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Migration and the impact of cross-cultural experiences in Manjushree Thapa's *seasons of flight*

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Abstract

Diaspora literature revolves around the idea of a home land or a place where displacement happens and deals with the narration of harsh exile seen in the characters of many diasporic novels due to their expulsion. Exile plays a very significant role in shaping diasporic sensibilities. Manjushree Thapa's "*Seasons of flight*" situates underprivileged diasporic subjects from Nepal and the United States of America in the contexts of cross-cultural interactions and in betweenness of life. Thapa mainly deals with migration, nationalism, colonialism, diaspora, and globalization, has done more than represent or recover the lives of people who are living under the forces of these historical aspects and socio-cultural formations. This study examines Manjushree Thapa's novel *Seasons of flight* from a global standpoint to identify the migration and the impact of cross-cultural experiences. Prema, the central character in the novel, participates in the EVD programme operated by the US government as a way for young people from underdeveloped countries to immigrate to the United States.

Keywords: Migration, displacement, cross-cultural interactions, hybrid identity

Introduction

Diaspora is the term often used today to describe practically any population which is considered 'DE territorialized' or 'transnational' that is, which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe. The word "Diaspora" derives from the Greek diaspeir "to distribute"; it is a compound of speir, "to sow to scatter" like seeds and dia- "from one end to the other". The term of course became associated with the Jewish historical experience, and hence was associated with being a dispersed community sharing a common religious and cultural heritage. Such populations are growing in prevalence, number, and self-awareness because of the "shrinking" boundaries. Several are emerging as (or have historically long been) significant players in the construction of national narratives, regional alliances or global political economies. (Tiwari 2011:1) [10].

Manjushree Thapa, born in Kathmandu, Nepal's capital, raised in Nepal, Canada, and the U.S, is an essayist, fiction writer, translator, and editor. This research article based on Manjushree Thapa's novel, *Seasons of flight* (2010) [9] highlights Thapa's immigrant characters and their experiences as first-generation Nepali Immigrants in America. Thapa explores the cross-cultural experiences of Prema, the central character, as an immigrant in America. The novel explores the life of Prema as a narrative interwoven from the Nepalese as well as the American perspective.

Objectives and scope of the study

The issue that this research seeks to investigate is the absence of studies that describe the impact of cross-cultural interactions in voluntary migrations of Nepali immigrants that later invoke a sense of displacements. The study explores the dynamics of socio-cultural and emotional ethos in the life of Nepali immigrants through the character of Prema. This study is aimed at limning the cultural mosaic of hybridity of myriad shades of immigrant's experiences. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the task requires close and extensive reading and careful analysis of the primary sources. This article is very important in locating Thapa's text and her observation of the life of immigrants in postcolonial condition.

It does this by further exploring the risks and challenges that are associated with taking a new 'flight' to a land that is unknown and far away from one's home.

Migration

Migration is the phrase that refers to the movement of people from one location to another location. Dirk Hoerder defines, "The migration of people from place to place in search of better opportunities and higher living standard goes back centuries" (21). One of the key sources of employment for the young Nepali workforce is overseas labour migration. Migration, whether it be voluntary or forced, has had a significant impact on the way our world looks today. Emigrants depart from their nation, whilst immigrants arrive. Both the place left behind and the place where migrants reside are affected by migration. There are a variety of reasons why someone would want to relocate. These explanations could be societal, political, economic, or environmental. There are typically push causes and pull factors at play for migration to occur. Push factors are the motivations behind someone's decision to relocate. Migration is mainly based on three types of phenomena, namely forced, half forced or half willed and willed consequences. The Jewish community was forced to exile, whereas during the colonial period people were uprooted to serve the British Empire in different parts of the world and their settlement in alien country was half forced. The third dimension of expatriation is the willed choice of migrants from the third world countries for greener pastures in the developed countries.

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Diasporic Concerns

Manjushree Thapa's novel, *Seasons of flight* deals with diasporic aspects along with international issues like

globalization, multiculturalism, cultural displacement, economic inequality, and fundamentalism. Among these issues, the book also focuses on colonialism and racism, ethnicity, and the Gorkha separatist movement. Depending on the struggles of the diaspora, the diasporic experience has different concerns and theories. The diasporic imaginary, according to Kiran Desai, an Indian-born novelist, is derived from Indian context and can be found in Vijay Mishra's book *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. In the introductory sections of the book Mishra defines diaspora as,

"All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diaspora refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by specters, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements" (Mishra 2007:1) ^[11].

