

## Explore the Cultural Portrayal in Manjushree Thapa's Work, *The Tutor of History*

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### Abstract

The concept of cultural representation, rooted in Stuart Hall's framework and recognized as a vital branch of cultural studies, posits that cultural expressions, including film and literature, serve as reflections of realities. These representations extend beyond mere artistic endeavors and encompass reflections of cultural institutions such as language, religion, marriage, food, and dress. Manjushree Thapa's work, "The Tutor of History," emerges as a compelling cultural text delving into these institutions within the context of Nepal.

This study delves into how Manjushree Thapa skillfully portrays the socio-cultural realities of Nepal within her novel. Employing the tools of humanistic studies, this paper endeavors to identify and analyze the cultural representations embedded in Thapa's work. The methodology adopted is that of analytical research, drawing upon the rich arsenal derived from cultural studies. The exploration aims to elucidate how Thapa's novel enables readers to vicariously experience the intricate tapestry of Nepali culture.

**Keywords:** Cultural Studies, Nepali Culture, Language, Manjushree Thapa

### Introduction

Fictional works serve as a literary medium through which the cultural fabric of a society or community is conveyed. Within the intricacies of its plot and narrative, fiction encapsulates diverse cultural practices, including but not limited to religion, festivals, culinary traditions, and marriage conventions. These cultural practices represent the tangible expressions of a culture, reflecting the customary behaviors of specific ethnic and cultural groups. Cultural practices, dynamic in nature, are a focal point of examination in the realm of cultural studies, as they evolve and adapt in response to cultural transformations over time.

This study delves into the cultural intricacies portrayed in Manjushree Thapa's work, *The Tutor of History*. It scrutinizes Thapa's adept depiction of the social fabric in modern-day Nepal through a lens of cultural realities. Additionally, a meticulous examination is undertaken to unravel the cultural backdrop within the novel, offering readers an immersive experience of Nepal's cultural milieu.

Culture is not just a symbolic system but a vibrant realm of lived experience and practical engagement, intricately woven into the fabric of everyday life. Transcending culture is a formidable challenge given its intimate connection to our daily existence. The term "representation" signifies not only the act of describing or portraying but also the imaginative and symbolic rendering of something.

Cultural studies, a critical analysis of culture, delves into the intricate political dynamics of contemporary culture, exploring its historical roots, defining characteristics, and inherent conflicts. This field of study focuses on the examination of cultural practices influenced by social phenomena such as ideology, class structures, national formations, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and generation. In Ziauddin Sardar's work, "Introducing Cultural Studies," five defining characteristics are highlighted: the scrutiny of cultural practices in relation to power, analysis of the social and political contexts shaping culture, examination of political actions, efforts to unveil knowledge divisions, and an ethical evaluation

of modern society with a commitment to radical political action.

The term "Cultural Studies" was first coined by Richard Hoggart in 1964 when he established The Birmingham School, marking the inception of the world's first institutional home for Cultural Studies. Stuart Hall subsequently advanced the field by proposing cultural representation as a distinct branch within Cultural Studies. While Cultural Studies encompasses the analysis of issues like race, gender, ideology, and identity, its primary focus remains on dissecting the practices and institutions that constitute culture.

In the novel, Manjushree Thapa explores themes of idealism, alienation, human relationships, and love in "The Tutor of History." The narrative vividly portrays the evolving cultural landscape of Nepal. This analysis aims to delve into the cultural institutions depicted in the novel. Thapa emerges as a dynamic literary voice representing a nation navigating through the currents of cultural transformation. Within the narrative, Thapaskillfully navigates two contrasting cultures — the traditional and the western. The novel unfolds against the backdrop of two thematic cultural dimensions: political culture and individual lifestyle culture. The characters grapple with the complexities of straddling these two cultural realms, creating challenges in their actions and decisions. The narrative delves into the intricate tapestry of cultural institutions, weaving their impact into the characters' trajectories as a thematic backdrop. These cultural institutions are organized into distinct categories: the political framework shaping culture, language as a mirror of cultural representation, the juxtaposition of rural life between tradition and Western influences, and the vibrant hues of local customs, attire, religious practices, and caste distinctions.

Individuals sharing a cultural milieu, a common conceptual map, and a shared linguistic expression understand that the seemingly arbitrary amalgamation of letters and sounds in a word encapsulates a profound concept. Languages function as vessels of shared conceptual maps, linguistic systems, and codes that facilitate the translation of signs. Diverse languages and cultures encapsulate distinct meanings, and in the context of contemporary Nepal, this richness is reflected in a multilingual backdrop encompassing Nepali, Hindi, English, and various regional languages.

Language, in this narrative exploration, serves as a conduit to understand characters and their cultural backgrounds, elucidating the nuanced relationships between linguistic expression and cultural nuances.

