

Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight*: A Flight into an Alienated Land

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Abstract:

The novel of Manjushree Thapa's Seasons of Flight presents a provocative and pessimistic picture of the human society. Through her novel, she expresses poignantly the psychological dilemma of the protagonist in an inimical society. She delineates the predicament of the protagonist caught in the vicious circle of irremediable isolation in the modern life. She shifts her vision from the external world to the inner reality and her novel explores the complexities of the inner world. Manjushree Thapa grew up in Canada, Nepal and the United States. Although educated in the West, she found her calling in giving voice to the people of Nepal through her writing and attempts to depict the plight of the individuals bereft of love and being alone in this globalized world. Thapa's personal experiences made her sensitive towards the strong desire to evocatively present the dilemma of modern displaced individual. The paper presents the negation and the aimlessness is due to nostalgic preference for the native culture and the consequent failure to accommodate to the new form of culture.

Keywords: Immigrant, nostalgia, loneliness, deculturation, desi, belongingness

In one of her interviews she admits to her own feeling of belongingness for her home land: "There are some writers who feel that distance is an advantage. I am not one of these. To the contrary, I feel that there are great advantages to living in the place that you write about" (*Engagement Through Writing*).

The tremendous progress of science and technology in the 20th century has introduced revolutionary changes in man's life. The process of globalization directly interacts with man's personality and his social relationships. Johan Gultang categorically states in his paper, "the first thesis is simply this: many human societies (perhaps most) are in a state of advanced social disintegration at the close of the twentieth century ... a trend toward destructure and deculturation, heading for structurelessness and culturelessness" – or what he defines as anomie and anomie" (Gultang, 1). Thapa presents the intensity of the globalization which is directly responsible for the increased mobility of people, leading to snapping of continuity of the cultural and natural environment. Pulled apart by two cultures, caught between exile and home coming, rendered homeless both at home and abroad, the individuals get often doomed to a pallid, savourless and rootless existence. Ortega Y Gasset profoundly defines the modern man's predicament:

....the other also has his here but this here of the Other is not mine. Our 'heres' are mutually exclusive, they are not interpenetrable, they are different, with the result that the perspective in which the world appears to him is always different from mine. Hence our worlds do not adequately coincide. For the present I am in mine and he is in his. And this is a fresh reason for radical solitude. Not only am I outside of his: we are mutually two outsiders (fueras) and hence radically strangers (forasteros). (Gasset, 75)

An immigrant is characterized by a sense of strangeness and alienation and is conditioned by non-acceptance in the society. An outsider becomes conscious of the disorder and chaos in an alien land compared to the organised life in his native land. The individual is forced to live as an insular and he tries to find a 'way back to himself' (Wilson, 159). The negation of natural peaceful surrounding mars the growth of the personality of an individual. William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* speaks about the unfulfilled desire of immigrant for cohesive integration in the society:

....And so we might speak of a 'pain threshold', a 'fear threshold', and a 'misery threshold' and find it quickly overpassed by the consciousness of some individuals, but lying too high in others to be often reached by their consciousness. The sanguine and healthy minded habitually live on the sunny side of their misery line, the depressed and melancholy live beyond it, in darkness and apprehensions (Wilson, 118).

The people torn from their native ground feel uprooted in the foreign place and fail to relate themselves with the new surroundings. Czelaw Miloz has an answer to man's agony in the contemporary world, "The individual establishes his identity physically relating himself to objects within the reach of his hands and eyes. Through his expanding perception he extends his own identity, first spatially, including a village, a district, a country, then temporally extending himself into the past and creating relationships with its details lest it remain for him a "nowhere". Where such steps are impossible one looks for substitutes" (Miloz, 199). A displaced person in Fromm's terminology needs 'rootedness and relatedness' to avoid the pressures of being an alienated individual (Fromm, 19). Migrating people are dislocated from their native or 'desi' homelands and are transposed elsewhere. *Seasons of Flight* is the story of a Nepali girl, Prema who after winning a green card in the US government's diversity lottery arrives in Los Angeles. Prema's flight takes her from her village up in the hills of Nepal to a beachside neighborhood of Los Angeles. She leaves behind an ageing father to work as a homecare attendant of an elderly American woman. Prema tries to safeguard her 'desi' identity in her new location by defining to everyone who asks her where she is from. She is repeatedly asked if she was from India. But she says she is from Nepal, the country of Mt. Everest. Prema heard a lady saying, "My husband and I went to Rome for our honeymoon, but we never made it to Naples" (1). She feels disembedded from her Nepali language, cuisine, homeland and Hindu religion. She does not find any constants or signposts as she navigates the territory of Los Angeles which she could call her own. A very simple question, 'Where are you from?' (1) compels her to think about her national identity.

The era of globalization provides no psychological support and sense of security to the protagonist. The post-modern phase, which the current revolution in communications and robotics seems to portend, is characterized by a breakdown of human relations- a collapse and corruption of institutions, an isolation of individuals and the growing predominance of purely egotistical motivation for action. 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). Though she wants to be real American through her physical and mental attachment with her Latino-American boyfriend Luis but fails to be related to the American life. Consequently the futility of effort to replace old ties results in Prema feeling nostalgic. The ailment of the human psyche is Thapa’s forte. She emphatically displays the damaging effects of the severance of natural roots and the dislocation of geography, climate, race, custom which lead to ‘declining performances, 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.

