

# Revisiting Representation of the Gurkha Soldiers in Mike's The Gurkhas

**Peshal Kumar Luitel**

*Lecturer, Everest Nursing College, P.U.*

Email: [Email:pluitel4u@gmail.com](mailto:Email:pluitel4u@gmail.com)

## Abstract

The paper analyzes the interconnected nature of individual and collective identities among the Gurkha soldiers in Mike's *The Gurkhas*, on the themes of recognition and misrecognition, power dynamics, stereotypes, and exoticization from a decolonial psychoanalytic perspective by Robert K. Beshara. It centers on how recognition, which validates a group's cultural, social, and historical validity, and misrecognition, which reduces individuals to simplified stereotypes or exoticized notions, impact the Gurkhas for their portrayal. The legacy of colonialism and prevailing beliefs contribute to their simultaneous experience of recognition and misrecognition. Power dynamics further situate the Gurkhas within a structure that perpetuates unequal relationships, casting them as the 'Other' or the exotic, distorting their representation, and reinforcing the dominant narratives of the colonizers. Stereotyped narratives and images used as the data in the research portray them as fierce warriors, loyal but lacking agency, originating from admiration but limiting understanding and contributing to the misrecognition of their diverse experiences. The cultural practices and military valor are often romanticized or fetishized in popular media, limiting them to symbols of bravery or curiosity. To truly grasp the Gurkhas' identity, a reimagining of recognition must be placed at the front, embracing their complexity, agency, and humanity. Exposing unconscious processes and challenging colonial narratives foster genuine recognition that surpasses stereotypes and exoticization, promoting a more comprehensive and equitable representation of the Gurkha soldiers. The research brings awareness to Gurkhas about being exoticized, stereotyped, and misrecognized by the British and helps stakeholders and policymakers rethink the Gurkha recruitment policy in foreign military forces. It also opens up a new avenue for researchers and academicians who are interested in researching Gurkhas serving in the military.

**Keywords:** Gurkha, representation, power dynamics, stereotypes, exoticization

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## Introduction

The Gurkhas boast of a long and sagacious history for their military gallantry and bravery worldwide. Originating from hilly regions of Nepal, they have been serving as inseparable parts of British, Indian, and other interna-

tional military forces since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. The Gurkha recruitment in the British army, as Rathaur argues, "Dates back to the early Sugauli Treaty of 1815 held between the British East India Company and the Nepal Government" [1]. Consecutively, the British East India Company has been recruiting a large number

of Gurkhas soldiers in their army one way to another to sustain and expand the territory and influence the entire world. Over time, the Gurkhas get represented as loyal, honest, brave, and martial on the one hand and mercenary, dependent, and savage on the other in the national and international arena. Despite the multifarious portrayal of the Gurkhas from different sections either positively or negatively, the Gurkhas have continued their service in the British, Indian, and other military organizations sticking to the ancestral tradition and practice.

In this context, the paper analyzes the depictions of the Gurkha soldiers in Mike Chappell's *The Gurkhas* through the decolonial psychoanalytic perspective [2]. Analyzing the representation of the Gurkha soldiers to comprehend the political and socio-cultural dynamics in the text not only shapes public perceptions but also influences the self-identity and experience of Gurkha soldiers. It sheds light on the issues of identity, cultural consciousness, and post-colonial power dynamics between Gurkhas and the host nations. The texts in the book both in written and visual image form chronicle the history of the Gurkhas ranging from the inception of their recruitment to continual services in different battalions in India and the British army by characterizing the Gurkhas soldiers from a colonial mindset, undermining their perpetual contributions and services to UK, India, and Singapore. The texts recount the past and the contemporary time of soldiering tradition of the Gurkhas based on subjective prejudice, the notion of othering, and stereotyping. For the textual analysis, the paper draws on the three major research questions: (a) How do the texts represent the Gurkhas over a long historical context?, and (B) Why do the texts create a space of 'Other' for the Gurkhas? C. What sort of psychology do the texts base on to represent the Gurkhas?

## Methods

The study embraces qualitative methods, particularly textual analysis and visual analysis of the narrative and visual texts based on the notion of decolonial psychoanalysis of Robert Beshara who challenges the colonial and Eurocentric approaches by establishing decolonial psychoanalysis as liberation praxis [3]. It is also called contrapuntal psychoanalysis which puts "an effort to theorize oppressor/oppressed subjectivities to practice liberatory subjectivities". It is a conscious act of analyzing and understanding the subjectivities of both colonizers/colonized to develop the theoretical frameworks that incorporate the perspectives and practices of both groups thereby heading beyond analyzing rather than reaching towards practical implementation of liberation. Western psychology based on colonial and imperialist ideologies and episteme enforces a system of subjectivity that positions marginalized 'Other' creating a hierarchy of superior and inferior.

Within the context of the decolonial psychoanalysis, Be-

shara [3] develops the notion of racialized capitalism which is "structured not only a hierarchy of labor (bourgeois v. proletariat) and sex (male v. female) but also, and more importantly, a hierarchy of race (being v. non-being). This implies racialized capitalism as a system that only focuses on class and gender issues but also creates a racial hierarchy to establish the binary for perpetuating exploitation, inequalities, and injustices. It functions as a system in which the oppressor works as an analyzer while the oppressed functions as an analyzed. Hence, racialized capitalist psychology requires to be decolonized for liberation praxis resulting in the decolonial psychoanalysis serving as an "anti-racist and anti-capitalist" tool to liberate the oppressed (8). Functioning as an anti-racist and anti-capitalist tool, decolonial psychoanalysis underscores that racism is not just linked with social and individual issues but it is intricately implanted with the structures of the economic system. The deconstruction of racialized capitalism erases and annihilates racist and dehumanized practices. As a chief theoretical tool in the paper, decolonial psychoanalysis challenges the colonial legacies, epistemes, ideologies, and structures that shape the narratives of the Gurkha soldiers. In addition to decolonial psychoanalysis, the grammar of the visual design by Kress and Van Leeuwen has been employed to analyze the visual image texts. It is a "holistic approach to examine elemental forms with a visual composition" (84) going beyond interpreting the meaning of individual elements.

## Literature Review

Examining the Gurkha soldiers' representation in Nepalese modernist narratives, Bhandari argues that representation is not "a neutral act of reflecting reality" but it is an act of meaning-making politically and ideologically (162) [4]. The way how the Gurkha soldiers are represented does not rest with an impartial foundation rather it is grounded on political and ideological standpoints. Ché Singh Kochhar-George portrays the Gurkhas as a "martial race" that continues to occupy a powerful place in the public imagination"; however, they have been discriminated against from affording them pay, pension, and other facilities (43). This fact reveals a positive representation of the Gurkha soldiers who are deprived of their fundamental rights. On the contrary, Rai finds out that the Gurkha soldiers have been placed in positions of inferior ranks over the long history despite their glorious military history and contribution to the British Army [5]. The way the Gurkhas are treated and positioned shows how they are underrepresented as marginalized and oppressed groups within the physical and psychological space. Similarly, Upreti brings out "the masculinity of the common Gorkhali soldiers through his research represented as being similar to the masculinity of lower-class Britons, a mode of masculinity associated with qualities such as physical valor, courage, impulsive-

ness, and lack of rational control". The representation shows Gurkhas' status as equal to lower-class Britons since both groups are characterized by 'Other' categories as inferior, irrational, aggressive, and objects.

The reviews unveil how Gurkha soldiers are politically and ideologically treated stating that Gurkhas are the brave race born for the battle. Although they are not given higher ranks in the armed forces, they are represented as valorous fighters who possess a glorious history in different world wars. The above-mentioned studies focus on the representation of Gurkha from outsiders' perspectives other than the British. This study, however, focuses on how British insiders perceive and represent Gurkha soldiers, analyzing textual and visual texts produced by British writer, Chappel in *The Gurkhas* [2]. It also explores how Gurkhas are represented, represented, recognized, and misrecognized simultaneously through visuals and texts. In this light, this research is significantly different from the researchers above.

## Results and Discussion

### Recognition and Misrecognition

The Gurkhas of Nepalese nationality serving in the British, Indian, and other international forces have acquired a great deal of recognition for their loyalty, bravery, and military gallantry on the one hand and misrecognition for mercenaries, emotional and fierce warriors. The recognition they gained over epochs stems from their history, tradition, and valor they proved in different battles around the world. Concerning the recognition the Gurkhas embrace, the texts recount, "Over this period the British Army's and public respect, admiration and affection for the Gurkha soldiers have grown to such a level that few would challenge the right of the Gurkha regiments to be considered an elite—and a popular elite at that" [4]. This reveals that Gurkhas are publicly esteemed and have won the hearts of the British public due to their devotion to their profession and loyalty to the host country. No soldiers from other countries excel in the expertise and honesty of the Gurkhas and they cannot replace Gurkha's position in the military realm. In a similar vein, Wu and Zhu embody the Gurkhas as loyal and brave and are a special part of the British army. Despite their small body statures, they took part in fierce battles worldwide proving the combat abilities and gallantry to serve British royalty [6]. The comment shows the Gurkhas' unwavering loyalty and remarkable bravery which stand them out as exceptional and fearlessly involved in the intense battles across the world. Reinforcing the ambivalent theme of seeing and being seen in the case of the Gurkhas, texts narrate:

This is all the more credible when compared with the public image of other elites, particularly mercenary elites. A few have been loathed; many have been feared, and some have been respected, but no other group of mercenaries

approaches the popularity of the Gurkhas [4].

Primarily known for unwavering loyalty and exceptional gallantry that occupy the imagination of people from around the world, the Gurkhas have acquired immense respect and adulation from the public from the host countries and others. On the contrary, Gurkhas as mercenary elites being loathed or feared raise questions about their representation of their popularity as loyal, brave, and reliable since the concept of mercenary is a colonial project to deploy them to maintain control over colonized territory and safeguard economic interests. The popularity of the Gurkhas has been deliberately constructed by colonial enterprise and narratives that romanticize non-western as other. Regarding this, Quijano argues that "At the center of global capitalism, Europe not only had control of the world market, but it was able to impose colonial dominance on all the regions and populations of the planet" [7]. The argument highlights the central role of Europe as a principal agent of the colonial enterprise in both global capitalism and colonial domination. It also hints that Europe holds not only economic control over the world market but also the power to impose colonial dominance on different regions and diverse populations of the world. In the process of the colonial project, Gurkhas have been assigned to safeguard the interest of the colonizers. The painting image of Gurkha shows how he is recognized by arms and ammunition and misrecognized by his countenance.

Traveling educates travelers and broadens their minds. They meet new people, come across new cultures and listen to new sounds and have new sights. Therefore, Iyer appreciates traveling and writes, "We travel to open our hearts and eyes and learn more about the world than our newspapers will accommodate" [8]. Travelers overhear the conversations of people, or have conversation with them. That adds knowledge and information to them. Iyer loves traveling because "it enables you to bring new eyes to the people you encounter" (p. 144). Dhakal travels to Karnali zone, a remote region that is supposed to be undeveloped and gloomy [9]. But traveling shows Dhakal another side of Karnali as traveling expresses "the sights and values and issues that we might ordinarily ignore; but it also, and more deeply, shows us all the parts of ourselves that might otherwise grow rusty" [8]. Dhakal finds Karnali affluent in history, culture and civilization which is why it is bright but not dark.



Figure 1: Displays neglected aspect of Gurkha (5)

The Gurkha soldier depicted in the image displays both known and unknown aspects—an acknowledgment of Gurkhas' identity, history, and their contribution on the one hand and misrepresentation, exoticization, and subjugated stereotype on the other. The image of a Gurkha soldier carrying a gun, Khukuri, and the load embodies military prowess and the crucial role they perform as disciplined and loyal. The representative image of the Gurkhas focused more on weapons and backside suggesting a dehumanized attitude towards them. This representation of Gurkhas chiefly as warriors carries stereotyped meaning and parochial understanding of their identity, overshadowing the rich cultural heritage, diverse skills, and contributions beyond the battlefield.

Similarly, the hidden face in the image symbolizes the obscured identity of individuality and agency within a colonial framework. The anonymity created by hiding the face exposes a form of erasure since it denies the recognition of the history, identity, stories, and experiences of Gurkhas. In addition, the hiding face reinforces the concept of Gurkhas as an esoteric site of colonial gaze that objectifies and commodifies their bodies only for battles and wars. Hiding the face depersonalizes the individual leading to an objectified and stripped of humanity strengthening a colonial gaze that dehumanizes the Gurkhas' bodies as machines only for killing and dying in the war.

## Interplay of Power Dynamics

Power dynamics refers to complex and reciprocal interaction between individuals, groups, and institutions in which power is exercised, negotiated, contested, and resisted by groups deeply ingrained in the socio-cultural and historical context. The interplay of the power dynamics creates a binary of oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized, centralized and marginalized. In the process, it involves how power relationship shapes social structures, hierarchies, and interactions influencing the distribution of resources, and opportunities. The text in the book reflects the Oriental stereotypes: The appellation

awarded to them by so many, 'happy warriors'. Gurkhas are cheerful men, proud and content to be soldiers, and capable of finding humor in the direst of circumstances. This is the opposite of that of most Westerners, who enjoy neither soldiering nor the risks of battle, but admire those who appear to do [5]. The designation of happy warriors exhibits Gurkhas' manifestation as exoticized and stereotyped groups emphasizing their delights and resilience in the face of challenging conditions.

The happiness attribute given to the Gurkhas leads to a misleading conclusion since this attribution deviates them from being human. The constructed narrative of Gurkhas disregards the wide range of emotions, aspirations, and individual experiences of the Gurkhas community narrowing them down into a singular, homogenized, and subjective image that supports the power dynamics of colonial narratives.

The narrative on Gurkhas also makes a sharp contrast between the perceived attitudes of Gurkhas with those of Westerners towards soldiering tradition. Most Westerners do not enjoy and embrace the challenges of warfare, but they admire those who take risks and show gallantry on the battlefield. It implies a power imbalance between them. The Westerners as agents of the colonial campaign make a gaze while Gurkhas as colonized perform to have gazed in the front. To explore the dual relationship between the Gurkhas and Westerners, the notion of underlying alterities by Iglesias "reproduces the colonial difference that establishes an ethnic-racial hierarchical classification of the population in the postcolonial periphery" [10]. The idea of underlying alterities plays an important role in understanding the dynamics at play. It implies that there is a deep-seated political, social, and cultural divide between the Gurkhas and Westerners rooted in the historical context of colonialism. The image below manifests the clear hierarchical dichotomy between the British and Gurkhas.



Figure 2: Features the power dynamics of the British officer and the Gurkhas (Appendix- H)

Figure 2 features the power dynamics of the British



officer and the Gurkhas. The image at its core reflects an apparent power dynamic in which the British commander assumes authority and control over the Gurkhas. The power exercise is exemplified through the officer's possession of a diary, pen, and pistol which symbolize his administrative and disciplinary role. In contrast, the Gurkha soldiers' portrayal with arms and ammunition signifies their subordinate positions. Moreover, the image evolves the perpetual legacy of colonialism through the presence of Gurkhas, who historically share a connection with the British Empire. Despite the formal conclusion of direct colonization, the image hints at the persistent impact of colonialism, emphasizing the ongoing relationship between colonizer and colonized [10, 11].

The obscured face of one Gurkha and the downward gaze of the other hint at the dehumanizing effects of colonial power structures. The disguised face signifies the erasure of the individual identity and agency, while the downward gaze conveys the submissiveness and internalized sense of inferiority. On the contrary, the objects held by the British officer symbolize the production of Western knowledge systems for impositions and practice upon the colonized populations. The officer's light weapon juxtaposed with Gurkhas' heavier weaponry implies symbolic power and ideology rather than physical force.

The dynamic portrayed in the image further accentuates the interplay of power in which the officer stands for the commander to order while the Gurkha soldiers obeyers to follow what he instructs them to do in warfare. The commander's posture alongside the attentive stance of the Gurkhas demonstrates a hierarchical relationship rooted in obedience and submission. The dynamic in the image highlights the inherent power relationship with the colonial system where knowledge, orders, and expectations flow from the colonizer to the colonized.

## Exploring Stereotypes and Exoticization of Gurkhas

The narratives constructed by colonial Western powers about the Gurkhas represent Gurkhas as fierce warriors with unwavering loyalty to their colonial masters. Not only do these narratives dehumanize the Gurkhas but also create a space of otherness creating a gap between the colonizer and the colonized. The exoticization reinforces a sense of otherness by romanticizing and fetishizing certain aspects of a cultural group focusing on their perceived exotic qualities. In the case of Gurkhas, their physical appearance, traditional attire, culture, and marital skill have been stereotyped and exoticized underscoring them as a mysterious and primitive warrior race. The same issue can be traced in the texts: Self-confident and independent, the Gurkha has a fondness for a strong drink—especially British Army Rum—and an even greater fondness for gambling. The Gurkha is also recorded as being fond of

the ladies; his religion permits polygamy, although he rarely takes more than two wives [12].

The text displays the sense of stereotypes and exoticizations projecting colonial desires and anxiety onto the Gurkhas. The colonial project built the structure of hierarchy and power imbalance with an effort of the colonizer to exert control and dominance over the colonized. The stereotypes about Gurkhas, including their supposed fondness for alcohol, gambling, and polygamy, were often constructed to reinforce the idea of the colonial subject as "other" and to justify colonial control over their lives and bodies. The depiction of the Gurkhas as self-confident, independent individuals serves to assuage the anxieties of the colonizers who are much worried about the resistance and challenges to their authority. The representation of Gurkhas as fond of drinking, gambling, and having relationships with many women can be seen as a projection of colonial desires and fantasies onto the exotic, reinforcing the notion of the Gurkhas as objects of desire and fascination [12].

The embodiment of Gurkhas as gamblers, polygamists, and alcoholism in the public sphere shows their irrational and emotional nature which is just the opposite of Euro-centric personality based on rational and intellectual knowledge and practice. A similar kind of misrepresentation and image of Gurkhas can be traced in the given image which is more occupied by the arms and ammunitions than humans [6].

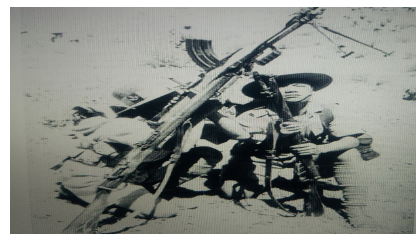


Figure 3: Shows the value more on the machine to man/Gurkhas (14)

The image featuring Gurkhas carrying oversized weapons with a focus on machine guns and ammunition exemplifies the perpetuation of stereotypes and exoticization of Gurkhas. Emanated from the colonial mindset the portrayal reflects the orientalist gaze that has distorted the representation of the Other. Depicting Gurkhas as hyper-masculine and violent figures embodies an exotic notion of inferiority. The attention paid to the guns and ammunition enforces the objectification of Gurkhas reducing them to carriers of weaponry rather than complex individuals with diverse experiences and identities. This sort of objectification not only creates power imbalance but also erases the agency and subjectivity of the Gurkhas underscoring the idea that they are only worthy of being as exotic fighters.

In addition, the image displays Gurkhas as physically strong, though they seem to have small stature, who adhere to colonial and orientalist stereotypes revealing how stereotypes exoticization contributes to the marginalization of Gurkhas. The way of stereotyping and exoticizing Gurkhas establishes a hierarchy that in fact, misrepresents the nuanced and diverse identities. The images have overlooked the diversity, rich culture, and struggle of Gurkhas to perpetuate the colonial ideology and practice [13].

## Conclusion

The concepts of recognition and misrecognition, power dynamics, stereotypes, and exoticization of the Gurkhas highlight the interconnectedness of individual and collective identities. Recognition, which plays a crucial role in shaping identities, acknowledges the cultural, social, and historical validity of a group, while misrecognition occurs when individuals or groups are reduced to simplified stereotypes or exoticized notions. The Gurkhas find themselves in both recognition and misrecognition due to the legacies of colonialism and prevailing epistemes. In this duality between the known and unknown aspects of the Gurkhas, power dynamics play a significant role in situating them within a power structure that perpetuates

unequal relationships, casting them as the Other or the exotic. Consequently, this power imbalance distorts the representation of the Gurkhas, establishing a hierarchical system that upholds the dominant narratives of the colonizers. In addition, the exposure to stereotypes and exoticization sheds light on the misrecognition experienced by the Gurkhas. Stereotypes, which are based on cultural, racial, or ethnic characteristics, categorize individuals or groups according to oversimplified beliefs. The Gurkhas have been subject to stereotypes that depict them as fierce warriors, loyal yet lacking agency. While these stereotypes may initially stem from admiration, they limit understanding and contribute to the misrecognition of the diverse experiences, aspirations, and struggles of the Gurkhas. Moreover, the Gurkhas have been exoticized, with their cultural practices and military valor romanticized or fetishized in popular media, further objectifying them and reducing them to symbols of bravery or curiosity. To truly understand the Gurkhas' identity, Mike's perspective calls for a reimagining of recognition that embraces their full complexity, agency, and humanity. This entails unraveling unconscious processes and challenging the dominant narratives of the colonial enterprise to foster genuine recognition that transcends stereotypes and exoticization.

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