

## Diasporic Identity in Bharati Gautam's Memoirs

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### Abstract

This article aims to explore how Bharati Gautam's collection of memoirs *Vigata ra Baduli [Past and Hiccups]* exhibits the formation of a diasporic self. The text connects the Nepali American writer with both of her homeland (Nepal) and hostland (the USA). Dean Smyer Yu's theorization of diasporic selfhood and identity guides the analysis. Yu argues that the people who consciously choose to make their new home in the diaspora work for their self-making and place making that ultimately manifests their transnational and trans local mode of being. Their identity develops as a hybrid one because of the admixture of the culture, emotion, thought pattern and practicality from both the lands. Gautam's memoirs present the same tendency of her growth in the America for about four decades. Her identity is constantly in the making and so she goes on modifying her life and thoughts to adapt in the new land. She gradually develops a diasporic consciousness that helps her accept the differences between the homeland and hostland life as a transnational individual. Finally, her family evolves a cosmopolitan consciousness. This article will contribute to the study of the making of the diasporic self the Nepali people have been undergoing for long.

**Keywords:** *Alienation, diaspora, discrimination, hybridity and identity.*

### 1. Introduction

Bharati Gautam is a Nepali diasporic writer. Bajgai [1] claims that Gautam is a senior writer from the Nepali Diaspora. The facts about her life and literary career help to establish this claim. She has been living in the USA for last 35 years (since 1986) with her family. Her book-length writings on the theme of diaspora and its life are *Akashamathiko Shahara [City Above the Sky]* (2006) a collection of poems, *Amerikama Ama [A Mother in the America]* (2015) an autobiographical novel, and the award-winning collection of memoirs *Vigata ra Baduli [Past and Hiccups]* (2020). Her collection of poems reflects Gautam's feelings during her adaptation in the USA. Similarly, the novel deals with her growth as a Nepali transnational mother in the hostland. The theme of her latest memoirs is also diasporic in terms of her consciousness and belonging.

Gautam's *Vigata ra Baduli* has recently been awarded with the Uttam Shanti Puraskar, a prestigious literary award in Nepal. This book has covered the writer's experiences of living in the USA as a Nepali and its resultant pains and pleasures. Mostly related to her personal family connection in both the USA and Nepal, the memoirs highlight the feelings of a diasporan. Gautam [2] accepts that the book is like research on her life; and so, it explores into the making of her 'self' [ma]. She expects the readers to find themselves while going through the memoirs. As autobiographical writings are the major revealers of diasporic realities, Gautam's *Vigata ra Baduli* also falls on the same category.

Critics and reviewers also highlight the diasporic features of the book and its writer. Luitel [3] informs that Gautam reveals her sensitivity and nostalgia through her writing. So is Baral's [4] opinion. Baral finds herself being emotional while going through the incidents Gautam has portrayed in the text. She further finds that Gautam's identity is closely connected with Nepal through her extended family and relatives back there. In the same line of argument, Pokhrel [5] detects the love of Nepal as the main motif of the memoirs in this collection. He opines that the text shows that Gautam's life is guided by the Nepali culture though her children are not well aware of it. Shrestha [6] connects her writing with diasporic consciousness that positions her divided between the Nepali and the American culture though she loves to be a cosmopolitan being. Whatsoever are the themes and meanings of the memoirs, Khatri [7] finds the book as the means of emptying the pain of the writer. These various findings of the critics indicate that the memoirs are diasporic in nature.

The themes of these memoirs deal with the making of a person in a diaspora. Such a making of an individual is related to the formation of one's identity. Basically, diasporic literature is considered to be an identity writing as it is an expression to a conscious realization of who one is [8]. The attachment of the writer with a place and the connected emotions helps the discourse on diaspora turn into the discourse of identity binding identity to spatial location [9]. Based on these practices, identity formation is taken to be one of the basic themes of diasporic literary works [10]. Sujaritha [10] also specifies three types of identity formation of the diasporans: homeland identity, settled land identity

and hyphenated identity. Gautam's memoirs directly and indirectly are related to these aspects of diasporic identity. As this aspect is unexplored, this paper deals with the same.

This article, in general, aims to discuss the identity related aspects of the memoirs. Specifically, the article tries to

- explore the material and mental aspects of Gautam's (the writer's) identity,
- discuss how her identity is hybrid, and
- find the way the writer and her family deals with the contradictions in the diasporic set up

## 2. Materials and methods

Gautam's book *Vigata ra Baduli [Past and Hiccups]* provides the primary data for this research. The analysis focuses on the character's condition of living and feeling in both the hostland and the homeland (when she visits it on some occasions). The process of analysis is interpretative with the use of the theory of hybridity in identity discourse. For this, the discussion includes the instances from the text that connects the diasporic feeling and the identity of the speaker in the writings.

Bhabha [11] proposes three conditions for the postcolonial identity that incorporates diasporic identity within it: relation to otherness, caught in the tension of demand and desire, and constant transformation of the subject. Specifying the discussion further Baig [12] discusses diasporic identity in terms of material and mental aspects. She argues that diasporans "materially and ideologically restructure ideas of home, space, place, and belonging in diasporic or transnational contexts" (8). Here is the role of diasporic consciousness in the formation of diasporic identity: "People's identity is related to how they understand themselves according to their surrounding environment" (7) [8]. Yu [9], too, has a similar take when he claims that "diaspora is about seeking both real and imagined routes for the emplacement of the diasporic individual in both physical and symbolic terms" (14). Such realities of one's diasporic life are possible to be revealed "when an individual suffers the thick and thin of life" (166) [13]. Gautam's [2] memoirs also reveal her pains and pleasures during her growth as a diasporan in the USA.

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1. Material aspect of identity

Material aspects of diasporic identity formation is related to the dislocation and re-establishment of the diasporans in terms of geographical, cultural, social and linguistic realities. The diasporan's enselfment moves along with where the body goes [9]. They leave everything back in the homeland and try to establish them in the hostland. For that they need to find an appropriate place for their re-rooting.

In Gautam's memoirs the USA is the prime location of her re-rooting. Though they do not live in one place forever even in the USA and has to move to more than fifteen places in their first fifteen years of stay there, more or less the geography, culture, society and language are the same throughout the places they migrate within the hostland; and they are different from those of Nepal. Thus, the USA is the geographical location for them. They try to re-root themselves there as without a place, the diasporic individual or community can hardly show the verity of its existence and professed identity. As place making is the essential task in the process of diasporic livelihood [9], diasporic individuals are displaced and de-territorialized from his or her homeland. So is the case of Gautam and her family.

The de-territorialization extends to Europe when her son decides to settle in Sweden marrying a Swedish girl. It makes the writer feel confused about the identity of her son. She wonders why the place of her son's stay and marriage could not be Nepal where he was born or the USA where he spent about three decades of his life. The level of his dislocation is more than that of the writer. She calculates: "*pustaalaaee jatipatak joda, ghataau ra gunan gare pani chheu nabhetne* [no connection at all how many times one adds, subtracts or multiplies the generations]" (326) [2]. Even then she consoles herself as it is the fate she accepts from the time she left Nepal to get settled in the USA. Such geographical dislocation constructs diasporic identity of the writer and her family.

The next material aspect of the writer's diasporic identity formation is their cultural dislocation. Riaz and Ruzbeh [13] explore the process of such dislocation. They find that the diasporic individual traverses cultural differences on the routes of his diaspora that helps in the gradual fusion of his displaced identity. In this process, when their homeland culture is found to be different from the culture of the hostland, they feel they are culturally dislocated. But slowly and gradually, they begin to find their hostland simultaneously the locus of sameness and difference. Most South Asians find these dislocation and re-location in terms of their food, clothes and family relations. Gautam [2] always reminisces the Nepali food when she has to take the American one. She always misses the vegetables from eastern

Nepal. She is nostalgic of the special foods in the Nepali festivals. Even when she cannot relish the food of her like, she consoles herself, “*bholi tijako brata ta basnai chha* [Anyway, tomorrow I have to do the Teej fasting]” (147) [2]. There is no pooja like that of Nepal. No group of Nepali sari-clad ladies to sing *sangini* and dance on the occasion of the Teej.