This article explores *Seasons of flight* as a diasporic text that spells out the tragic ramifications of inequalities, class-based exploitation, and broken values in the characters of the novel. Therefore, the novel explores the interplay between different categories and mainly focuses on identity crisis in the context of diaspora, globalization, and migration. This particular set of circumstances shows the deep roots and modern trends of globalization and shows the urgency of the matter should be discussed. Many scholars and writers, however, emphasize a specific issue, most notably Salman Rushdie's collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands*, which focuses on migration in literature.

"Let me suggest that Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the cultural and politics of phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. America, a nation of immigrants, has created great literature out of this phenomenon of cultural transplantations, out of examining the ways in which people cope up with a new world" (Rushdie 1992:20) ^[6].

Discussion: Migration and cross-cultural interactions

The publication of *Seasons of flight* unveils in the Nepali diaspora's narratives a renewed sense of diasporic consciousness owing to their mixed experiences after displacements. Thapa focuses on the lives of first-generation immigrants who are forced to navigate both the traditional values of their immigrant parents and the mainstream American values of their peers. Thapa's novel depicts a problem that is all too common among young people who move to western countries in search of a better life and more opportunities, but who end up failing to manage their lives once they get there. The daughter of a Nepalese family from the middle class, Prema moves to the United States of America with fond memories of her childhood home and the school she attended. Prema notices that the structure of families in the United States is different from that in Nepal.

According to her, people in the United States give more importance to oneself and one's individual priorities.

In a metaphorical sense, the title of the novel *Seasons of flight* conveys the idea that people strive for freedom. Prema describes her home in village in this way: "Her family home which she still thinks as hers, though she had not lived in it since she was seventeen-was sturdy, two-storeyed, of stone. It has felt sheltering, and safe, when she used to run through the bamboo grove past the Shiva- Parvati temple that bordered the terraced rice fields, to school. (12)

Thapa uses the narrative structure to demonstrate how immigration is a difficult nostalgic movement between past and present. Diaspora primarily addresses socio-economic inequalities as well as socio-political formations; these two factors encourage readers to think critically about migration and global capitalism, both of which can be traced back to the primacy of European colonialism and cultural displacement.

Though Prema wants to be real American owing to her attachment with her Latino-American boyfriend Luis, she fails to relate to the American life. The familial ties which Prema has left behind in Nepal are sought to be replaced immediately by seeking friendship with Luis. "All loneliness syndromes seem to give rise to yearning for the relationship- an intimacy, a friendship, a relationship- that would provide whatever is at the moment insufficient" (54) Nevertheless, the futility of effort to replace old ties results in Prema feeling nostalgic. Thapa exhorts upon the damaging effects of alienation and displacement. Dislocation of geography, climate, race, custom lead to 'depression' and 'vegetative dystopia' (51). One way for the Nepalese immigrants' generation like Prema is to deal with its identity crisis by re-establishing connections with its past through reminiscences. Prema's encounter with Mata Sylvia in Los Angeles, a preacher of Hindu religion, reciting lines from Bhagavad Gita, The Mahabharata, The Ramayana, and the books about Osho, Krishnamurti, Vivekananda, Ram Das, Sai Baba takes her back to "Nepali home" away from her "present home". It is a kind of place where Prema could find refuge and claim to be real and yet not real enough to feel authentic.

While Thapa's novel does not debate the socio-political issues as a primary concern, it nevertheless touches upon the concepts of cosmopolitanism and diaspora at the level of genre and readership. Thapa reimagines the diaspora in relation to various diasporic groups, as well as in the context of global capitalism. She follows the journeys of her protagonists and highlights homeland (past) and adopted land (present), demonstrating how capitalism primarily operates on the logic of exclusion of racism.

Prema's life after bitter cross-cultural experiences becomes a dreary affair. "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 spoke English "without an accent" (151), comprehending the language in a way her parents "still do not" (151). "And yet there was evidence that I was not entirely American," Prema describes her alienated existence in America as, "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." (152)

In an interview, Thapa states, when she first started writing, she did not consciously make a choice that her subject would be the Nepali-American experience. But what drew her to this craft is the desire to force the two worlds she occupied to mingle on the page. "On the cup of a new century, the term 'Nepali-American' has become part of this country's [America's] vocabulary." Thapa resents on her character's compulsion to leave her homeland, "I've heard it so often that these days, if asked about my background, I use the term myself, pleasantly surprised that I do not have to explain further." (Interview, 153). Her experience of cross-cultural intermingling is simultaneously shocking and interesting: "The traditions on either side of the hyphen dwell in me like siblings, still occasionally sparring, and one outshining the other depending on the day." (154). Nonetheless, similar to siblings, they have a deep understanding of one another, are able to forgive one another, and are bonded.

