



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue 1.,2016 (Jan-Mar.)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

REMAPPING WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN "SEASONS OF FLIGHT"
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ABSTRACT

'Women have no Nationality', Manjushree Thapa, the diasporic voice of the Himalayan nation Nepal declares. *Seasons of Flight*, her novel depicts the conflict of the marginalized women to find an identity in the patriarchal society. My article discusses the depiction of memory, search for home and the problematic of identity for an immigrant woman in the novel *Seasons of Flight*. The novel's character Prema immigrates to America from Nepal where she experiences the feeling of not belonging anywhere and is trying to assimilate herself into the American multiculturalism. Using feminist lenses, my article explores the context of an identity in home and the world.

Keywords: Diaspora, exile, cross-cultural experience, identity, patriarchy

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One of the essential characteristic of Diaspora formation is dispersion of people from their homeland and this dislocation creates the emergence of cultural identity and longing for home with a sense of loss. The third world post-colonial nations have an identity struggle to belong in the age of globalization. The immigrants from these countries are in a search of a (better) future in the host countries. Most diasporic works focus on the struggles these immigrants face in their need to assimilate and feel belonged. A third world woman is doubly marginalized and seeks freedom exploring her own identity in an alien land. Manjushree Thapa narrates a poignant tale to delve into the mindscape of a Nepali woman. It is not even a category as women have traditionally being marginalized in Nepal. Thapa 's work has primarily focused on Nepali first generation immigrants, exploring themes of exile, isolation, and assimilation. Her struggle to carve an identity for women wherein they feel belong resonates through her works. My paper analyses *Seasons of Flight* as a narrative of the marginalized women to find an identity in the patriarchal society.

Thinking of the small Himalayan nation, Nepal, one interminably is reminded of the snow clad mountains, peaked heights, scenic landscapes. What one is unable to forget and remains central as well as parallel to the denizens of the nation is the shadow of the seemingly unending war. The rare but distinct entity of literature in Nepal written in English is not left untouched by the raging war. For the simple reason that it cannot, as the political has become the personal. This is moreover so for the South Asians. South Asia as only a

geographical entity is not present in the works of the authors from south Asia. It is a constant, a presence, a consciousness that has been a recurring theme in the literary works from South Asia.

Manjushree Thapa has been no exception to this phenomenon. 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..."

This very emotion, create 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 is she from...Originally?" 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." (*Seasons of Flight*, 16)

Also, Nepal as a country is rarely known outside Asia, so Prema has to define her identity with India, Nepal being a 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." 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 for 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. So 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 my 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 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 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 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."(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.'(186)

Food and language plays a pivotal role in her longing for home. The hot delicious *momos* not only transform her to her village but she calls her mother tongue 'the language of her sorrows.'(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 bhinjaju*, the Nepali couple who helps her initially. This abandonment is innate in her as she feels her mother had left her when she (the mother) dies.

There have been not many instances of women immigrants having this quest to go on. Often the women in diaspora are bewildered with a sense of loss and belonging other than her family (marriage) and homeland. This instance refutes the claim that women are no nomads.

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...' (164/5). 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 lays 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".

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