As the writer cannot recreate her cultural self in the USA, she consoles herself keeping some symbols in her home. In her cupboard there is a conch that her uncle gifted to her in her visit to Nepal. She attaches it with the family culture of worship and meditation back in Nepal. Along with the conch there are two volumes of *Shreemad Bhagavata*. With these books she has preserved her Hindu culture and mythological tradition that is not found in the public sphere in her hostland. She defines herself with these cultural objects. This is the result of cultural dislocation where a diasporan cannot physically observe the culture, but s/he has to be satisfied with symbols.

Such a dislocation is not found only in the hostland but also in the homeland when the diasporans visit it after a long time. When the writer visits her birthplace during a Dashain, she finds herself just as a tourist, an outsider, not as a sister returning to her natal home [*maiti*] during a festival. She feels: “*paryatakaharookaa majhamaa malaee aaphnai gharamaa paryataka bhaeko anubhava bhayo* [I felt like a tourist in my own home amid other tourists]” (72) [2]. She finds similar cultural dislocation of her daughter when they visit the Taj Mahal in India. Because of some technical problem and miscalculation when the writer cannot manage enough money to purchase a ticket to enter the Taj Mahal as an American, she urges her daughter to purchase it pretending to be an Indian girl. The writer feels ashamed of herself because going against the norms of truth and value her daughter learnt in the USA, she is compelled to speak a lie in India. She knows lying for some benefit is common in Nepal and India, but because of her American culture she finds her and her daughter dislocated here.

The next type of diasporic dislocation is linguistic one. There are some examples of such experiences in the book. The writer tastes her daughter’s pronunciation of the word ‘Sikkim’ to pretend to be a Sikkimese Nepali to purchase a ticket to enter the Taj Mahal. But her daughter cannot pronounce ‘Sikkim’ in the Nepali or the Indian way. It sounds like the pronunciation of an English-speaking westerner. This is an example and effect of linguistic dislocation. The next example is found during the writer’s son’s marriage in Sweden. The same son who, some years ago, claimed to be able to speak some Nepali, but could not do so, is translating the Hindi instruction of the Indian Hindu priest into English so that his English-speaking bride can carry out the function in the marriage ceremony. In the ceremony, there are many Swedish relatives who neither speak Nepali nor Hindi nor English. The writer and her husband find themselves linguistically dislocated. Even in a family function, they find themselves the outsiders.

### 3.2. Mental aspect of identity

The crux of diasporic identity is the way a diasporan thinks about his/her position in the hostland. They evaluate their condition in terms of both their dreams and achievements. Yu [9] rightly claims that “diasporic emplacement, in relation to the issue of identity, community, and reterritorialization, is a mode of meaning-making as well as the enselfment of the diasporic self” (14). Gautam [2] accepts that they have migrated to the USA with a hope of higher-level quality education that would provide them with social prestige and comfortable life. After about three decades, they are happy with these achievements. Her husband has been awarded with the degrees of the PhD and Post-Doc. He has got good jobs in the universities including Harvard. Their children, too, have got international class education and consciousness. People in the American Nepali Diaspora treat them with utmost respect. They have earned similar prestige back in the homeland. They have become the symbols of success both in the homeland and hostland. This is a positive aspect of their identity.

But there are some lope sides in their identity formation. Despite the success in their planned areas, they live a life of outsiders both in the homeland and hostland. Whenever she visits Nepal, the sense of being alienated in her own home pangs her. She has expressed the feeling of an outsider in many occasions. One representative occasion is the time when she visits her birthplace Dhankuta with her first son. This is a place she was born and grown up. There are many relatives these days, too. But they cannot spend a night with them because her son needs modern day American style amenities in the place to spend the night. So, they are compelled to take a hotel for their stay. She thinks over this condition:

*Aadatale, baadhyataale yaa aroo kunai kaaranale chhoraa ra malaee hotelabhitra lyaayo. Dashainmaa nai pugepachhi ta gharai yahee hunuparne malaee laagchha. Gharai ta ho ni, mero astivako aarambha. Ma gharaimaa ta aaekee chhu ni.* [Maybe habit or some compulsion brought both the son and me into a hotel. When I reach here in the Dashain, it should have been my home. Yes, it is my home where my existence began. I have really come to my home.] (209) [2].

Though she feels so close to this place, she cannot get the birth-place like response there. This is the fate of a diaspora in the homeland.

