

Transnational Identity in Thapa's Seasons of Flight

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Abstract

This article focuses on the transnational identity of Nepali immigrants in America through the representative character of Prema in Manjushree Thapa's novel, Season of Flight. The finding of the article is that transnational identity of immigrants is unstable and fluid. This instability and fluidity result in crossing the border from one nation to the next. Transnationalism is the process of globalization where immigrant adopts foreign culture and retains the roots simultaneously. Although immigrant has to undergo alienation and frustration in the host land, he/she prefers to live there because of immense freedom and liberty. The researcher has focused on the cultural aspect of immigrants living in transnational space, and hybridity as a theory has been applied to interpret and analyze the text.

Keywords: Border, fluidity, hybridity, Identity, immigrant, instability, transnationalism

Introduction

Identity of the people is associated with various factors such as nation, religion, culture, race, gender and language. However, these factors are subject to transformation. As such, identity of people also continues changing along with the changes of these factors in a particular circumstance. Sanjeev Upreti writes, "National identity of men would be constructed within the political and cultural boundary of nation in the past." (210). People move from homeland to host land crossing the border with the prospect of better future. The identity of people attached to ethnicity and nation was considered to be fixed, pure and essential which is replaced at present by unstable, mixed and constructive identity in the transnational society. Nayar writes, "Bhabha rejects notion of a fixed rooted or binary identity" (201). Transnational identity of immigrants is fluid and unstable. The immigrants in the new territory adopt new culture and assimilate in the new society accordingly retaining cultural identity at homeland. Regarding the flow of Nepali immigrant scholars across the globe, Bhatt writes, "in post revolution era in Nepal, i.e. after 2006, Nepali scholars are rapidly migrating around the globe and many books of Nepali literature are published from different countries of the world". Thapa chooses characters and settings from beyond the boarder and writes seasons of flight on transnational theme.

Transnationalism and Unstable Identity

The identity of immigrants in transnational society is fluid and unstable. Movement of people from one territory to the next crossing the border in the globalized world creates instability and fluidity in the identity of immigrants. Regarding shifting identities, Nayar writes, "Rhusdie and Bhabha celebrate displacement as the means to abandon older, perhaps oppressive and limited forms of identity, in favors of a shifting and complex one" (201). The writers in transnational society search for routes rather than roots. Equal opportunity is available for the immigrants in the foreign country. Immigrants feel freedom and liberty in transnational society. Moreover, transnational identity based on plurality and heterogeneity is the process of globalization. Regarding the formation of transnationalism, Dahinden writes, "transnational formations result from a combination of transnational mobility, on the one hand, and locality in the sending or/and receiving country, on the other. Mobility is to be understood here as the

physical movement of people in transnational space.” Thus, the combination of locality and mobility create multiple identities of immigrants.

Hybridity is created in the multicultural society of transnationalism. Nayar writes, “Multiplicity results in an identity that is extremely fluid, and can even induce a sense of anxiety” (204). As identity results in multiplicity in host country, it creates anxiety and isolation in immigrants. However, the immigrants prefer to live in multiculturalism of host country enjoying instability and mobility. Single and fixed identity of the homeland is replaced by the plural and fluid identity in the territory of destination. Regarding the formation of hybrid identity in diaspora, Hall writes, “the diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference by hybridity” (120). The immigrants thus produce continuously new and hybrid identity through ‘transformation’ and ‘difference’.

Reviews of various critics have been incorporated to find out the gaps. Manohar D. Dugaje analyses *Seasons of Flight* focusing on the protagonist, prema who undergoes psychological dilemma between her strong attachment with homeland and her desire to be adjusted in host country, U.S.A. He displays the plight and agony of the immigrants living in the U.S.A. through the characterization of prema in the globalized society. Prema’s self is fragmented because of her in-between position. As a result, her identity is in crisis. She gets peace, solace and security by reciting lines from Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the books about Osho, Krishnamurti, Vivekananda, Ram Das, and Sai Baba. Dugaje further writes that Prema who does not feel at home with Luis and Andy finds peace and security with Niru Didi and Shusil Vinaju in little Nepal.

