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Manjushree Thapa

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SEPTEMBER 24, 2026

Life • Culture • People • Nepal



Nepal Digest

Writing Nepal Between Worlds: Manjushree Thapa's Life in Fiction and Translation

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By Nepal Digest - September 24, 2026 - Nepal

Manjushree Thapa has spent much of her writing life moving between boundaries that Nepal's literary culture often treats as separate: fiction and nonfiction, English and Nepali, politics and private life, Kathmandu and the world beyond it. Her books do not resolve those tensions so much as inhabit them. She has written novels about aid workers, migration and everyday relationships; nonfiction about war, monarchy and democracy; biographies and travel writing; and translations that carry Nepali literature into English. Taken together, the work forms one of the most sustained attempts to explain modern Nepal without pretending that a

country can ever be captured by one language or one genre.

Thapa's career is unusual because she is both an insider and an outsider to the worlds she describes. She was born into Nepal's elite social and political landscape but has consistently written critically about power, inequality and exclusion. She became one of the best-known Nepali writers working in English while insisting on deep engagement with Nepali-language literature. She has lived outside Nepal for long periods, yet the country remains the central imaginative and political territory of her work.

That position creates productive discomfort. Thapa has repeatedly questioned whether her own voice is the right one for particular stories, especially when writing about people more directly affected by structural inequality. Rather than treating this as a reason to remain silent, she has made self-questioning part of the method.

Writing Nepal in English

One of the defining questions in Thapa's career has been what it means to write a largely Nepali social world in English. Language is never neutral. English can provide international reach, but it can also create distance from the people and experiences being represented.

Thapa has described the act of writing non-English realities in English as a form of translation, even when no original Nepali text

exists. The writer has to carry rhythm, cultural assumptions, humour and social hierarchy across languages without making the result feel like an anthropological explanation for outsiders.

This challenge shaped her prose. She developed a style that often allows Nepali contexts to stand without excessive explanation, trusting the reader to enter the world rather than constantly pausing to translate it culturally.

Translation as Apprenticeship

Thapa has said that translating Nepali literature helped her learn how to write Nepali characters in English more convincingly.

Translation forces a writer to confront what resists direct equivalence. A sentence may be technically transferable while losing its emotional or social meaning.

By working closely with Nepali texts, Thapa sharpened her sense of what English can and cannot carry. This practice influenced her own fiction, where the challenge is not simply choosing English words but recreating a social world that developed in another linguistic environment.

Translation therefore became both service and apprenticeship. It connected her to Nepali literary traditions while improving the craft of writing original work in English.

The Tutor of History

Thapa's first novel, *The Tutor of History*, established many of the concerns that would recur throughout her career: provincial politics, social hierarchy, desire, public ambition and the messy intersection between private relationships and national change.

The book resisted the tendency to present Nepal to international readers only through mountains, spirituality or exotic rural life. Politics mattered, but it appeared through ordinary people rather than abstract institutions.

This grounded approach became one of Thapa's signatures. Large historical processes are most meaningful when they become visible in individual lives.

Mustang Bhot in Fragments

Her first book, *Mustang Bhot in Fragments*, was a travelogue based on journeys near Nepal's border with Tibet. The work already showed Thapa's discomfort with neat genre categories, combining observation, travel and social inquiry.

Travel writing can easily reproduce the tourist gaze, turning communities into scenery. Thapa's later work suggests a consistent awareness of this risk.

Instead of presenting Nepal as a fixed cultural object, she has tended to emphasise movement, contradiction and historical change.

Forget Kathmandu

Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy became one of Thapa's most important nonfiction works. Written in the shadow of the 2001 royal massacre, the Maoist insurgency and Nepal's political crisis, the book combined personal reflection, reportage and history.

The title itself is deliberately provocative. Kathmandu is both literal capital and metaphor for elite political memory, a place where national history is often narrated from the perspective of those closest to power.