Manjushree employs the way of fond memories of connecting with the past. She suggestively uses the technique of flashback. The incidents which occurred in Nepal are described alternately with the incidents taking place in Los Angeles. An encounter with Prema’s mother in “Nepali home” through memory is a space where she could find a trace of identity and completeness which is too fragile to call her own. The construction and reconstruction of her ‘desi’ identity through historical symbols and religion supply her alternative identity to everyday insecurity. “The paradox of this era of globalization is this: The same forces that ushered in unprecedented opportunity have also given rise to unprecedented vulnerabilities and insecurities” (www. E-articles.info). It conveys her a trace of security- though elusive- of a ‘home’ safe from intruders. Prema, a drifting woman, is always in search of her fixed cultural identity. Though she is physically located in Los Angeles, she is occupied by the memory of her village.

At the centre of this nostalgia is a concern for meaning and cultural identity newly problematized by the conditions of contemporary life. She polemically questions herself: Who am I? What am I doing here? Under these conditions nostalgia becomes a means of identity construction. Nostalgia connects her to her past, compels her to articulate her generational experience in narratives, and contrasts the present, increasingly dominated by economic, geographic and genealogical inequality and instrumental rationality, with the past which she could call her own.

The global changes have meant that an increasing number of people now lack the protective cocoon of relational ties that shielded community members and groups in the past. In this wider sense, Giddens in *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the late Modern Age* says:

Globalization tends to break down the protective framework of the small community and of tradition replacing these with many larger, impersonal organizations. The individual feels bereft and alone in a world in which she or he lacks the psychological support and the sense of security provided by more traditional settings. (Giddens33)

Prema insinuates herself in the comforting and assuring zone of her desi land which she persistently remembers and longs for. She seeks nostalgically to recapture her “happy days” of childhood past in her imagination, in turn, often associated with fond memories of food and festive meals: reminiscences of those culinary delights that brought her such warm feelings of pleasure, security, and even love as a child. When Prema visits Neeru-didi and Sushil-bhinaju, she is very happy to see them offering Nepali food. She exclaims with joy when she finds two plates of hot dumplings before them, “Momos! Can you believe? Momos in America (171)!” the moment she discusses about the Nepali cuisine, she feels like eating them and being very near to her ‘home’, a secured place. After turning her back on her country, she begins scanning the internet for news on Nepal and exchanging e-mail with friends in Nepali. Such ruminations definitely reflect the urge to regress to a secure and known habitat.

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 become numb while updating and renewing her cultural identity. Prema, like other immigrant Nepalese, takes part in the Bhajan and enjoys the privilege of kinship. The wails of harmonium and the tiny ching-ching of cymbals touch her heart and she feels secure in this desolate land. Prema involuntary claps when she hears: “Jaya Krishna, jaya Krishna, Radhe swami jaya jaya. Jaya Krishna, jaya Krishna, Radhe swami jaya jaya” (157). Prema time and again steals away to “the sleepy, elm-lined neighborhood of low, cream-colored houses. 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.

Manjushree Thapa’s *Seasons of Flight* is a compelling tale of alienation and homelessness. Away from ‘home’- Nepal, in the foreign land- Los Angeles, Prema is disembedded from her root and she lacks the protective cocoon of home. Identity is newly problematized by changing conditions of Nepalese way of life in Los Angeles. Identities are increasingly nominal and she feels insecure in the foreign land. This individual case of insecurity and homelessness experienced at a personal level find a larger parallel to the immigrant Nepalese in Los Angeles. The severance of natural ties brings into sensitive minds diseases such as schizophrenia. Prema teaches Luis to speak Nepali. She thinks by teaching Nepali, she could overcome the sense of loneliness and the lack of belongingness by possessing him whole heartedly. She says: ‘Ka, Khha, ga, gha, nga’. ‘Come

again?’ ‘The first give letters of the alphabets, Ka, Khha, ga, gha, nga.’ ‘Um.’ He said, ‘Ka, ka, ka, ka, ka, ‘ She laughed’ (135).

When Luis asked if she was a Nepalese, she says it is not ‘Nepalese’, it is ‘Nepali’. Luis wants to go to see the mountains of Nepal. He says: “‘I’ d love to go to the Himmel-aa-yas.’ ‘Himal’ Prema said. “Sorry?’ ‘Himaals. Himaalayas’(36).” Prema endeavours to achieve security by taking recourse to her native language as she is afraid of losing her identity in alien land.

The novel reveals that the literature about immigrants is a bye product of cultural displacement and it traumatic effect on the displaced one. The displaced one develops an ‘immigrant psyche’ which shows particular stresses that are symptomatic of mental aberrations. Security, peace and rootedness of an individual are replaced by feelings of anxiety, pain and fear in a sordid and exiled place. The negation and the aimlessness in Prema’s character is due to her nostalgic preference for the native culture and the consequent failure to accommodate herself to the new form of culture which she is exposed in Los Angeles. The author forcefully reiterates many challenging, and often iconoclastic interpretations of the current human predicament in the novel. *Seasons of Flight* is therefore the most congruent exploration of Thapa into dilemma of identity,

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