The writer remembers how close she used to be with the place and feels sad in losing that attachment in practice. She thinks, “*Dhanakutaa ra ma, ma ra Dhanakutaa eutai thiyau* [Dhankuta and me, me and Dhankutaa were the same]” (210) [2]. But they are practically at a distance now. This distancing has made her an outsider in her own homeplace; and so she is very emotional: “*kasaiile nadekhnegaree mero daako bhitrai chhutchha* (I wail inside so that nobody could find my pain)” (210) [2]. And she concludes: “*ma Dhanakutaako huna pani nasaknegaree paraai bhaeke thie* [I had become an stranger, forever unable to be a person from Dhankuta]” (215) [2]. This condition refers to diasporan’s sense of alienation, loneliness and feeling of loss [10]. This is a prominent aspect of the writer’s diasporic identity.

The distance with both the homeland and hostland is symbolic in the formation of the writer’s diasporic identity. Khatri [7] claims that Gautam’s memoirs reflect how the transnationals need to make the love of past and nation as their close friend to feel comfortable in the hostland society. De Walt’s [14] claim is relevant in this connection: Like that of the Africans in the USA, ‘No place’ is the position of the transnational people. The fear of distancing from the root is acute with the first-generation migrants like Bharati Gautam and her husband because their diasporic consciousness features a sense of alienation in a new society and culture [13]. Gautam feels it in many occasions. One example can be taken from the time of her son’s marriage in Sweden. When her son announces that he has planned a Nepali style marriage procession [*janti*], she thinks: “*ho ta ni! Bihemaa ta janti jaanuparchha. paraaibhoomile laththieko mero chetana jhaskinchha. Behulaakee aamaa kama ani nimtaalu badhee bhaeko puna: anubhava hunchaa* [Yes, we have to take part in *janti*. My consciousness bemused with the strange land startles. I feel I am less a bridegroom’s mother and more a guest]” (339) [2]. Such an outsider’s position defines the writer’s diasporicity.

The next aspect of diasporic mentality is the feeling of being pushed into the margin and discriminated. Gautam has expressed such position of hers in both the homeland and the hostland. Levinston [15] claims that “United States ... suffers an unjust, antidemocratic, and strikingly tenacious civic empowerment gap along lines of race, ethnicity, and class” (80). Gautam experiences such discrimination in many occasions in the USA. One good example can be in the time of twin tower attack. Suddenly, the gap between the American and non-American grows up after that. All Asians and Muslims are stereotyped. The writer’s son returns from his school with the complaint that his close friend Ryan told him to go back to Nepal, his own country. The shock is that this son of the writer was born in the USA unlike her two senior children. The writer now ponders what the term ‘your own country’ means for her son. Their differential identity is exposed in the time of crisis in the hostland.

The whole Asian community comes under threat. The writer reports that the White people begin to look at them with some kind of suspicion. Some people have to change their outlook within a night. Asian Americans are attacked, looted, their houses are burnt and many other social allegations they have to undergo just after the twin tower attack. In the airline check posts, the Asians are the targets. Even her husband, who is a renowned professor in Harvard, has to face such a racial discrimination in the airport. The writer’s White friends begin to console them for experiencing this condition. But the writer begins to detect the White friend’s feeling of discrimination even in such consolation. Referring to her meeting with a close friend, she reports her experience: “*hijosanga ra hijokee masanga ani hijoko haamro mitrataasanga pani usakaa aakhaa hichkichaajasto maile anubhava gare* [I experienced as if her eyes hesitated to accept me as I was yesterday, as a friend and as a person in the past]” (252) [2]. In such a condition, the writer realizes that in the diaspora, one cannot be in equal par with the mainstream. The lack of recognition as equal can hamper the development of the self [16]. There always remains some kind of gap between the insider and the outsider. And such a gap and lack of recognition define diasporic identity.

A diasporan experiences marginalization and discrimination even in the homeland. When the diasporans look at the traditional homeland culture from the new consciousness they have acquired in the hostland, they feel more discriminated. It is normal in Nepali society for a daughter to just help in the ancestor memory ritual their brothers conduct. It is taken to be the son’s duty to organize family function on the day of the demise of their parents and remember them. But when the writer visits Nepal after her parents pass away and finds only her brother conducting the pooja, she feels herself as an outsider and gendered. Her daughter grown up in the US culture has to remind her of her position in the family. It makes the writer worried about her identity in the family and society as an American Nepali woman. She has never thought from that angle even in the America.

This incident and the consequent realization highlight the cultural aspect of one’s identity. Riaz and Babae [13] claimed that

Cultures leave imprints on the people's life wherever they are. It is evolved from the spatial forms and fantasies. Every culture has a rich and vast history. In the case of immigrant characters, a multi web of the cultures is knitted around. It amalgamates those who face it. (164)

The writer faces the effects of Nepali culture and its modification in the hostland. Her desire of making her daughter daunting and conscious is fulfilled. But she finds that her daughter is freer and more adventurous than she wishes her to be. Such a thinking is the result of her cultural background. She accepts: "*Dhanakutaako brahmanputriko sanskaarako odhne mero aangabaata ajhai khuskisakeko thiena* [The cultivation of a Dhankute brahmin has not yet been shed off my body]" (305) [2]. But still she accepts the inter-caste marriage of her children and feels happy when her daughter is happy on the day of her marriage. She remembers how the Nepali girls weep when they have to leave their natal home, and consoles her that her desire of making her daughter capable has been fulfilled. She is capable of managing herself.

Such a dichotomy of loss and achievement has shown that the writer lives with double consciousness or the split self. Here, Bhabha's idea of 'in-between' gets attracted [11]. Yu [9] interprets such a situation as a focal point of "twofold signification of emplacement" that is "the imaginative capacity of the diasporic individual, which affords his or her new establishment in a new place" (14). Yu further defines the divided condition of the writer's consciousness as "the cannibalization of differences" that ultimately "reorients the diasporic person toward a heightened consciousness of his or her identity in a given diasporic place and toward a mode of being that is a fusion with local cultural dynamics" (17). Gautam's transformation in the thought and cultural view is an example of the eventual expansion of "axiological system for a mutual convention of the values of sameness and differences" (18) [9]. In the beginning of her stay in the USA, the writer's family used to think that one day they would return to Nepal. But gradually they realize that such a physical return is not easy for the diasporans. So, they gradually modify their thoughts and life practices that made the evolution of their diasporic self. Now, they live with a hybrid consciousness.

### 3.3. Hybridity

Hybridity is an essential feature of a diasporic life and identity. It is a matter of unsettling of identities [17] maintaining balance between two different identities [8]. Yu [9] clarifies the point:

... diaspora is a process of enselfment and emplacement, in which the disowning of parts of his past and the re-embracing of new vital elements of the present social environment are adaptive mechanisms for the on-going reconstruction of self-identity and for internalizing new mode(s) of being (19-20).

Clifford [18] terms this process as constructing home away from home. He focuses on the diasporic home making of and by women as the regaining their power in the society. Women in diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by "home" culture and tradition. Gautam [19] highlights the role of an individual as the carrier of cultural baggage. Such a baggage is transported into new cultural surroundings where he sorts out his experience and adopts himself in a new country (2). All these ideas commonly accept the fact that diaspora is the society with hybridity. Both the homeland and hostland merge together in different forms.

Gautam's [2] memoirs reflect the hybridity in their social and personal life in the diaspora. She finds it in many incidents of her life in the USA. Two prominent examples are taken here from the scene of her children's marriage ceremony. Her daughter is shown getting married in the compound of a Hindu temple in the USA. Though the land is American, the cultural practice is that of Nepal. The bridegroom is purely an American, whereas the bride is an American Nepali. The bridegroom is not a follower of Hinduism, but he is following all the processes of a Hindu marriage. It is a good example of cultural mix and the resultant hybridity of their family life. The child born from them is neither an American nor a Nepali, but a Nepali-American in blood.

Similar scene is portrayed in her son's marriage and marriage ceremony as well. Her son is marrying a Swedish girl. In the day of their marriage, two ceremonies are arranged. The first is Nepali style Hindu culture-based ceremony in which an Indian priest leads the function. Both the bride and bridegroom are dressed in traditional Nepali attires and involve themselves in Nepali cultural function. After the Nepali style ceremony is complete, they take part in the Swedish style ceremony. The bride and bridegroom put on traditional Swedish dresses and participate in a Christian style ceremony. It is an unusually hybrid marriage function.

In case of language, too, there are examples of hybridity. The writer mixes up Nepali and English in her conversation at home. Her children can understand some Nepali and are fluent in English. So, whenever they talk, they mix up these languages. Her daughter says: "*hoina, uneeharoole saatne chhaina, thikka paisa deu bhaneko holaa*, but I was

not sure” (155) [2]. Here, the first half of the same sentence is in Nepali and the second half is in English. While visiting the Taj Mahal, her daughter puts on kurta and salwar though it is not her favourite dress. Despite the lack of preference, she feels it is good to visit the Taj Mahal in South Asian dress. Her mind is ready to mix up American thought and Indian/Nepali dress.

Cultural and linguistic hybridity sometimes puts the diasporans in contradictions. Baig [12] claims that moving contradictions are relevant in situating diasporic identification between nation-state, culture, and beyond. The writer finds that she has been caught up within the contradiction of Nepali and American consciousness. “*naaree aadarshako mukut maile pani siuriekee rahichhu. Uktta mukut naphukaalee ma naaree adhikaar ra sammaanako jhareemaa niskana samet khojdirahichhu* [I have put on the crown of Nepali idealism. Without taking that crown off, I happen to try to come out in the rain of women’s rights and dignity]” (299) [12]. Here, she is critical of both the western and eastern approaches to women’s position in the society. The Nepali ideal look at woman is as a submissive and shy lady; whereas, the western look is as a human being who is ready to enjoy the right and dignity not less than that of the men. Now, her moves are confusing for herself as it is very difficult to manage both approaches in her life. She compares herself with an orange and her daughter with a lemon. How can they be similar? But she has to adjust the way it is possible. Life is to be managed in the possible way.

The way the writer manages her personal, familial and social life resonates Yu’s claim about diasporic self [9]. He argues that diasporic self is “an adaptive mechanism” that is made up of “translating otherness into sameness, and the exotic into the familiar” (11). Here, “the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy— it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (Bhabha 45) [11]. On the day of her son’s marriage ceremony in Sweden, the writer thinks: “*chaara prakaarako prishthabhoomi bhae pani eutai utsavamaa jammaa bhaekaa haamee eutai parivaara bhayau* [Though we have four different backgrounds, we are the same family because we are participating in the same celebration]” (339) [2]. The family relation is hybrid. All of them accept it as the need of the time, place and life in the diaspora.

Hybridity is seen when the writer’s family adopts a dog. Her children treat the dog as if it was their own sibling, whereas the writer’s couple take it merely as an animal. This contradiction between the America-grown children and Nepal-grown parents is resolved when they keep the name of the pet. Children want to name it after the Hindu gods; but the parents deny. Then the children want to name it ‘Ajay’. The parents do not agree with it because it may be the name of any of their Nepali or Indian relative or a probable guest. Finally, they name it “Jey” that indirectly means Ajay. In this naming, there is the mixture of the American and Nepali thoughts and treatment about the dog. In the beginning the writer is reluctant to keep a dog at home because it needs to be treated like a child. But later she modifies her belief and accepts it as a pet and treats it like her children. Such is the life with adjustment in the diaspora. Once things are adjusted mixing the homeland and hostland thoughts and practices, hybridity is naturally created. And, finally, hybridity becomes the basic pattern of diasporic life.

#### 4. Conclusion

The memoirs collected in Bharati Gautam’s *Vigata ra Baduli [Past and Hiccups]* highlight the writer’s diasporic identity. Her identity is reflected in terms of the material condition, thinking, feeling and consequent hybridity. Gautam is dislocated from her homeland to the hostland that observes entirely different language, culture, religion, food, education and other life practices. She has been away from the opportunities to practice homeland culture. She is also socially dislocated amid the western norms and values that do not match with her traditional Nepali mores. Nepali, the language she is used to, is not in everyday practice in her family and locality in the USA. These material conditions make her feel to be an outsider and alienated in both the hostland and homeland. She feels to be marginalized and discriminated in both locales. Consequently, she has developed double consciousness that makes her personality divided between the homeland and hostland. Along with the division in many fronts of life, there are mixtures of cultures, rituals, languages, dress ups and life practices. Such mixtures create hybridity. The writer depicts the instances of contradiction and her way of managing them with the help of diasporic consciousness. Thus, this book is a representative text that presents the identity related conditions and crises of the Nepali diasporans in the West.

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