Seasons of flight is simultaneously both a personal drama depicting the life of Prema, a Nepali immigrant to the United States of America, and a social panorama pointing up facets of individuality and cross-cultural interactions. Prema's life brings forth the attitudes and experiences of people whose culture has left distinct imprints on them. Her insights encompass observations on Prema's life as an immigrant from Nepal, the process of immigration, traditional Nepalese society, and the situation of immigrants in the United States. In America there is no gender discrimination but in Nepal patriarchy promotes.

In this regard, Prema says: 'She kept getting pregnant because she wanted a son! You know how many times? One baby before me, two afterwards-they all died. And she-wanted was a son! In Nepal they still- People still- All these stupid white people American Hindu call this Krishna love?' (183).

Even though the main female character in this book, Prema, is/was Nepali, the majority of the episodes in her life are about lost identities and forgotten tales as well as the will to bond oneself to a new community in spite of the persistent anxiety that one will fail or betray others. In the initial phase of her successful negotiation of cross-cultural challenges, Prema acknowledges to call herself "American," not Nepali-American, not hyphenated, and she aspires to be acknowledged as "an American chick" in the custom of the American people. Cross-cultural interactions help to transmit various cultures from one part to another through migration and displacement. 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 'unsolved' comes into our consciousness. It is from this consciousness that I create my life and new identity. (16) Prema defines what she calls a "aesthetics of dislocation" as one aspect of the identity of Nepali Americans: The other is that we have all come under the sign of America. "The momos were soft and succulent, the chicken savory with onion, cumin and coriander. Prema felt she had never eaten anything quite so nourishing. She finished them all at one go, mumbling with her mouth full: 'Delicious'" (197).

Generations of immigrants from Nepal, such as Prema, undertake the path of becoming 'American' and, more specifically, of establishing a Nepali American identity. In the narrative, Prema visits her family in Nepal after a five-year absence. As she passes the national boundary, she is compelled to acknowledge her dual identity, which is more American in dress, speech, and body language than Nepalese, despite being ethnically marked. Nepali Americans are also known as NRNs, or Non-Resident Nepalis, in Nepal. Notwithstanding the fact that Nepal does not permit dual nationality, this is a method to maintain close emotional ties; hence, although being American citizens, they are still identified as 'Nepalis,' albeit 'non-resident' — a type of "flexible citizenship," to use Inderpal Grewal's term. As Grewal notes this condition in India,

"The Indian government nurtures the ties to home since they want to entice NRI financial investments to India; this NRI population is not interested in forming coalitions with other people of color in the US, and most are uncritical of the US ideology of 'democracy' and 'freedom'." (Grewal 2).

Prema packs her cameras and sets out on a journey to see her relatives. She is drawn to the ethos and cultural nuances that she does not share after her migration to the United States. Through the character of Prema, Thapa deftly portrays the image of this native-returned-as-tourist.

The ways in which language is used are an important aspect of the cross-cultural experience. In his story, Thapa recreates the degrees of ignorance regarding Asian languages and cultures that are prevalent in American society, including the following: "Can you speak Mexican... No, I am from Nepal... Can you speak Hindi?" (SF 118). The difficulty that a generation of immigrants faces while attempting to learn mother tongues that are not spoken in the culture at large is exacerbated by this misunderstanding. But, those languages, particularly those mother tongues, remain with them in a way that is virtually indistinguishable from the presence of a mask that cannot be removed. In yet another instance, a daughter from the second generation flees her family. The cultural divide between the daughter and her parents is so vast that when the daughter flees her family she is in a dilemma while choosing a language to leave behind a note to her parents. How can she write in English to her parents, who have only spoken to her in Nepali? "Who will have to have someone translate the lines and curves, the bewildering black slashes she has left behind?" "Maybe the words will come to her... halting but clear, in the language of her parents, the language that she carries with her, for it is hers too, no matter where she goes" (142).