Thapa's book attempted to explain how Nepal arrived at a moment when monarchy, insurgency and democracy collided. Its power came partly from admitting that the author herself was trying to understand events while living through them.

Writing During War

The Maoist insurgency transformed Nepali public life and forced writers to confront the relationship between literature and political violence. Thapa wrote essays, reporting and commentary during a period when narratives about the conflict were highly

polarised.

Her nonfiction often resisted simple moral binaries. Criticising state power did not require romanticising insurgent violence, and defending democratic rights did not mean pretending Nepal's older political order had been just.

This commitment to complexity sometimes frustrated readers looking for clear ideological alignment. It also made the work more durable.

Democracy as More Than Elections

Thapa's writing on democracy has consistently extended beyond formal institutions. In interviews, she has argued that democratic life includes social, psychological and emotional dimensions: who feels they belong, whose voice is considered legitimate and which citizens are expected to remain silent.

This broader understanding explains her interest in gender, caste, ethnicity and citizenship. Constitutional structures matter, but they are incomplete if social relationships continue reproducing hierarchy.

For Thapa, democracy is therefore not a finished political system. It is an ongoing cultural argument.

Fiction After Political Nonfiction

Thapa has moved repeatedly between fiction and nonfiction rather than choosing one as her permanent form. She has described nonfiction as comparatively straightforward because the material comes with an external structure, even when the research is difficult.

Fiction produces a different kind of anxiety. Every character, sentence and narrative decision could have been otherwise. The writer has to invent the truth rather than document it.

This tension may explain why her fictional work often returns to political and social material. Fiction allows her to examine structures through ambiguity rather than argument.

Seasons of Flight

Seasons of Flight turned toward migration and the experience of a Nepali woman building a life in the United States. The novel extended Thapa's recurring interest in what happens when geographic movement unsettles identity.

Migration is often narrated through economics—jobs, visas and remittances—but fiction can explore the emotional dislocation beneath those systems. Leaving changes relationships with family, class and the self.

Thapa's own transnational life gave her access to this unstable territory without reducing the fictional character to autobiography.

All of Us in Our Own Lives

Published in 2016, *All of Us in Our Own Lives* brought together Nepali and international characters connected through the world of development aid. The novel examined a sector that has shaped Nepal deeply but is rarely portrayed from inside its everyday relationships.

Foreign aid can appear abstract when discussed through budgets and institutions. Thapa turned it into interpersonal drama: people with good intentions, professional ambitions, misunderstandings and unequal power.

The book reflects her refusal to divide Nepal neatly between local victims and foreign actors. Everyone operates within systems larger than individual intention.

The Aid Industry as Literary Material

Nepal's NGO and INGO economy is socially significant enough to deserve literary treatment. It shapes careers, urban culture, development priorities and the language through which social problems are discussed.

Yet the aid world can be difficult to criticise because many participants genuinely want to help. Thapa's fiction explores the gap between intention and effect rather than assuming bad motives.

This is a recurring feature of her work: institutions are criticised through the ordinary behaviour of people inside them.

Writing Women Without Simplification

Women's lives are central across Thapa's fiction, but she resists turning female characters into simple symbols of empowerment or oppression. They can be ambitious, compromised, selfish, generous and politically aware at the same time.

This complexity reflects a feminist perspective more interested in agency than idealisation. To treat women as fully human is to allow them moral and emotional contradiction.

Thapa's characters often become compelling precisely because they are not designed to represent a clean political lesson.

Citizenship and Exclusion

Thapa has written and spoken about Nepal's citizenship laws and the ways they affect women and marginalised communities. She has also been careful about the limits of her own authority on the subject.

In a 2019 Kathmandu Post interview, she noted that when discussing citizenship, she was not the primary victim and that voices of Madhesi women and others directly affected should remain central.

This distinction between solidarity and substitution is important. Writers can participate in political debate without assuming they should always be the main narrator.

Canada and the Question of Distance

Thapa has spent long periods living outside Nepal, including in Canada. This physical distance changed her relationship with the country but did not end it.

