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CULTURAL DISLOCATION AND CONTESTING IDENTITIES: THE MATRIX OF DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN MANJUSHREE THAPA'S *SEASONS OF FLIGHT*

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ABSTRACT

In the present day postmodern and globalized period, where societies are largely polychromatic, the issue of identifying an individual's space turns out to be a topic of significant concern, especially for an immigrant writer who is saddled with problems of immigration, acculturation and identity politics. Cultural dislocation and contesting identities have always been major themes in the body of works produced by diasporic writers. Canadian essayist, novelist, translator and editor of Nepali descent, Manjushree Thapa is considered as one of the leading diasporic voices of Nepal. This paper attempts to analyze the diasporic factors such as cultural dislocation and conflict, isolation, identity crisis, and the expatriate sensibility that find expression in Manjushree Thapa's novel *Seasons of Flight*. The paper focuses on the problems, disturbances and setbacks confronted by the expatriates in a foreign land and their attempt to gain a wholesome identity among conflicting cultures. It also echoes how Thapa presents a negotiation of identity of displaced individuals who dangle between acculturation and in-betweenness, fulfillment and frustration in her novel.

Key Words: Dislocation, Identity, Acculturation, Diaspora, Globalization

Introduction

The twenty first century diasporic writings are enriched by the issues of exile, hybridity, rootlessness, nostalgia, memory, and alienation with the resultant development of cultural dilemmas, mental trauma and contesting identities. They serve as core issues in today's enhanced era of globalization, a process that brought numerous changes all over the world endowed with opportunities. Spatial movements from one's native country to a foreign country in search of a better life, career prospects, economy, and education became very common during the post-colonial and postmodern globalized period. Cultural dislocation

and its subsequent loss of identity have constantly been the major themes in the body of works produced by diasporic writers.

Diaspora is a contested and ever-changing term originally applied to the forceful migration of the Jewish community living outside the frontiers of Israel. Today, the term is extended to embrace all people living outside their homeland due to slavery, colonialism and voluntary and involuntary migration. As Walker Connor opines, diaspora is "that segment of a people living outside the homeland" (Levi 31). However, defining the term diaspora, encounter more conundrums as a result of global mobilization, technological development and multiple

dislocations. According to William Safran the concept of 'diaspora' can be applied to:

expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they or their ancestors have been dispersed from a specific original 'centre' to two or more 'peripheral', or foreign regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland- its physical location, history and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return- when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe they should collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; 6) and they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (Monsutti 110)

This definition explains the Jewish origin of the concept and its extension to certain other communities. The different types of exodus across the globe have increased cultural contact and interaction. James Clifford writes, "multi-locale diasporas are not necessarily defined by a specific geopolitical boundary and that, they betray a principled ambivalence about physical return and attachment to land" (Mishra 17). Although connecting their present situation to the past is a general characteristic of almost all diasporic people, this is an indomitable experience for first generation immigrants. Troubled by the reminiscence of their homeland they wish to get back. As time passes their native land becomes buzzing in their mind. The term 'diaspora' thus embodies all the activities of expatriation which results in emotional and physical displacement.

The study of diasporic literature, which emerged as a distinct literary genre, got popularity during the late 1990s. Diasporic writers portray the problems, counterforce's, disturbances and setbacks confronted by the expatriates in a foreign land. The idea of "home" or "homeland" is a pivotal part of all studies on diaspora. Susheila Nasta observes that "diaspora, does not only create an unrequited desire for a lost homeland but also a 'homing desire,' a desire to reinvent and rewrite home as much as a desire to come to terms with an exile from it" (7). However, the perennial sustaining force for the diasporic writers is the dispossessed person's quest for identity. Diasporic writings also provide a set of perspectives about political despotisms, anguish, isolation, existential rootlessness and dissatisfaction. The literary expression of immigrant experiences permits a migrant to convert himself/herself as the spokesperson of his/her distinct self and put forward the concept of cultural distinctiveness. The diasporic writers like Manjushree Thapa differ from other writers as they represent the diasporic experience as individuals and as members of a community.

Manjushree Thapa: *Seasons of Flight*

Manjushree Thapa is a Canadian essayist, novelist, translator and editor of *Nepalidescent*. The objectivity, aloofness and insight of a detached observer find expression in her writings. Being a writer of Nepali origin, Thapa combines her sentiments, thoughts and perspective in her writings which permit her to portray the experiences of her characters more effectively. Thapa deals with the glitches of the immigrants whose miseries are the resultant consequence of immigration. The immigrants displaced and uprooted from their native land, losing their indigenous language are unaccommodated strangers with multiple wounds which account for contesting identities. In this context, Oscar Handlin remarks:

As the passing years widened the distance, the land the immigrants had left acquired charm and beauty. Present problems blurred those they had left behind, and in the haze of memory, it seemed to those people they had formerly been free of

present dissatisfactions. It was as if the Old World became a great mirror into which they looked to see right all that was wrong with the new. The landscape was prettier, the neighbours more friendly, religion more efficacious. (232-33)

Handlin points to the sense of nostalgia and detachment experienced by the immigrant communities about their homeland. Manjushree Thapa's work dramatizes the saga of the immigrant towards attaining a true identity and finding a place in society.

Thapa's novel, *Seasons of Flight*, published in 2010 problematizes Nepali identity through the protagonist Prema, a girl from a war-torn village of Nepal struggling to survive in Los Angeles, United States after winning a Green Card in a lottery. As the novel progresses, Thapa unfolds the cultural conflicts, dislocation, separation and contesting identities of immigrants entombed between the culture, values and beliefs of their homeland and the unfamiliar circumstances of their present home. *Seasons of Flight* is titled by Thapa after that period of the year when butterflies start flying and later dies. The novel narrates a pragmatic instance of uprootedness through Prema who similar to a butterfly flies from a picturesque village in Nepal to a socially and culturally flamboyant metropolis in the United States. The journey in Prema's case is not just territorial, but also psychological. She sets out on this extraordinary journey in order to escape from her village that is infested with Maoist aggression/civil wars. The novel portrays how her life, thoughts and behavior changes under the influence of a new culture.

Prema and her sister Bijaya spend their childhood days in a small village in Nepal where they did their primary schooling. Her father is a liberal person who supports his daughter to go to Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal in order to pursue her studies in forestry. During the tenure of her study in Kathmandu, Prema learns that her friends have made arrangements to migrate to India, Australia, Europe, Canada, and America as "there was so little in Nepal, everyone just wanted to leave. And also, 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" (6-7). On the insistence of an agent named Kanchha, Prema too fills an American lottery form which she wins and reaches America:

Prema was convinced the war would escalate from here on. The Maoists would not give up, and neither would the king and the army; and people who had nothing to do with either side would get drawn in... Having received a chance – having won the lottery. Was this not an opportunity to keep progressing? America was rich, it was – proper, solid. (51)

Premastudied English in order to overcome the language barrier, learned driving in order to be independent and read book son United States. She also started reading Los Angeles Times online in an attempt to embrace a foreign land. Prema's migration to America at the age of seventeen was thus voluntary and for better prospects. She envisioned herself in a better position than that of Kathmandu.

Thapaprovides a microcosm of the cosmopolitan city, describes the Los Angeles airport, and narrates the splendid life of people of America. Prema on reaching America started living in Little Nepal, ghettos where Nepali immigrants live. From this juncture, the corpus of Nepali diasporic literary productivity finds expression within the pages of the novel. On her way to 'Little Nepal', Prema gets mesmerized by the broad roads, lights and traffic system in America. She finds that there are telephone directories at each telephone booth, on television there are several ads of car races, court cases, news of celebrity couplings and separations, weight-loss breakthroughs and the like. However, she later finds that the family system in the cosmopolitan city is very much complicated from Nepal. The social life in America is told through Esther's life. In Esther's family separations with partner and re-marriage and step relations are very common.

Contesting identities is another important thematic concern in diasporic writing. Identity is defined as "the process of creative self-realization"

(Mitra 44).Thapa deals with the sense of identity and the rising consciousness of its loss in the minds of the immigrants. In America Prema desires to reinvent herself:“but-What is there to being human? The body which desires, persistent and unreasonable; thoughts and temperaments. Instincts.A capacity to harm. And history, which lingers as a spectre”(3).In the opening pages of the novel, Thapa states the irony that her homeland Nepal is not well-known or even accepted as a distinct nation by many Americans. While engaging in a conversation with an American woman Prema finds it very difficult to explain where she is from. Shetries explaining: “It is near India’, or ‘Where Mt Everest is’, or ‘You’ve heard of the Sherpas?’, so that they might say, ‘Geez, that’s real far’, or ‘I could have sworn you were Mexican/ Italian/Spanish’, or ‘You speak very good English’” (Thapa 1). Later when she is encountered by a Korean lady she opted to say “I am from India” (104). Prema struggles in the midst of uncertainties attempting to reinvent herself in a different world, and her ties to her native land, language and culture. Prema’s gesture of taking the lustrous stone, Shaligram, which her mother used to worship with her as a memory shows her inclination to her native land and culture. In America, Prema feels that she is far-off from her native land. Thapa places her protagonist in an interstitial space constantly shifting between her homeland and her current metropolitan life.

Apart from Prema, Sushil and Neeru are the other first generation migrants pictured in the novel who finds it difficult to assimilate in a new land.Neeru’s son has in full fledged embraced the American way of living. The American way of living “is the unique lifestyle of the people of the United States of America. It refers to a nationalist ethos that adheres to the principle of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_way). Neeru some how is able to accept her son’s attitude towards life or to be precise the American way of living.

Prema is culturally displaced from her home and she lacks the shielding it had provided. She struggles for a better life: “Even she A Nepali from the high, misty hills. A nobody lost in America. A nothing.An ephemera. Even she needed to lead a

complete life” (194).But Prema frequently feels uneasy about her present situation and that she is beaten down upon every time in this new land. Her stay with Neeru and Sushil and her meeting with Andy and Luis gives her opportunity to visit various places in America. Prema efficaciously maintains a respectable affiliation with Neeru. With the emotional support rendered by Neeru, Prema finds a job in Shalimar restaurant where women from India and Nepal work.Neerubecomes a torch bearer for Prema in the alien land. Neeru helps Prema in getting credit cards, phone cards, and State of California identity card. She explains about the internet cafes, social security, health care and unemployment benefits. She offers the names of lawyers and social workers to contact in case of crisis. Prema’s association with immigrants makes her aware of the fact that hard work is inevitable to survive in America.

Unlike most immigrants who prefer the companionship of their own people in an alien land, Prema believes that her relationship with them has kept her outside of America. Hence she disconnects her connection with Neeru and Susil in order to create a cosmopolitan identity. Her reminiscence of Nepal does not provide comfort to her and she treats Nepali as “the language of her sorrows” (60).She discards all connection with her homeland initially in order to embark a socio-cultural journey of becoming an American. To be Americanized, she starts by mimicking American dressing style, purchases a red bikini, flip-flops and the like. This is what HomiBhabha calls “mimicry”. Prema feels sexually liberated in America and is able to enjoy her body. Sexual liberation was something unimaginable in the Nepali cultural setting. She had to keep her relationship with Rajan a secret. But in America sheconsentsto living with her boyfriend, Luis, but cannot take pleasure in the relationship with him for long. The sexual encounters she had with other men are very casual and short-lived.