Bhatt analyzes the text, *Season of Flight* focusing on how the protagonist, prema feels psychological ambivalent and cultural dilemma between desire for living American ways of life and nostalgia for her native culture. The sense of loneliness, anxiety, homelessness and alienation results from cultural hybridity. Prema’s longing for migrating to USA for permanent settlement and assimilating with American way of life is disturbed by her memory and nostalgia of her native land. He further writes the protagonist, prema migrates from village of hillside to Kathmandu, and from there she migrates to America through diversity visa. It is the Maoist movement prevalent in Nepal that compelled people to leave the village and migrate to cities of nation and trans nation. In America, prema keeps herself away from her father, disconnects with her sister and tries to be Americanized. She even avoids contacts with sushil, niru and other nepali immigrants living in Los Angeles. She lives with American boy, Luis and tries to be adjusted to the American way of life. However, she feels alien and uprooted in American society. Bhatt further writes that she attempts to recreate a lost sense of cultural identity. She recites lines from the Mahabharata, the Bhagawatgita, the Ramayana, reads books of Osho, and Nepali bhajan. This takes prema back to Nepali home. Thus, divided self of prema has been exposed resulting from hybrid identity.

Regmi analyzes the novel, *Seasons of Flight* by Manjushree Thapa as the story of Nepali immigrants living in America especially through the representation of the protagonist, Prema. Experience of first generation of Nepali immigrants through the characterization of Prema in the host country, America is terrible and painful. The novel explores the bitter experience of Prema who undergoes rift between native culture of homeland and longing material prosperity of the host country. Regmi further views that first generation of Nepali immigrants like Prema prefers to be identified psychologically as American and socio-culturally as Nepali American. Critic

focuses on the broken identities of the immigrants neither fully assimilated in the new culture of host country nor do they adjust to the nation they belong to. Prema returns to Nepal after five years crossing borders. Dual identity can be seen in her: American in looking, dressing, speech and body language but nepali in roots. The characters in the novel demonstrate diversities of south Asian communities in America with their various languages, religions and foods. The article thus views the life of Nepali immigrants living in America how they are culturally fragmented, and how they remain in between position. It is obvious from the above review and criticism that research on *Seasons of Flight* has not been conducted through transnationalism on the issue of fluidity and instability of prema, Nepali immigrant in America. These are some of the reviews which do not focus on the topic of transnational identity of immigrants

Problems, Objectives and Methodology

The problem in the research article has been mainly posed as follows:

- 1) How is transnational identity of Prema fluid and unstable?
- 2) Does fluidity and instability create hybridity in prema?

The article focuses mainly on these two problems to find out the solution. The objective of the study is to find out how transnational identity is fluid and unstable, and to analyze how fluidity and instability create hybridity in Prema. Theory of hybridity will be applied to analyze the text.

Textual Analysis

Prema moves to U.S.A. as nepali immigrant through green card lottery. The identity of Prema in transnational society is fluid and mobile. The fluidity and mobility is obvious in Prema's life throughout the novel. Moreover, this fluid and unstable identity of prema in transnational society is created through hybridization. Prema remains in-between position adopting American culture and retaining native culture at the same time. Ascroft et al. writes, "it is the in-between space that carries the burden and meaning of culture, and this is what makes the notion of hybridity so important" (119). Consequently, Prema does not assert to any specific culture as her own. Even though her life seems to be directionless and uncertain in America, she enjoys it and decides to live there among uncertainties, fluidities and instabilities. Moving from hill town to Kathmandu and from Kathmandu to U.S.A., Prema, the protagonist in the novel does not seem to have a fixed settlement, "she was left to the world. Tracing her way along her ever-directionless zigzag trail" (thapa 216). In U.S.A., she does not have stability and continues shifting from place to place.

Prema as an immigrant shifting from the origin of territory, Nepal to the host land, U.S.A. is the protagonist who goes through the experience of rootless identity throughout the novel. She is unable to assert her identity strongly in the multicultural society of America. Further, she attempts to be adjusted and adapted to American way of life. Regarding the fluid and rootless identity of immigrants in America, prema opines, "our lives are a catalogue of random occurrences that hew us into who we are, we drift from circumstances to circumstances, pointing to the attributes that result from our adaptation" (Thapa138). She happens to meet Luis, her boyfriend in Los Angeles; they are from two different locations, cultures, nationalities and languages, but they accept each other to live together without marriage. As immigrants in the host country do not have their fixed and solid identity, Prema utters silently in the shopping complex with Luis that circumstances brought them together and formed their identity in a new way.