She has spoken about the creative benefits of being “untethered,” while also recognising that much of her formation as a writer came from being deeply involved in Nepal’s historical processes. The tension between attachment and distance runs through her career.

Writers often see home more clearly after leaving, but they also risk writing a version of the country frozen in memory. Thapa’s continued engagement with contemporary Nepal helps resist that tendency.

The Nepali-English Divide

Debates about Nepali literature often divide writers by language, especially those working primarily in English from those writing in Nepali. Thapa has challenged the idea that the two communities are completely separate.

She has pointed out that Nepal's English-language literary community is relatively small and often remains deeply connected to Nepali writing. Translation further complicates the boundary.

Her own career is evidence of that overlap: she writes in English but has spent substantial effort translating and discussing Nepali-language literature.

Indra Bahadur Rai

One of Thapa's major translation projects was Indra Bahadur Rai's *Aaja Ramita Chha*, published in English as *There's a Carnival Today*. Rai is a major figure in Nepali-language literature, and translating his work required navigating linguistic and cultural density.

The project demonstrated Thapa's position not only as an author but as a mediator between literary worlds. Translation can expand the canon available to English-language readers while raising questions about what gets selected for international attention.

For Thapa, the work also deepened her own understanding of Nepali prose.

The Politics of Literary Visibility

Writers in English often receive disproportionate international attention because global publishing systems operate primarily through major languages. Thapa has always been aware of this imbalance.

Her international visibility gives her opportunities that equally accomplished Nepali-language writers may not receive.

Translation becomes one way of redistributing some of that access.

But no single translator can solve structural inequality in publishing. The broader need is investment in languages, translation and literary institutions.

Genre as a False Hierarchy

In a 2023 interview, Thapa argued that there is no inherently good or bad genre, only good or bad writing. The comment fits a career that has crossed fiction, essays, reportage, biography and translation.

Genre categories help booksellers and readers, but writers can become constrained by them. A political question may require

nonfiction; an emotional truth may be better approached through fiction.

Thapa's body of work suggests that form should follow the problem rather than the other way around.

The Discipline of Revision

In 2025 and 2026, Thapa began publicly documenting the revision process of a new novel through her Substack. She wrote about completing eighth and ninth drafts, revealing how much rewriting happens behind a finished book.

This transparency is useful because readers often imagine published writers producing polished prose naturally. In reality, major novels are built through repeated structural and linguistic revision.

By August 2026, Thapa wrote that she had finished the manuscript and sent the final draft back to her agent after another round of corrections. Even after decades of publishing, completion still involved uncertainty.

What It Means to Finish

Thapa's reflections on finishing a novel show that the process does not become effortless with experience. The writer gains technique but also greater awareness of what can go wrong.

Each draft solves some problems while revealing others. Characters deepen, themes shift and sentences that seemed perfect months earlier become obviously unnecessary.

The willingness to keep revising may be the most important professional habit in her career.

Writing as a Bridge, Not a Passport

Thapa's international career makes it tempting to describe English as the language that gave her access to the world. That is true in publishing terms but incomplete artistically.

Her strongest work depends on remaining connected to Nepali language, history and literature even when the sentence itself is English. English is a bridge, not a replacement homeland.

This distinction is what prevents the work from becoming generic international fiction with Nepal used only as setting.

What She Changed

Manjushree Thapa helped establish the possibility of a Nepali writer working seriously in English without writing primarily for tourism or exotic consumption. She showed that Nepal's politics, ordinary relationships and literary traditions could be represented with intellectual confidence to both domestic and international readers.

She also expanded the role a writer could play: novelist, essayist, translator, political commentator and cultural intermediary.

Younger writers no longer have to imagine those categories as mutually exclusive.

Between Worlds Without Choosing One

Thapa's career does not resolve the contradictions of belonging. She remains tied to Nepal while living elsewhere, writes in English while deeply engaged with Nepali, and moves between political argument and imaginative fiction.

