AboutUs: http://www.the-criterion.com/about/

Archive: http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/

ContactUs: http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/

EditorialBoard: http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/

Submission: http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/

FAQ: http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/

Unpacking the Postcolonial Puzzle: A Critical Reading of Indra Bahadur Rai's *Ghosh Babu*

Ashish Chettri
Asst. Professor,
Dept of English,
St Joseph's College,
North Point,
Darjeeling.
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14605835

Article History: Submitted-04/12/2024, Revised-20/12/2024, Accepted-27/12/2024, Published-31/12/2024.

Abstract:

Indra Bahadur Rai was a doyen of literature in Nepali/Gorkhali from India. A figure revered across time and space for his scholarship, unique style, and deceptively simple idiom, he is credited with works that have proven to be timeless. His works provide the minutiae of Gorkhali life with acute psychological and philosophical insights. His short stories sketched as vignettes present a stark reality, at times in a lyrical manner. His works often hailed as classics with a contemporary air, have welcomed various theoretical approaches and prying critical lenses.

The paper is an effort to work on the contemporary nature of his short story titled *Ghosh Babu*. By using the lenses of postcolonial theory the intent is to set off a kaleidoscope of images and thereby focus on the possible meanings.

Keywords: Neocolonialism colonized subject, bourgeoise intelligentsia, decolonization.

When Dr Indra Bahadur Rai passed away on 6th March, 2018, the *Kathmandu Post* brought out an obituary which read that he had, "ushered in a paradigm shift (in Nepali literature...) he was a lone mountain towering over the field of Nepali literature". In the field of letters, Dr Rai

was a novelist, a short story writer, an essayist and a literary critic. Apart from this, as 'Renaissance Man' he was also a language activist, a teacher and an orator par excellence.

Born on the 3rd of February 1930 at Balasun Tea Estate, Rai had his schooling in Kurseong and Darjeeling. He completed his graduation from Calcutta University and then his post-graduation in English from the University of North Bengal. Starting his career as a teacher at Turnbull High School Rai later became a professor of English at St Joseph's College and afterwards the Vice Chairman of Darjeeling Municipality. But he was pre-eminently a language activist, spearheading the movement for the constitutional recognition of the Nepali/Gorkhali language. This came about on the 20th of August, 1992 when, the language got included in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution of India.

During his literary career which spanned three decades, he produced thirteen volumes which included works of literary criticism, short stories, essays, a play and a novel. In the 1960's along with Ishwar Ballabh and Til Bikram Nembang(Bairagi Kaila) he heralded post-modernism in Nepali literature with the a literary movement called 'Tesro Ayaam'. His 1974 work on literary criticism, *Nepali Upanyaska Aadhar Haru,* got him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1977. Though the language had been included in the Akademi's list of languages in 1947 itself, this was the very first recognition by the Akademi of a work in Nepali. Thus this award can be seen as recognition of I B Rai's genius as well as of the Nepali language, hence its added significance.

I B Rai's oeuvre suggests that he was exceptionally well-read from the Upanishads to Marxism, from Buddhism to Post- Structuralism. Prawin Adhikari, a translator, says in an interview to *Himal* magazine that, Rai was "most conversant among his peers with trends and ideas in the arts and literature around the world. It was his deep and deliberate scholarship that enabled him to create literary movements like *Tesro Aayam* or *Leela Lekhan*" (Adhikari). Further Adhikari calls I B Rai, the "greatest contemporary writer in Nepali language…readers in Nepal/Nepali were shown the potential of their language through Rai's work". I B Rai's consummate artistry is attested by his fellow *Ayamic* collaborator Bairagi Kaila, " he used to say that a good sentence was like a guitar if it's strings are tuned well, but if it is out of tune the same instrument can be unpleasantly chaotic'(Obituary). He has had his fair share of detractors too; he was accused of leap-froging from one esoteric literary project to another obscuring the readers and reducing their numbers as well. There are also many who in awe accepted his greatness

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

without reading him, partly because his later works are notoriously dense. Satis Shroff writes in *Gorkhapedia* that I B Rai, 'has added the sophistication and intellectual incomprehensibility of his post-structuralist mentors' (Shroff).