Prema attempts to adapt and assimilate herself in American culture. She attends Thanksgiving and Christmas ceremony in Luis's family gathering. Exchanging greetings, Prema knows American culture that son addresses to his mother by her first name such as "how is it

going with you, peggy? Peggy, would you like some more champagne?” (145). Prema finds it odd to address mother by her first name directly by her son. Further, she learns American way of talking, wearing, eating, addressing, hugging and parting with which she is really impressed. Relatives in the family gathering hugs Prema and she also hugs them back, “Peggy hugged Prema, Ryan hogged Prema, Anna hugged Prema. Similarly, Prema also hugs Matt, Mike and Mark” (145). Besides, Prema learns that divorce and step relation are very common in American society, in which Luis’s family is the best example of it.

Identity of the immigrants depicted in the novel is hybridized and plural. Combination of native culture and foreign culture create cultural hybridity in Prema. She speaks not only Nepali and English but also attempts to speak Spanish. Moreover, Prema does not prefer to be confined to Little Nepal among Nepali community in America, rather she decides to leave Little Nepal and move to open society in Los Angeles such as “she missed Sushil and Neeru, and the company of her compatriots in little Nepal. But she was determined to keep going farther” (Thapa125). Identified herself as Indian while introducing with Andy, building constructor, she hides her Nepali origin and at the same time consider herself as “Asian woman” (129). Visiting music concert in the bar offered by Andy is easily accepted by Prema, and enjoys western music and drinking. She looks like Bollywood heroine in ‘indigo dresses’. Assimilated into the culture of kissing and hugging, Prema enjoys sexual relation with Andy without hesitation. Similarly, Prema wearing red bikini and flip flop mimics American women in the sea beach. Exposing her attractive body in the beach, she plays with the wave thus: “a current drew her out as the wave receded, but then another wave surged toward her...” (80). Prema adopts American life and turns into hybridized.

Prema as an immigrant has mobile life in America. Even in native land, she does not have her fixity in a particular location because of her leaving home at the age seventeen and moving to different places in course of job in NGO with Rajan and Trailokya. She seems to lead directionless and mobile life throughout the novel. Confined and congested in Little Nepal while living with Neeru and Sushil, she decides to live with American roommate, Meg and Susan in open society in Los Angeles. Worked as a homecare attendant for Esther, Prema happens to meet Luis, her boyfriend, and goes to live with him in his flat quitting the job at Esther. Living together with Luis does not last long, and she deserts him, feeling restless and loneliness. As such, working again as a homecare attendant at Esther’s home, living in the flat of Neeru and Sushil, visiting park etc. become her daily routine without having her fixity and stability in term of identity and location. In the argument between Luis and Prema, she replies to Luis’s question as “I do not have a world! Prema cried. I left the world I had, and do not belong in the one I am in now- your world. I do not have a place in the world”(212). Finally, she decides to return Nepal, but even in Nepal she cannot stay for long time, and immediately goes back to America after meeting with her relatives.

The identity of immigrants in trans nation rest on both the origin and destination of territory. Prema tries to assimilate in the multicultural society of America retaining the culture of her homeland. Connecting her homeland through memory, she keeps ammonite secretly which memorizes her mother. Furthermore, she retains her cultural identity through listening to Nepali *bhajan*, eating *daal bhat*, visiting little Nepal, teaching Nepali language to Luis and visiting her native country. Similarly she also attempts to adjust to the multicultural society of America through trying to learn Spanish language, enjoying western music with Andy in the bar and restaurant, attending Thanksgiving and Christmas ceremony with Luis in the family gathering, having sexual experience with American guys, Luis and Andy, wearing ‘bikini’ and ‘flip flop’,

and enjoying in the sea beach. Adopting both cultures create hybrid identity in Prema which keeps her in between position.

Hybrid identity in trans nation sometimes creates loneliness and frustration in the immigrants because they do not assert their specific culture. However, the immigrants enjoy uncertainty, fluidity and mobility in the host land because they feel freedom and liberty there. Prema enjoys living in America though she feels loneliness and frustration. Stayed for few days in Nepal, she decides to go back to America instantly again, and express her uncertainty to Bijaya, Prema's sister about when she will be back Nepal, "I don't know when I will be back" (240). Although Prema feels rootless and directionless, she still prefers to live in America among uncertainties. Prema does not seem to carry out any commitment and responsibility to others. She does not live dutiful life as wife with Luis, either, and decides quitting relation of living together with him. She is entirely left to the world, "tracing her way along her ever-directionless zigzag trail" (216). Thus, