be metaphorically compared to fiction, regained his memory, that Pahalman was able to make out the truth that none could have ever dreamt of.

Another question worth discussing here in brief is how this decentering or deconstruction of history in the novel results in the marginalized being magnified and the unheard or ignored voices given representation. Apart from the life of the rich, powerful and the important historical figures of the time, the novel gives strong representation to the low and marginalized section of Nepali society. From the towering figures of Sir Robert Clive, Sir Warren Hasting, General Eyre Coot, Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula, Maharaja Ranjeet Singh, Kaji Amar Singh, Mir Kasim, Prithivi Narayan Shah and other hill Rajas, the novel also gives sufficient space to the ordinary people. The ferryman, who is a victim of caste based hierarchies of the social setup of the time, is depicted to be more prudent than Jagati Khan, "a close confidant of the Raja of Gorkha." An

insignificant potter saves Chegu's life with the deftness of a skilful surgeon. He is the one who thinks of an excellent plan to escape out of the Gorkha territory. Pahalman, a high caste Dura, shuns the prejudice of caste-based hierarchies and accepts to live and eat with the potters. The wisdom of the regent queen in exposing the keeper of the seal, the spy of the Raja of Palpa, breaks the myth that women rulers are less capable than their male counterparts.

## **Conclusion**

*The Restless Quest* is a historical novel based on a country that had never remained under the British subjugation. Studying about a novel written by a British author who is writing about the Gorkha people (from a non-colonial angle), is one of the interesting cases in the literary research arena. Just as some of the characters like Chegu or Nicholas and Pahalman or Paul in the novel have dual identities, this novel too has a dual identity of work of creative writing and intercultural translation. By being both faithful and unfaithful in the representation of the source culture, the text has tried to bring into the mainstream, those repressed elements from history, which Alun Mellus calls "otherness." The author in writing this novel has attempted to integrate regional elements of the Gorkha culture with the English language. Though the language in which one writes, "can never go against its own grain," but it is also a fact that the language used in the translation seldom belongs to the source and the target code. In the absence of any source text, the transcreational shifts (at the linguistic level) are minimal; however, the cultural artefacts of the Nepali community are altered in a slightly negative manner. By giving equal preference to history and legend, the author has indulged in the deconstruction of recorded history.

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