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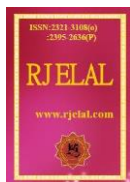
MAPPING THE ROUTE/ ROOTS OF SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN DIASPORIC AUTHORS FROM NEPAL AND SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Women Diasporic novelists from South Asia have made their presence globally though the dominance was by Indian authors. Lately there has been a surge of voices emanating from the other south Asian nations. This paper attempts a reading of the two women writers from countries of Nepal and Sri Lanka charting out the routes they have taken to deal with questions of identity and belonging. The experience of migrancy molds their identity, coupled with the double marginalization of being a woman and belonging to the third world countries. How these women writers are essentially in search of the feminine self all the while trying to recreate a home in the world is the nucleus of the paper. Answering the perennial question of identity through the chosen diasporic works I explore the varied constructions of home. Home transgressing the boundaries, a multi layered space, is a palimpsest. One home is constructed over another without effacing the first but not completely indifferent or independent of the other. Nayomi Munaweera from Sri Lanka and Manjushree Thapa from Nepal are the women diasporic authors chosen to study the similarities or differences seen in their cartography of diasporic journey.

Keywords: Identity, Belonging, Nationality, Diaspora, Women, South Asian.

As Ferdinand de Saussure explained, no term has its meaning independently, but rather acquires it in its relationship to, and nuanced difference from, related others. Accordingly, 'diaspora' has evolved as an umbrella term comprising transnationalism, globalization, migrancy, ethnicity, exile, the post-colonial and the nation. The changing meanings have amplified the concept.

Judith Shuval encapsulates the term diaspora thus: A diaspora is a social construct founded on feeling, consciousness, memory,

mythology, history, meaningful narratives, group identity, longings, dreams, allegorical and virtual elements all of which play an important role in establishing a diaspora reality. At a given moment in time, the sense of connection to a homeland must be strong enough to resist forgetting, assimilating or distancing (Sahoo and Maharaj,5-6).

In the context of South Asia perhaps all meanings of diaspora are true with the migratory movements having been governed by different reasons. Economic reasons governed the movement of indentured labour and of the trading

communities; they have also governed the pursuit of a higher standard of living. Opportunities for work, research and search for freedom from persecution have motivated migration. The major flow of people in South Asia, a region synonymous with the Indian subcontinent, has been propelled by demographic pressures, the forces of economics and politics.

The concern worldwide for South Asia is manifold. The region of South Asia is of prime importance in the present global scenario but India has become synonymous with the region leading to questions of nationality for the other south Asian nations. The arrival of Indian American writers on the world literary map such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri (winning the Pulitzer) to name a few created a huge new readership. The West equated India with South Asia, the notion for which was changed by congruently ferocious voices coming from the Indian subcontinent, from countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal to name a few. The diasporic women voices from the countries of Nepal and Sri Lanka are the focus of the present paper. The paper studies the similarities as well as differences showcased by these different women who were bound by a common thread of migrancy. Whatever the reason of their departure from their homeland, whether forced or voluntary, these women have charted a different *route* from their *roots*. This paper takes into count the other important south Asian nations to deal with questions of identity and belonging, focusing on the conventionally marginalized gender, the *other*, women. I first analyze Thapa as a diasporic feminist author followed by the Sri Lankan writer Munaweera.

Mostly the country of Nepal had been unwritten in literature. The literary individuality of the tiny nation has been cemented with few contemporary writers writing in English. Manjushree Thapa is definitely one of them. A woman novelist and essayist, Thapa has brought the nation in to the novel. Themes ranging from politics to society, patriarchy to position of woman have been the wide focus of her fiction. A pioneer of sorts writing the first immigrant literature by a woman, Thapa with her *Seasons of Flights* ventures into uncharted territory with her heroine, Prema. It is about a Nepali

woman who wins a US green card in a lottery and moves to Los Angeles.

Regarded as the foremost diasporic voice of Nepal, Thapa has been residing in Canada for a considerable time. The objectivity, distance and perception as a detached observer have come into her writings from the necessary geographical distance. She believes her *location* plays the integral role of shaping her views and ideas for the political strife in her homeland. What distinguishes Thapa from most of the diasporic authors is the lack of nostalgia for her native land. She confirms the fact that the sorry state of affairs regarding women in her country had quite early made up her mind to fall in the category of a feminist. Her liberal family background has helped retain her individuality, though unconventional. The lack of *any* right for women in Nepal as a sovereign country, the denial of an equal status to women with men has been a *tour-de-force* behind Thapa's inclinations. The patriarchal attitude of the Hindu government in Nepal is devaluing women.

"Our identities are defined by men; we have no essence, no identity, of our own...Women have no nationality..." (Web).

This very emotion, creates the enigma that her protagonist Prema is, in her second novel, *Seasons of Flight*. Prema is escaping from her native hill land from obscurity, nothingness in search of free individuality and fulfillment. The narrative reflects her (Prema) making sense of herself as her country Nepal is in search of narratives to make sense of it (self) Prema, the young woman who grew up in a village in the mountains of Nepal, travels to Kathmandu and then to a bazaar at the base of the hills, wins a green card in a lottery and takes flight to America, on a guarantee that life will become better. This journey begins at the opening sequence in the novel where Prema is asked, "where are you from?...Originally?" (*Seasons of Flight*, 1). This need to construct her identity and find herself through her country is novel for her as in her native country Nepal she was identified as merely a woman (with no nationality). The patriarchal hegemony in the small country had led her to this escape in America. Prema had had many experiences about the

marginalization of *herself* as being a woman. So when she describes herself in America in relation to her country as reiterating she is from Nepal, it makes her question the fact whether she has really escaped.

"The other is that we have all come under the sign of America. In Nepal, no one would ask me if I were Asian American or Asian. Here we are part of a minority, and the vision of being 'unserved' comes into our consciousness. It is from this consciousness that I create my life and new identity" (*SoF*, 16).

Also, Nepal as a country is rarely known outside Asia, so Prema has to define her identity with India, the largest neighbouring country. Thapa through her portrayal of Prema enquires about this uncertainty about her country's identity in the outer world. "Prema had wanted to reinvent herself in America" (*Ibid*, 3). This reinvention is hinted for Nepal too, by the author, on levels of social, political, economic and most importantly gender.

The Nepal Constituent Assembly's decision endorsing patriarchy (in September 2015) and in turn differentiating women nationals from the men, led Thapa to burn the constitution of her country. Her raging against this restriction though she is not affected by it directly defines her position of a feminist voicing out her dissent through her works and acts. Identity crisis in south Asian women, especially in diasporic women is the motif dominant in works of Thapa. This double marginalization in immigrant women has influenced her writings. She is rewriting women's agency through women's body. Her heroine Prema, in *Seasons of Flight*, is contesting the ideal of womanhood in Nepal and her flight to America is the core of her own (i.e. the author's) immigration. It answers the questions regarding most women diasporic authors that the way they write is inherently embedded from 'where' they write. The location plays an irrefutable task in the works of these women diasporic writers. The majority of the South Asian diasporic women authors reassert the claim that they write because they are separated from their native land. This spatial trajectory of their lives is intertwined with their works.

Seasons of Flight reflects the immigrant's unbearable rift forced between an individual and his homeland. Thapa's work primarily focused on Nepali first generation immigrants, exploring themes of exile, isolation, and assimilation. She confesses: "I also entered a world my parents had little knowledge or control of: school, books, music, television, things that seeped in and became a fundamental aspect of who I am" (*Ibid*,151). She spoke English "without an accent", comprehending the language in a way her parents "still do not" (*Ibid*, 151). "And yet there was evidence that I was not entirely American," (*Ibid*, 152). Prema unfurls the tie of her coming to America.

"In addition to my distinguishing name and looks, I did not attend Sunday school, did not know how to ice-skate, and disappeared to oblivion for months at a time. Many of these friends proudly called themselves Irish-American or Italian-American. But they were several generations removed from the frequently humiliating process of immigration, so that the ethnic roots they claimed had descended underground whereas mine were still tangled and green. I was not American by birth, nor would I ever be no matter how hard I tried. I felt doomed by this pronouncement, misunderstood and gradually defiant" (*Ibid*, 152).

Seasons of Flight captures the exilic condition Edward Said asserts through Prema. Initially she denies the pull of home or a sense of belonging, a rootedness. Searching for herself Prema is at loss to identify with any world. 'I do not have a world!...do not belong in the one I am now...no place in the world' (*Ibid*, 186).

Food and language play a pivotal role in her longing for home. The hot delicious *momos* takes her back to her village in spirit also she calls her mother tongue 'the language of her sorrows' (*Ibid*,167). Like all expatriates Prema too goes through the process of assimilation and acculturation. Prema had understood America through the multicultural inhabitants of the country. The uncertainty of being the *other* was present in her. She continued her journey where America kept unfolding. Prema subconsciously connects to Luis as he is also an expatriate. The war in Guatemala reminds her of the

war *back at home*. This sorrow of migration is not shared by Luis. This identity crisis is only Prema's. Identity is a layered concept. These migrant lives confirm the presence of alternate realities for identity.

It is only later when she realizes that Luis believes himself to be an American unlike her that Prema is again on the go. She finds her place only through her work in the wilderness of human habitation. The endangered El Segundo Blue butterfly gives her a fragile sense of belonging. Prema, a woman has been depicted as true migrant with a wandering spirit leaving not only places but also people behind her like her father, sister, Rajan, Luis. In America too, once Prema gathers her moorings, she abandons her *bahini and bhinaju*, the Nepali couple who help her initially. This abandonment is innate in her as she feels her mother had left her when she (the mother) dies.

In the novel the stereotype of an Asian woman also has been negated by the free will and unarrested behavior of Prema. She is not the mouse Americans think she is 'You were so quiet and reserved, so *Asian...*' (*Ibid*,164-165). She is searching her 'self' single handedly without a male anchor in an alien land. The abundance of everything from food, money, work and physical intimacy without the need of social approval had made feel Prema *free*. Nothing captures what lies at the very heart of this phenomenon better than the author's own words- "For those who felt they were from a shabby third-world country, it was hard not to believe that life in a richer land was more- proper, solid" (*Ibid*,6-7).

Evaluating the journey taken by Munaweera from the island nation of Sri Lanka, the idea of feminist sisterhood looms large. There have been influential writers from this paradise, which turned into a living hell for the inhabitants once the civil war erupted, but Nayomi Munaweera is a contemporary upcoming writer who happens to be a Sinhalese. While exploring the specificity of women diasporic experience and the problematic of identity and the ideas of 'home' many different questions spring up on the motivations and forms their writings have taken. A pan South Asian identity evolves from a

diasporic perspective when writing from foreign shores though region specific particularities are also visibly there.

Analyzing the Sri Lankan perspective of the new feminine diasporic consciousness, the trauma of exile which Munaweera depicts in her *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* brings out the inner recesses of the exilic Sri Lankan community who were not at peace with themselves because they were funding the war which had displaced thousands. The Sri Lankan diaspora mostly has been exiles, the direct result of the war citizens, desperate for a *refuge*.