In another incident, a mother deals with the emotional fallout of discovering that her kid is the target of racist harassment at school. The mother feels helpless because she is not capable of contending with the teacher in English, which she does not understand very well. "My few English phrases," she thinks. "She [the teacher] will pluck them from me, nail shut my lips" (202). She managed to evoke dread and a sense of cultural impasse with just a few well-placed lines. For first-generation immigrants in search of a community to call home, homesickness for the nations and neighborhoods they left behind can be overwhelming. When one becomes diasporic, it is imperative to bear in mind the

political dimensions of home, community, and nation, as Chandra Mohanty states.

What is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where I live and work as an adult? Where I locate my community-my people? Who are 'my people'? Is home a geographical space, a historical space, an emotional sensory space? Home is always so crucial to immigrants and migrants... I am convinced that this question-how one understands and defines home-is a profoundly political one... Political solidarity and a sense of family could be melded together imaginatively to create a strategic space I could call 'home.' (Mohanty 5).

Seasons of flight prompts the reader to consider the concept of cultural displacement and cross-cultural experiences as well as the degree to which one's thoughts can be influenced by the dominant culture. According to Sanjeev Shakya, it is a lovely story that reaffirms Thapa's status as one of the most accomplished and graceful young writers in this country.

Whether migrations are an enjoyable experience or agonizing, the cultural interactions, some pleasant and others shocking are unavoidable. In one such instance Prema observes, "In one romance, Rihanna, a successful executive, battled her attraction to Jeff, a ruthless executive at a rival company, only to discover that he had been abandoned as a child, and that his fear of love, like hers, stemmed from early rejection" (201). For many immigrants born in Nepal, such as Prema, to forget the pangs of displacements and for invoking a sense of satisfaction embracing the hybrid identity seems normal. But it does not last long and fades owing to the deep-rooted psychological and sociocultural experiences that never disappear from their memory. Prema, towards the end of the novel renews her relation and reconnects with her national roots by visiting Nepali people in Los Angeles and by taking a trip back home. Her effort to reconnect with previous relations revives the ties that had faded while she was negotiating the cross-cultural identity. Prema, like other immigrant Nepalese, takes part in the Bhajan and enjoys the privilege of kinship. The music of the harmonium and the cymbals touch her heart and she feels secure in this desolate land. Prema instinctively claps when she hears "Jayakrishna, Jayakrishna, Radheswami jaya jaya. Jaya Krishna, jaya Krishna, Radhe swami jayajaya" (157) reminds the readers of the indelible imprints of homeland. Prema times and again steals away to "the sleepy, elm-lined neighborhood of low, cream-coloured houses of "Little Nepal" (167). She speaks in to Nepali: "Neeru-didi hunuhuncha?" (169). When Neeru didi and Prema meet they feel secured in the company of each other and promise to meet again. The recognized kinship provides them a sense of security. Speaking to Prem Dhakal on the issue of her characters often playing the life of exile, Thapa clarifies her stance.

"It interests me to imagine characters shifting from one situation and location to another for whatever the circumstances may be. In the first collection, the characters were all moving for more or less the same reason (which was also the reason my parents came to the United States) for opportunities or job. In this collection there is a similar pattern of movement, but the reasons are more personal somehow-- they are

reasons of family dynamics or death in the family or things like that. In this book, I spent more time with characters who are not immigrants themselves but the children of immigrants. (Dhakal 6).

Although the majority of the events in the story take place in the United States, some set in Nepal bring to life the silken bond memories of homeland. There are women who have affairs, women who abandon their husbands, women who prioritize their jobs over their families, and both men and women who do not adhere to established gender roles. The many different languages, faiths, and regional cuisine cultures exhibited by Thapa's characters are illustrative of the diversity that exists within the South Asian American population. Their lives in this place of diaspora unfold as they struggle and dream, dispute and entertain one another throughout the day. By rejecting any preconceived notions of what constitutes "excellent" Nepali culture, these portrayals extend the representations of Nepali Americans.

Conclusion

In *Seasons of flight*, Thapa tells the stories of immigrant characters and their experiences as Nepali immigrants living in America. These characters' experiences are described from their point of view. She explains that the heroic, victorious, and even glorious moments in the lives of Nepali- American people, which are frequently marked by material prosperity, are irreparably undermined by the loss of culture that they have left behind. They have no anchors and are cut off from the spiritual community. It is hypothesized that the characters in Thapa's novel suffer because the immigrant's life is an intolerable rift that is forced between a human being and their native place, between the self and its true home. This rift creates a cultural mosaic the result of cross-cultural experiences.

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