"In the bazaar people could be heard speaking Nepali, Gurung, Hindi, Kumhale- and bursts of English: "Tata, bye-bye, hello sir".

Language and its representation play crucial roles in the examination of culture. Thapa explores how concepts and ideas are translated across different languages, emphasizing how language serves as a lens through which we perceive and refer to the world.

Political culture encompasses the set of beliefs and assumptions held by ordinary individuals toward the world. It differs from ideology, being more diffuse and less goal-oriented. Political culture exhibits relative stability over time and is perpetuated through political socialization. While some argue that political culture fosters democratic stability, the reality is that a stable and effective democratic government hinges on people's orientations toward the political process—on their political culture. For instance, "The Tutor of History" delves into a recurring theme of politics, exploring the lives of numerous individuals in the quaint town of Khaireni Tar. The central

characters are intricately linked to a minor political party striving to secure a handful of seats in the national parliament. Their optimism is pinned on Khaireni Tar, where their candidate—a renowned film star—commands popularity, exuding charisma, courtesy, and idealism, albeit with a touch of naivety regarding democratic processes. Born in the region with relatives nearby, he enjoys widespread support due to his star status.

Set against the backdrop of the 1990s, a period when Nepal had recently initiated elections, the novel captures the bittersweet experiences of its characters. The narrative unfolds during a '90s-style election campaign in Nepal, providing a vivid portrayal of a lively, gossip-filled town immersed in the fervor of the elections. Simultaneously, it contrasts this vibrant electoral atmosphere with the backdrop of the violent Maoist insurgency that has disrupted life in the country, causing extreme chaos in the characters' lives.

The political landscape in Nepal, as depicted by Thapa, is fraught with corruption. Through glimpses of speeches from various political parties, she exposes the illusory promises made during the campaigns. While the Congress and Communist parties emerge as major contenders, there is a hopeful undercurrent among the village supporters of the people's party. Thapaskillfully adapts rural culture to depict the village itself, illustrating the diverse ways of life undergoing transformation and convergence.

Khaireni Tar existed as a town of moderate proportions, where strolling through its narrow pathways often led one into a convergence of cultural realms: the distant echoes of Nirvana emanating from a transistor radio might intertwine with the laughter of women balancing bundles of recently gathered dung.

While rooted in tradition, Khaireni Tar found itself entangled in the crossroads of Western and

traditional influences due to external factors. As an illustration, a character vividly portrays the village,

“The city had come here to meet the villages, he thought. Nepal's wandering populations had gathered by the highway to make neighbours of farmers and businessmen, of squatters and landlords, of Hindu, Buddhists, Christians, Musalman and the godless like him, and of Gurungs, Magars, Chettris, Bahuns, Kumals, and indescribable half-breeds. The faces that passed by were hewn by ambitions no longer met by local means”.

In the novel, as the village undergoes transformation, Kathmandu becomes an unfamiliar terrain, leaving another character grappling to comprehend the shifts in the landscape.

“... The problem was the bigness of this city, its indifference, its people pushing against each other not knowing the background of those they talked to its assumptions, its way of controlling the talk, its colors, its crowds, its disguises, its secret wives of communication, its whispers and its hidden power”.

The novel unfolds in a rustic village, with Thapa predominantly illuminating male characters. These men, hailing from the village, carry with them personal aspirations into the realm of politics. In the traditional norms of Nepal, where male dominance prevails, women are often relegated to a subordinate role. Politics, in this context, is viewed as a domain primarily reserved for men, while women assume supporting roles.

The male characters, deeply rooted in rural culture, grapple with political challenges as they pursue individual needs. Among them is a former banker, entrenched in alcoholism, who fancies himself an authority on local affairs. His companion, a kind and hopelessly optimistic ex-British Gurkha, adds a unique perspective. A prosperous contractor, initially driven by financial pursuits, undergoes a

transformation inspired by a political candidate's words, shifting towards redemption. This character, an ardent conservative Hindu, seeks financial gains through political affiliations.

The narrative introduces a character from Kathmandu, a disillusioned Communist sent to spy on the local village party, aiming to divert votes from the Congress party. Thapa employs irony to navigate through the complexities of each male character's journey. Trapped between personal desires and the cultural tapestry of the village, they exhibit a diminishing passion and passivity towards their dreams.

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journey. Trapped between personal desires and the cultural tapestry of the village, they exhibit a diminishing passion and passivity towards their dreams.

On the other hand, village women exhibit minimal engagement in political campaigns; local women are simply "too busy learning letters" to concern themselves with politics. In their literacy classes, they not only acquire reading skills but also confront challenges to notions like "A woman isn't a woman without a baby." Thapa, however, illustrates a contrasting cultural dynamic within a single village: men are occupied with seemingly unattainable political objectives, while women are dedicated to becoming literate and participating in idealistic movements. Traditional women remain indifferent to global political affairs, whereas Western-influenced women express a desire to challenge established norms for their rights. Thapa navigates these two cultural perspectives.

An individual with an urban and literate background embraces moralistic and idealistic perspectives. Urban culture, as portrayed, champions free thought, human rights, and transcends caste and religious confines. While caste is not explicitly delineated in this narrative, its subtle influence shapes interpersonal dynamics. Take, for instance, Binita, the sister-in-law of the protagonist, a tea shop proprietor. Despite her youth, she is perceived as a respectable widow, navigating societal judgments and restraining herself in the widow's attire:

"Alone woman, still young, draped in a widows' fariya, a woman unloosened from the control of men: she tried to ward off criticism by subduing herself."

Diverging from traditional village norms, Binita, having pursued higher education, eloped with her teacher from a different caste. Facing rejection after his demise, she finds herself in a precarious position.

Unflinchingly, she shoulders the blame for aligning herself with a man destined to desert her. The protagonist, known as the Candidate, extends her dignified treatment, offering her a space where she can reclaim her agency and find solace.

"He had given her people and protection from them".

Initially, she resisted the idea of joining the mothers' club, convinced that she differed from the other village women and had no need for it. Rebelling against societal norms and politics held no appeal for her, showcasing a brighter aspect of contemporary Nepali culture.

"Was this her place? Among unsure and insecure women, among women defeated, crushed and bound, among women easily ridiculed for their clumsy, attempts at freedom; was this where she belonged?"

Perhaps, the answer is 'no.' It's challenging to embrace a culture that seems to offer no space for self-discovery. Binita, caught in the tug-of-war between two cultures, gradually discovers her place among these women, although the journey is arduous. Yet, putting trust in men for love proves to be an even more formidable challenge for her.

Examining the interplay between food and culture in cultural studies unveils intricate connections between individuals and their culinary choices, offering a rich tapestry of information. Food preferences lay bare the beliefs, passions, background knowledge, assumptions, and personalities of both individuals and groups. One's culinary selections become a defining aspect of identity. In this narrative, the incorporation of staples like milk, tea, rice, vegetables, and daal serves as a representation of South Asian cultural cuisine.

Nepalese culture is deeply rooted in folklore and traditional belief systems, adhered to by the majority of its people. The cultural landscape is marked by a

blend of Hindu and Buddhist festivities such as Dashayan in Autumn, Tihar in late Autumn, MahaPooja for New Year's celebration, and Martyrs Day. Nepali cuisine also plays a pivotal role in reflecting cultural values, featuring staples like Daal-Bhat, Tarkari, Achars, and Chatani. These traditional delicacies not only echo the cultural heritage but also showcase the amalgamation of diverse cultural influences.

The diversity in traditional clothing across Nepal is heavily influenced by local cultures. The novel highlights this variation, illustrating the spectrum of styles prevalent in different regions. For instance, some newly arrived party workers are depicted as young and urban, donning Danish slacks, shirts, windbreakers, and skirts. In contrast, older workers embrace traditional attire such as bhotos, homespun fariyas, or village-tailored pajamas, underscoring the coexistence of modern and traditional elements in Nepalese society.

The institution of marriage holds significant cultural value, deeply rooted in Nepali tradition. Presently, official recognition of love marriages remains restricted in Nepal. Within the narrative of this novel, Binita defies societal norms by marrying her teacher, transcending caste boundaries.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the text "The Tutor of History" leads to the discerning conclusion that the focal point of the narrative is the rich tapestry of Nepali culture. In essence, the novel serves as a poignant cultural chronicle, capturing the essence of Nepali life. Authored by Manjushree Thapa, the narrative delves into the realms of political shifts, societal transformations, village life intricacies, and the nuanced portrayal of individual characters. Thapa exhibits a remarkable ability to convey vivid and

concise descriptions, painting a comprehensive picture of the cultural landscape.

Within the pages of her book, Thapaskillfully interweaves moments of light-hearted humor, providing a nuanced balance to the underlying theme of her genuine concern for the people depicted. Beyond the facade of laughter, she artfully reveals her deep empathy for the joys and pains experienced by individuals in the intricate web of societal evolution. Consequently, the narrative not only becomes a reflection of how nations grapple with change but also underscores the profound challenges faced by individuals.

The crux of the matter lies in the intricate dance between societal adaptation and individual agency. The narrative underscores the inherent difficulty individuals' encounter when attempting to navigate the complex terrain of decision-making within a changing landscape. Thapa's narrative, therefore, emerges as a nuanced exploration of Nepali culture—encompassing the traditional and the western, the political and the personal. It artfully

navigates the intricacies of individuals grappling with change while shedding light on the intricate interplay between the personal and the political realms. In essence, "The Tutor of History" transcends the boundaries of a mere literary work, evolving into a profound exploration of the multifaceted nature of culture in Nepal.

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