Sri Lanka an island nation of South Asia infamous due to the carnage witnessed in the Civil War has had a large number of migrants. These asylum seekers are war refugees in search of peace, trying to rebuild a home to call their own. The marginalization of the Tamil community in the dominance of the Sinhalese was the core of the conflict. Mostly the migration has been on the side of the marginalized Tamils. Sri Lankan Tamil migration is a sociological event which had a historical and political context. The reasons for this migration have been political intolerance, wide spread violence and social exclusion. Like other migratory patterns, Sri Lankan Tamil migration too involved processes of departure, dislocation, dispossession, acculturation process in a host country which have left the scars of severe psychological wound, a trauma for the migrants. The *othering* within one's own homeland is distressful. The Sri Lankan diaspora comprising of both Tamil and Sinhalese community would be doubly displaced. For the South Asians in America, the *other* is not always the white Americans, but their own diasporic brethren from different regions, religions and ethnic groups of South Asia and from their own countries, therefore relegating them to the margins of the margins. Being women, these diasporic women traditionally the *other* to their male counterparts are totally marginalized.

Sri Lankan American women writers contest with their diasporic and cultural identities, personal and political, in their attempt to establish themselves within the diaspora. They have used narratives as means to articulate and to cope with

the turbulent memories, nostalgia of the land left behind. The loss of belonging and the process thereafter to assimilate and acculturate thus creating a new identity are some themes touched upon. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* reiterates the nation's history through the eyes of an expatriate Sinhalese American narrator. It is an interpretation of South Asian American identity as a Sri Lankan American woman writer. Munaweera's own multiple geographic and ethnic locations, as a Sri Lankan who grew up in Nigeria and migrated to America, play an important role in her novel's development. Her Sri Lankan identity is evident in her plot and its deep concerns with the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and its various repercussions in the ethnic and personal relations among Sri Lankans. Her geographic dislocations to Nigeria and America are evident in her narrator Yasodhara's reactions and observations as a new immigrant in America. The sense of immigrant displacement is keenly observed and represented in Yasodhara's narrative, thus making *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* the first Sri Lankan American woman's narrative exploring the geographic location of the Sinhalese diaspora in America. None of the contemporary Sinhalese American women writers have discussed the diasporic population or the diasporic locations of Sri Lankan Sinhalese in America prior to this. Munaweera's novel strives to voice the neglected representation of Sri Lankan Sinhalese, with diasporic affiliations to America, through her novel.

As referred initially the search for identity is the ultimate question for the migrants who move out to seek a safe haven. For Yashodhara and her loved ones, the exile is the identity formed for them whereas for their child of peace, Samudhra, a transnational identity, is in the offing. She is a citizen of the world without the scars of loss and longing, equally at home in cold climate of San Francisco, while looking forward to visit and *re-create* her tie with the island nation of Sri Lanka. As Said affirms, being an exile means that one is always more than one thing... exile can cultivate a scrupulous subjectivity, independence of mind, critical perspective and originality of vision. Being attuned to more than one culture can give the exile

'contrapuntal' awareness of simultaneous dimensions of reality.

While the novel includes the end of the military conflict, it highlights the fact that no Truth and Reconciliation commission is established by the Sri Lankan president who does not want "to dig into the past" or "open up this wound" (*Ibid*, 223), which does not augur well for a lasting peace. The story of Yasodhara and Saraswati bring home the distressing fact that, although the military conflict in Sri Lanka has come to an end, the accounting for what it has meant to the country and its people remains unfinished business.

What Sri Lanka is as a nation to its people, how nationalism is manifested through war for the inhabitants and through exile for the migrants, is linked to the question of identity for them. As a postcolonial state the idea of a unified nation, before it could be cultivated in the minds of the islanders, got ruptured due to the ethnic war. The category of the "nation" was never readily available for Sri Lanka (Web). The nation came into existence with the physical dislocation for the exiles. The feeling of a lost homeland, memories coupled with the loss of loved ones made the characters in the novel discern the notion of home country. The *rebirth* of the Sri Lankan nation is the center of Nayomi Munaweera's narrative of war and love. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* paints the picture, with Lanka (the character from the novel), to precision.

The fictional characters depicted in the selective creative works defy the stereotypes associated with their ethnicity creating a new identity. Women in diaspora act as agents of change. These diasporic sisters chose to integrate their cultural identity with the new individuality they discover in foreign countries producing multi-faceted identities with dual consciousness.

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