Since this paper is a study of Rai's translated work, a word on this art is required. Translations perhaps are what detractors of poetry have to say about it being twice removed from the real. There is first the author's ideal work in his mind, then the written word and finally the translated word. An anecdote should clear the air; Alexander Pushkin the great Russian Romantic poet chose to learn English just to read Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* despite there being Russian translations. It's nothing like the original. Perhaps a word on the delicate and challenging art of transcreation is also required. Prawin Adhikari the translator of *Bipana Katipaya* (Long Night of Storm) says that it is, "the slow, deliberate, reading of a word, a few triumphs and many long days of humbling work" (Interview).

It is oft mentioned that Rai's works are influenced by the world and speech of Darjeeling, and the various political movements thereabout. But a point that gets foregrounded is that his works have a contemporaneous air about them, always fresh, always relevant. Thus we see that it is about honour in *Jaa*r, the conflict between nature and culture in *Ujyalo*, the ideal and the actual in *Kheer*, the quest for equality in *Ghosh Babu* or the nalmost absurdist spectacle of life in *Aaja Ramita Chha*, his only novel that was published in1958. Concentrating on his short stories one could say that they seem transparent almost leading to the charge that the writer wears his heart on his sleeve. But like a typical Mozartian composition the transparency is deceiving, for the narrative appears and works like an iceberg, reminiscent of the American Nobel Laureate Ernest Hemingway's favoured technique.

Now to talk about his short story *Ghosh Babu* from his anthology *Bipana Katipaya(1970)*. A typical innocent reading would reveal the, it is about Subodh Ghosh, who ran a dry-cleaning business in Darjeeling. Despite his presumed best effort and charitable ways his workers had supposedly grown into ingrate rogues and had even threatened with a strike/ cease work. This matter had reached the labour office, but Subodh Ghosh wanted the narrator to solve it as he was an elected commissioner as well as the president of the worker's union. The plot seems too simplistic even to warrant a second reading. But an informed reading reveals the various levels of meaning and myriad symbols at interplay here, making it a classic postcolonial text.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

A contrapuntal reading immediately bring to the fore the unbalanced power equation of the supposedly master race and the servile one, the colonizer and the colonized. It tilting towards Ghosh, the 'Babu' and away from the *others*, the workers of whom only one is named simply as "Gore", which is a coloured nomenclature. This single individual is referred by his skin colour and the rest of the workers; all natives have been lumped together into a homogenous mass including the narrator himself. This homogenisation is an all too familiar colonial tool employed to 'wipe out any traces of individuals... with narratable life Histories' (Barry 194).

This equation then explains why Ghosh Babu never asks favours from the narrator, despite the fact that the narrator, himself a native is ever eager to oblige him. The narrator is always the first to greet Ghosh whenever their paths cross. His "Namoskar" in response to the narrators "Namaskar" suggests the linguistic, cultural, political, historical, social divide. Ghosh always reciprocated with a formal "Namoskar" of folded hands close to his chest and a condescending smile. At times he wouldn't even care to utter the greeting but responded with just the folded hands and a patronizing smile. Never does he reciprocate the honorific "Babu". 'Looking smart to the narrator even in his ill fitting coat and over-large trousers' (Poddar et al 88), he is a relic of 'sahibdom', he is the Bhabhaesque 'mimic man'. The narrator on the other hand presumed one act, he believed, though it was unfounded, that Ghosh was one of his electors that made him feel an overwhelming sense of obligation. "When I saw him ahead of me I would walk uplifted by happiness for twenty strides until we met then for forty more strides after we had parted" (88). This strange mood of elation can only be explained by revisiting the history of colonization. This explains how internal-colonization had resulted in the total loss of self-worth on the part of the colonized subject. Thus for the narrator being even in the mere presence of colonizer, of being in the same space as one's colonizer provided vicariously transference of worth. In Rai's novel *There's a Carnival Today (Aaja Ramita Chha 1958)*, the narrator talks about Janak the protagonist in a similar vein as that of Ghosh Babu. He says, "If it were true that only those Nepalis known to and respected by the local Marwaris and Bengalis were human, and the rest were rubbish, then the name of Mr Janakman Yonzon would appear at the very top rank" (8).

The narrator is dying to be an instrument of Subodh Ghosh, to be useful to him, "I could have got him contracts from so many different quarters. I had also thought of inviting him for a meal during Dasain…One day I thought about him so much it made me restless. I could have helped

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

him out with a municipal licence for his shop, with his trade tax, with water and electricity, but I was never asked to do anything" (89). Subodh Ghosh had become an obsession for the narrator as much as blue eyes had become, to the point of lunacy for Pecola in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. A history of internalized oppression resulting in a colonial mentality had led to this sense of utter inferiority, hence this hysterical desire for approval and validation. This loss of self, this degradation, is what is referred to by Frantz Fanon as the dehumanising effect of colonization. The narrator not satisfied by his own indulgence raises this same issue of a false sense of obligation with the workers, when he meets them later. He tells them, "Ghosh Babu has been most caring. He has chided you a if you are his younger brothers, he hasn't been an enemy to you…are we to forget all his kindness" (95). Hegemony has two parts, the agent and the patient, the agent makes a bid for domination but somewhere and somehow the patient too has a part in allowing it. This is a result of decades of ideological brainwashing, leading to the patient accepting the dominant discourse as common sense.

The lopsided power equation repeatedly manifests when Ghosh Babu visits the narrator's place. In one instance Ghosh is seated on a 'chair' and the narrator himself takes a 'stool' near him, and tries to be friendly by offering tea and his small talk. The narrator is a typical subject who has become a victim of years of coercion, of the years of constant pattering by the ideological apparatuses of the dominant race.

Making oneself comfortable Ghosh patronizingly comments "it's a nice place I like places like this". He looked out of the window, and gazed up and down" (Poddar et al 90) and then grudgingly deflated, "it's like a village". It is a case of the classic English understatement. Purposely or unawares, he brings about the rural-urban, rustic-sophisticate divide. The entire monologue is patronising and officious. An alert reader will find the narrator dropping bread trails here. Outside the sun was beginning to revive the foliage whose 'consciousness' had been taken by the winter. Gore the worker, was standing in the sunshine, which is symbolic of the revived consciousness in the workers, that Subodh Ghosh might be their boss but didn't own them. This consciousness is instrumental in subverting the imposed hierarchy.

This ownership attitude is fleshed out further when the narrator describes that Ghosh's dry cleaning business was 'housed in the past glory of some prince's derelict and haunted house' and that from there "he ran his small industry like the wife in a family...he wanted to be everyone's

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

father, everyone's big brother, he wanted to reprimand everyone, he wanted everyone's love, he wanted everyone to heed what he said" (Poddar et al 92-93).The workers had no say at all and as Gayatri Spivak says, "to ignore the subaltern today, is willy-nilly, to continue the imperialist project"(94). Let alone the house, Ghosh too was haunted, constantly visited upon by the Brown sahib's version of the White Man's Burden. The house though derelict, was a totem for Ghosh from which he sourced his contorted sense of ownership. His sojourn there had somehow given him the divine right to be the patriarch, lord over all his workers and demand habitual obedience from them. The house was similar to the shaky, ramshackle enclosure in V S Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr Biswas* but nevertheless had immense symbolic worth. Regarding Subodh Ghosh's actions to micromanage the affairs, lives and agency of the workers, threatening them with eviction has a parallel in a very telling remark found in IB Rai's novel *There's a Carnival Today*, where Janakman Yonzon while encouraging his wife Sita to give up her habit of chewing betel nuts says, "you must adopt good habits," Janak would say. "Good habits are as useful as Bihari servants; bad habits are as evil as Bengali masters."(31).

The workers had their fair share of complaints, they were exploited, had to work from dawn to dusk on a meagre allowance, they had no freedom of going to the cinema or using food grains as they wished. Their clamour for freedom and equality is seen by Ghosh with a typical colonial gaze, that 'their actions were determined by instinctive emotions rather than by conscious choices or decisions' (Barry 194). Ghosh justifies his actions by pronouncing a catalogue of supposed favours he had bestowed on his workers; "I give them rice from my ration to feed their children. I give them money to go to the cinema, even in the afternoon. I tell them to eat what I have cooked. I am like a wife"(91). He then tries to give it a religious-ethical colour, "they'll reduce dharma next, I've no doubt. Cut down on Dharma, increase the sin!"(91). He even tries to pass it as a domestic dispute and finally becomes stern and threatens eviction, "anyone who doesn't heed what I say need not live here anymore. He can go look for a house somewhere else…If I'm a bad boss, go and find a good one. As of today you don't have to stay here with me"(Poddar et al 91-97). This smacks of the all too familiar draconian 'law' of the white sahib in the not too distant past, '*hatta*-baahar'- my way or the highway. This was an evil practice during the British Raj where the European manager/owner in a tea estate would throw out not just the worker, at the slightest hint of disobedience but exile the entire family from the estate. This

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

practice of 'hatta-baahar' is still followed in tea estates even after so many years of independence.