Prema desperately struggles to be an American by adapting American life style with her boyfriend Luis but she feels alienated. The tendency to assimilate the American life style distanced her from her motherland. She often dwindles between past and present. Diasporic identities are created

out of the cultural politics of the host country and the recasting of an individual's relationship with the past. They live at a juncture between the two cultures. In Luis' company, Prema finds herself integrated to American culture, but the minute she idealizes her missing culture, she is crushed by its absence. Her identity kept fluctuating and is unable to find a fixed identity. Her drive to get Americanized is disturbed when she questions herself about her nationality and identity. Her sense of alienation in multicultural America unfolds in the course of the narrative. Erich Fromm defines 'alienation' as: "a mode of experience in which a person experiences himself as an alien... estranged from himself...The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person" (Adams 5). Prema hovers in search of the real America but in vain. She is regularly interrogated and pushed to the peripheries of American society because of her inability to understand English, her skin tone and her cultural differences. Prema, therefore, is torn between her past and her newly discovered life in America. Besides, memory of home kept problematizing her present, thereby crushing her dream to conform into American culture. Prema exclaims, "I left the world I had, and do not belong in the one I am in now – your world" (186). She is surely a victim of what Bhabha calls, ". . . neither the one nor the other" (178). In this condition of rootlessness and estrangement, Prema reinterprets her national identity as a person from Nepal following Hinduism.

The memories of home and the problems of acculturation have disturbed Prema both in terms of defining her identity and also to integrate into a new cosmos of chaos. 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" (151). She feels discontented with her American mode of life. She ends her relationship with Luis due to their cultural differences: "we are really different. We're-completely different, in fact. I'm also finding it hard going some days" (185). Prema leaves Luis and flies to Nepal and finds that there is nothing truly left for her there. Thapa portrays Prema as a tourist in her own land. She

realizes that her quest for identity and progress does not lie in abandoning Nepal or accepting America. Towards the end of the novel, Prema's identity in America is much contested: "Nepal? America? America? Nepal? Everything felt wrong" (191). She realizes that cultural dislocation cannot completely change one's identity. Identities are progressively luminal and she feels insecure and doubtful in the foreign land.

Nostalgia is the most prominent trait of diaspora and the migrants have constantly had an idealized view of their native land. Prema is caught between the cultural clashes. Thapa narrates the events in Prema's life such that she senses her physical location in America, but her genealogical and geographical roots remain in Nepal. Thapa uses Nepali food as a marker of Nepali identity. When Luis says: "Hey Prema, know what I had for dinner last night?...Dull-bath. A kind of Nepalese, I mean, Nepali food" (61), she replies, though she knows how to cook it she does not know where to get the ingredients. The discussion on Nepali cuisine, reminds her of her previous identity. As S Radhakrishna opines "the loss of identity would make a person apathetic figure" (Kumari 13). Though Prema craves for a new identity, she feels something which was protected in Nepal has lost in America and that is her roots, her belonging. The alternate identity that she carved could provide only a fragile sense of belonging for her.

Though Nepal appears far to her, Prema unknowingly remembers her happy days of her childhood. On hearing about Guatemala, Luis's fathers' native place, Prema is taken back to the memories of her homeland. She visits Little Nepal in Los Angeles and Mata-Sylvia, whenever possible consumes Nepali food, chants *bhajans*. When Neeru offered her Nepali food, she yelled: "Momos!... Can you believe? Momos in America!" (171). The thought of Nepali cuisine creates nostalgia in her and she feels very near to home. In order to overcome her terrors and uncertainties, her lost thoughts and despair, she makes every attempt to connect up with her home by renewing her relations. Towards the end of the narrative, Prema desperately attempts to recall the hints of homeland constructed and reconstructed in the face of

globalization through culture, religion, language, nostalgia and culinary.

Conclusion

Manjushree Thapain *Seasons of Flight* recount the lives of immigrants attempting to grapple with the pressures rising out of the feelings of cultural dislocation and the dreadful experiences of conflicting identity in the multicultural hybrid American society. The portrayal of cross-cultural experiences not only offers a distinguishing essence to Thapa's work, but also renders a global touch in the depiction of the characters. Prema desperately desires to get autonomy and prosperity in the America but is incapable to alter herself and come out of her past. Moreover, her difficulty in articulating English language and her cultural background hinder her ambitions for acclimatization in the American society. Prema's quest for identity in *Seasons of Flight* represents the plights of the displaced belonging to neither part of the world. Cultural dislocation whether forced or chosen, constructs a loss of identity and lack of connection to the cultural roots and forces the community to find an imagined home in order to dismiss the fretfulness of being the 'Other' in an alien land.

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