That unresolved quality is precisely what gives the work energy. Writers who become too certain about where they stand can stop seeing complexity.

The Ethics of Representation

Thapa's career repeatedly returns to the ethics of who gets to tell which story. This question becomes especially urgent when writers possess privileges their subjects may not: education, mobility, citizenship or access to international publishing. Good intentions do not erase those differences.

Her response has been to treat position as something that must be examined rather than denied. In nonfiction, this can mean stepping back when another voice has more direct authority. In

fiction, it means constructing characters whose lives are not reduced to serving the author's political argument.

This self-awareness does not solve the structural imbalance of representation, but it makes the writing more honest about the conditions under which it is produced.

The Writer as Translator of Institutions

Many of Thapa's major subjects—democracy, foreign aid, citizenship, monarchy and migration—are institutional. Yet her strongest writing rarely remains at the level of policy language. She translates institutions into consequences for particular people.

This ability is especially visible in *All of Us in Our Own Lives*, where the development industry becomes a network of relationships rather than a set of acronyms. It is equally visible in *Forget Kathmandu*, where national political crisis is filtered through personal history and observation.

Institutions become legible when readers can see how they shape work, family, movement and belonging. That is one of Thapa's most consistent literary methods.

The Importance of a New Novel

Thapa's 2026 announcement that she had completed another novel is significant because it comes after a long period in which her public literary identity was strongly connected to earlier books, translation and essays. Returning to a finished long-form fictional manuscript after years of revision demonstrates the persistence required by a mature writing career.

The project also shows how literary time differs from digital time. A novel can occupy a writer for years while public culture moves through hundreds of news cycles. The work has to develop at the pace required by character and structure rather than by attention.

When the book eventually appears, readers will encounter a finished object; the long sequence of drafts, doubts and revisions will largely disappear. Thapa's decision to document some of that process offers a rare view of the labour beneath publication.

Why Language Investment Matters

Thapa has argued for stronger investment in literature, linguistics and translation in Nepal. This is not simply a cultural preference. Languages lose complexity when institutions stop publishing, teaching and translating serious work in them.

A healthy literary ecosystem needs writers in Nepali, English and Nepal's many other languages, alongside translators capable of

moving work between them. Without that infrastructure, international visibility will remain uneven and valuable books will stay inaccessible to large groups of readers.

Her career demonstrates both the opportunities created by English and the responsibility to resist allowing English to become the only route through which Nepali literature is internationally visible.

Her work also offers a model for writers who resist being assigned one permanent public function. Thapa has been novelist, translator, essayist, political commentator and chronicler because different questions required different forms. That flexibility has allowed the career to evolve without abandoning its central concern: how people live inside structures of power they did not design alone.

As the new novel moves toward publication, that long pattern continues. The form changes, the political moment changes and the geography shifts, but the writing keeps returning to the relationship between individual freedom and the larger systems that shape it.

That durability is important in a media environment increasingly organised around immediate reaction. Thapa's work insists that some political and cultural questions require the slower attention of books, where contradiction can remain unresolved for hundreds

of pages without being compressed into a slogan. The method is demanding, but it preserves complexity that public debate often loses.

Her career also shows that distance from Nepal does not necessarily mean disengagement. The relationship can become more critical, reflective and self-conscious precisely because belonging is no longer taken for granted. Writing becomes one of the ways that connection is continuously renegotiated.

That practice of remaining inside contradiction may be the most consistent principle across her fiction, nonfiction and translation. The genres change because the questions change, but the refusal to simplify remains. It is what allows her books to survive the political moments that first produced them and continue speaking after the immediate argument has moved elsewhere.

Manjushree Thapa has spent decades writing Nepal between worlds because she understands that the country itself exists between worlds—between languages, political eras, social hierarchies and global systems. Her achievement is not explaining those contradictions away. It is giving them enough literary form that readers can remain inside them long enough to see what easy answers miss.

Originally published by Nepal Digest - <https://nepaldigest.com/manjushree-thapa-writing-nepal-between-worlds/>