To the earlier symbol of 'sunshine' the worker Gore was basking in, yet another is added, that of the sun basked Himalayas laughing, laughing at the desperate machinations of Subodh Ghosh. This symbol gains political weightage given its topicality of the statist narrative of 'pahad hasche' meaning the hills are laughing. The hills are not elated and laughing per se, still if there is any laughter at all it's a mocking laughter directed at the futile and juvenile attempts of the statist narrative to try and falsely portray that the hills are genuinely happy with the status quo.

Subodh Ghosh has been suggesting all the while that his actions were almost maternal and that his workers were immature, errant and childish which justified his reprimands and curtailments. The narrator too, tries to placate the workers with the all too familiar but irrelevant rationale that "you have lived as a family...Ghosh Babu started this business here, and it supports both him and you. So you are one family, you should come together...you must rely on what there is and share it between you" (Poddar et al 93). The narrator simplistically takes up the issue of economics but conveniently forgets the important pillars of a 'family', that of mutual respect, understanding, freedom and equality. He has turned into a 'bourgeoise intelligentsia'. On the other hand it very clearly explains the statist position where the powers that be, hijack the fundamental issues of equality and freedom replacing them with mundane matters of economics and development. Subodh Ghosh tries to deflect the issues by diluting them with emotional clap-trap which nevertheless betrays his feelings of racial superiority," I came from Calcutta, the son of a Bengali, and I wash dirty clothes for the whole of Darjeeling. Do I do it just for myself? Am I the only one here who lives on it? My wife washes the world's dirty clothes as well, what work that is!" (93). Thus, in his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon says, "colonialism did not seek to be considered as a gentle loving mother who protects her child from a hostile environment but rather as a mother who increasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from managing to commit suicide and from giving free rein to its evil instincts" (169-70).

Then the utopian happens miraculously, the rule of law shines forth, a worker announces the good news to the narrator,

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

> "The union got everything it demanded. The workers will be allowed to live there, but those who don't want to live will get a housing allowance. They will work only eight hours a day, and will wash and iron a maximum of twenty items. They will get extra money for doing anything more than that. The question of the tiffin allowance is coming up in the next meeting..." (Poddar et al 98).

The matter of the worker's unrest that had reached the labour office got decided in the favour of the workers, they got what was legally theirs and Ghosh was reduced to an incoherent mumbling joker. The narrator who was 'undecided', though comes across as a yet to be decolonised 'lumpen intelligentsia' who could as per Fanon would be responsible for tragedies. He says in his work *The Wretched of the Earth* that, " it so happens that the unpreparedness of the educated classes, the lack of practical links between them and the mass of the people…at the decisive moment of the struggle will give rise to tragic mishaps"(119).

The story then runs almost like an allegory to the present times, such that this work could be read as a study in miniature of the state of things in Darjeeling hills, a space reeling under internal-colonization. Where the colonizer claims ownership of colonized subjects inhabited space, agency and psyche. It further focuses on the interiorization of the years of oppression by the colonized subject leading to the dehumanization of the colonized and the colonizer alike. Perhaps then, it is pertinent to conclude with what Prawin Adhikari says about Indra Bahadur Rai's works;

> 'he simply didn't write stories about the poor and the downtrodden he gave them a complex inner voice and world view, elevated them to a fuller being worthy of empathy and dignity. He provided the germ from which many struggles for the dignity of a people have grown...in many ways the struggles for Gorkha identity in West Bengal would be much feebler without I B Rai's work in service of the Nepali speakers in India".

Works Cited:

Adhikari, Prawin. *The Art of Translating Indra Bahadur Rai.- Interview*. Himal Magazine 10 May.2018, https://m.himalmag.com

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

Bary, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. MUP, 2007.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth* Translated by Constance Farrington. Penguin, 1967.

Indra Bahadur Rai: The Lone Mountain Towering over Nepali Literature: Obituary,http://kathmndupost.ekantipur.com

Nayar, Pramod K. Postcolonial Literatures: An Introduction. Pearson Longman, 2008.

Poddar, Prem, Anmole Prasad. *Gorkhas Imagined: Indra Bahadur Rai in Translation*. Mukti Prakashan, 2010.

Rai, Indra Bahadur. *There's A Carnival Today* Translated by Manjushree Thapa. Speaking Tiger, 2017.

Shroff, Satish. *Indra Bahadur Rai*. Gorkhapedia, http://gorkhapedia.com.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. CUP. 1994, pp. 66-111.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030