Nepali Diaspora through Female Experience: Tracing the diasporic journey of a Nepali woman in Manjushree Thapa’s Seasons of Flight

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ABSTRACT

Nepali diasporic writings in English is a part of South-Asian studies that deserves attention. Such writings from such under-represented marginal spaces provides novel insights to the way we perceive diaspora and identity. The study is an inquiry into the Nepali diasporic identity and space through the physical and psychological journey of a third-world Nepali woman in Manjushree Thapa’s novel Seasons of Flight. The paper analyses the character’s development as she negotiates identity in diaspora from the third-world space of the homeland to the first-world space of the hostland. Through a textual analysis of the novel, the paper engages in issues of estranged homeland, hostile hostland, oppressive patriarchy, non-belonging and marginalisation with regard to the Nepali diaspora.

Keywords: Nepali diaspora, Nepali identity, South-Asian female migrant, Identity crisis Marginality.

In recent times, South-Asian diasporas from spaces like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have become topical subjects in international discourse, adding richly to the body of diaspora literatures. Nepali diaspora however, is a lesser explored area among other South-Asian diasporas. “Nepali diasporas do exist, but have largely remained mute.” (Poudyal, 2012) Even though, Nepali diasporic writings has scope in postcolonial, and diaspora studies, and also in the space of subaltern writings that talk of under-represented issues and people, that echo voices from the margin.

Manjushree Thapa is one such Nepali writer in English who engages in Nepali diaspora and subaltern studies. Thapa was born in Kathmandu in 1968. She has an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Washington. Her first book, Mustang Bhot in Fragments was published in 1992. She has also written for newspapers and magazines worldwide including The New York Times, London Review of Books and Hindustan Times. Thapa's newer publications include a short story collection, Tilled Earth, and a novel, Seasons of Flight. Her latest nonfiction is a collection of essays on Nepal's Maoist insurgency and peace process, The Lives We Have Lost. A strong feminist voice she works with NGOs in Nepal and is currently fighting for an equal position for women in the new constitution of the Republic of Nepal. (The Library of Congress, New Delhi)

Thapa is one of the first to critically examine the movement of the Nepali diaspora. She is a fiction and a non-fiction writer who manages to deal with various themes and gracefully weave them together. She herself is an immigrant who retains Nepalese citizenship but is a globe-trotter, and manages to unfurl the complexities of identity and displacement in her writing. She paints a transnational identity for Nepal and portrays the suffering of the marginalized. Thapa’s works have been wonderful additions to the corpus of diaspora literature.

Manjushree Thapa’s Seasons of Flight captures the experiences of an immigrant, a third world woman; in a land that is completely foreign to her. The novel shows the pain and frustrations of a Nepali diasporic subject in search of an identity, a place to belong to and root oneself. Thapa explores the various trajectories of modern day diaspora through her character Prema, who is a first generation
economic migrant trying to make life in America, away from the poverty of her third world country, Nepal. Prema is also an expatriate who is deterrioralised because of the atrocities and violence in war-torn Nepal which compels her to leave her nation. Therefore, it is both voluntary, at the same time, involuntary diaspora. On one hand there is a sense of success and relief, for being able to escape the poverty and war in her homeland, and making survival, and ‘progress’ in the hostland. On the other, there is constant confrontation with the survivor’s guilt for leaving, or escaping the turmoil of her homeland, abandoning her family, her people, and her nation. Through Prema’s journey and development from her homeland in Nepal to a complete alien land in America, themes of exile, inbetweeness, estrangement, rootlessness, quest for identity and self-invention are explored.

Assimilation to the hostland can be as painful as estrangement from the homeland, especially when the two spaces are world apart-geographically, culturally, racially and socially. **Seasons of Flight** depicts the South Asian third world space of Nepal torn by the Nepali Civil War (1996-2006) between the King’s government and the Maoist rebels who represent the Communist Party of Nepal aiming to overthrow the Nepalese Monarchy. The 10 year long conflict claims the lives of thousands of civilians. Human rights violation is treated with callousness. Poverty and terror reigns the nation. “We tried to make people use less, though they are so poor, they already use so little… In the poorest areas people have nothing; but we were always saying: use less.” (Chapter Title: “A Flutter of Blue” Location 3246) This dilapidated picture of Nepal is sharply contrasted with the affluence, prosperity and over consumerism of America when Prema encounters both the spaces.

Prema’s journey from an impoverished, remote village in Nepal to her education and job as an environmentalist for an NGO near the capital, Kathmandu, and eventually to her new life in Los Angeles, traces the various levels at which displacement can be experienced, both internal and external. Despite the progress she makes from a small village girl to a working woman, and then to a diversity visa lottery winner that lands her a green card in America, Prema’s life is defined by loss, the loss felt by the state of exile and displacement. She loses her mother when she’s barely eight. This event leaves a deep scar on Prema. Her mother exhausts the life out of herself by repeated attempts at giving birth to a son, what she considers her sole duty as a wife towards her husband. Prema believes that it was love that killed her mother, the love of her mother for her father. Prema learns detachment from love, ironic to meaning of her name. She does not believe in marriage and never wants to experience childbirth.

Unlike the conventional portrayal of diasporic women from South Asian third world space who are displaced into foreign lands because of marriage, children and who see their homeland as the ideal paradise they belong to and pine to return to; Prema’s character is very unconventional. She is an independent woman who consciously chose to leave the homeland on her own. She does not need a man, marriage or children to validate her existence. She rejects all conventional patriarchal roles of womanhood. She does not carry a romantic picture of her homeland either. In fact, she is extremely critical of her culture and space. Prema cannot forgive the Maoist rebels for recruiting children, for taking away her sixteen year old sister Bijaya. She bitterly hates the King’s government army for victimizing the innocents, for unlawfully dragging Kanchha, a 14 year old boy out of his house and making “…him disappear… They just could. Two months on, there was no news of the boy.” (Chapter Title: “The Boy who Disappeared” Location 837)

Prema witnesses this incident first hand. It acts as the final blow shattering whatever little hope that remained for her nation to redeem itself from the blood spilt of innocents. Anarchy and brutality was let loose. There was nothing in her country to hold on to, to stay back. Prema choose to leave, or is compelled to leave her country, which ceases to be her homeland. “One day she stole away without telling anyone. She felt bad leaving. She didn’t know why… There was no end in sight to the war. It felt like she was abandoning everyone, to secure her future. Yet that was what she did.” (Chapter Title: “A Place Called Los Angeles” Location 915)

Through her life in America and interaction with American culture, glimpses of the lives of many other Nepali, as well as other immigrants like her, is portrayed. The first place she finds accommodation – ‘Little Nepal,’ a small ghetto - like locality of immigrants from Nepal, debunks her idea of what America would be like. She sees no skyscrapers, but small, crowded settlements where thousands like her, have come to try their fates and makes a life for themselves in America. However every Nepali she encounters in Little Nepal is struggling through the American life, barely making their ends meet doing menial jobs at restaurants, construction sites. Like the boy from her village with an engineering degree working at a fuel filling station in America, Prema too, despite having a degree in Forestry and Environmental studies, begins her life in America by working in an Indian restaurant for minimum wages. Her ethnic identity is mistaken for Mexican or Indian by many. Most of the Americans have not even heard the name of her country; therefore India becomes a reference point to explain what part of the world she is from. Since the very beginning, she is assigned a hyphenated, negotiated identity in America.

Little Nepal represents the struggles, aspirations, the disillusionment of Nepali immigrants like Sushil and Neeru who are green card holders legally secure in the hostland, although economically deprived, rendering them powerless. Then there are immigrants like Shyam and Ganga who are illegal; ‘undocumented workers,’ the most disadvantaged of them all. Prema found Little Nepal a much-insulated space. For the other expatriates, Little Nepal was the ‘imaginary homeland’ (Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands”) they had created in an alien hostland. It was a space where they could find their people, their culture, and their cuisine. Ironically they called the White Americans, the ‘foreigners’ when in reality, they were the real foreigners in America. This ‘othering’ of other races and communities enabled them to build their own sense of self, their communal identity, solidarity and resilience in a foreign land.
However, Prema was an exception. She did not see Little Nepal as her destination. She did not belong there even though she was from the same community, spoke the same language, shared the same culture. Prema knew there was more to America than Little Nepal. She wanted to see the real America, live the real American life. She wanted to make progress, not just simply survive. She had to leave Little Nepal behind. Her entry into the White American society was facilitated by Lois, an American whose ancestry on his father’s side could be traced back to Guatemala and on his mother’s side, back to the May Flowers. Lois became her agency for assimilation not just to the American society, but also a catalyst for her reinvention and sexual awakening. Seated in Lois’ car Saturn, she looks at her outside world “…She saw the man on the bus and – through his eyes saw herself in the Saturn, and thought; look. She had become one of those Americans she used to look at from the buses, those American whose lives she had wanted for herself.” (Chapter Title: “Arrival” Location 1465) Lois was that American Dream, that American life she had aspired for, she had sought assimilation to. However, when Prema realizes the corruption and greed that is rotten the American dream, the over consumerist attitude that even Lois is guilty of, she realizes she does not belong in the shallowness of the American society as well. In a moment of despair and anger Prema cries “I do not have a world!... I left the world I had, and do not belong to one I am in now – your world, I do not have any place to take you, Lois. I do not have a place in the world.” (Chapter Title: “You Must not Despair” Location 3066)

It was Lois who had introduced Prema to the real American way of life, but it was Prema who made Lois realise the magnitude of violence and genocide his ancestors had been subjected to. Lois’ long dead father Carlos Reyes Gracia who came from Guatemala, became Carl Reyes in Los Angeles. Lois was a second generation migrant. Moreover, his mother was from the mainstream White American society. He never felt out of place, or un-American at any point in his life. Carl Reyes, on the other hand was a first generation migrant. Like Prema, he had left his homeland at a time of civil war and violence. Prema felt connected to the life history of a dead man more than any living person around. Prema as a first generation migrant guilty of abandoning her homeland, at the same time not being able to belong to the hostland, attempts to find a parallel between her life and Carl Reyes’. She wanted to locate her pain in Carl Reyes’ pain. “...She had been trying to remember the war in her life by learning about the war in the lives of others.” (Chapter Title: “¿Cómo Her Dicho?” Location 2366) Prema had to make peace with her past, she had to forgive herself for abandoning her country, she had to forgive to reconcile with her homeland, her family and most importantly, herself. She had to find herself, resolve her crisis of identity, find a space she could belong to, and call her own. Till then she had just been surviving, “who had only ever followed a trail of chance and happenstance. Who had begged her fortunes on a lottery.” (Chapter Title: “Sanctuary” Location 3166) She had to reinvent herself, she needed a conviction. “A Nepali from the high, misty hills. A nobody lost in America. A nothing. An ephemeral. Even she needed to lead a complete life.” (Chapter Title: “Sanctuary” Location 3183)

Edward Said, in his essay ‘Intellectual Exile’ says that the state of exile is a very painful experience, “one of the saddest fates” (113), of not having a space to belong to, of living in the margins and fringes of the society. “Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others.”(117) However, Said also advocates that this state of non-belonging, the intellectual exile must be cherished, preserved and cultivated. “Because the exile sees things in terms both of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, he or she has a double perspective, never seeing things in isolation.” (121)

Prema’s diasporic experience of exile and inbetweeness makes her take no sides. She chooses not to belong to any man-made space, to have no cultural affiliations, yet she finds her authentic space “She had found her place. Not in America, and not in Nepal, but in the wilderness at the heart of human habitation.” (Chapter Title: “A Flutter of Blue” Location 3250) The text takes on an ecofeminist discourse where Prema like the El Segundo Blues, an endangered species of butterflies, finds her affiliation not with the human world, but with nature. She roots herself not on ancestral lineage or ethnic identity, but in nature, as a creature in harmony with nature, just as the El Segundo Blues. The butterfly becomes a symbol for her diasporic experience and existence. Like the butterfly’s journey from being an egg on a late summer to a caterpillar under pupation through autumn and winter, finally blooming as a beautiful blue butterfly in spring; Prema’s violent yet beautiful metamorphosis also comes out of a very exhaustive and painful process of diaspora. “Only then would the butterfly be ready for a season of flight.” (Chapter Title: “A Flutter of Blue” Location 3292)

Prema becomes her own agency for liberation and self-realisation. She resolves her crisis of identity and belongingness by belonging nowhere but in nature. Like the endangered El Segundo Blues, Prema is also one of the few diasporic individuals who seek no human affiliation, no national identity. No country, no community can gravitate her into captivity. She can spread her wings and take her flight, soar as high as she wants to. She ceases to become a citizen of ‘a nation and goes on to become a citizen of nature i.e. a citizen of the world. Manjushree Thapa’s Seasons of Flight becomes a physical, more importantly a metaphorical journey of a Nepali diasporic subject towards reinvention and self-actualization; towards finding and retaining an identity that is not a negotiated one, not assigned or imposed on her by her homeland or hostland. She rejects both the spaces and creates her own out of her unique experience of diaspora.

Works Cited: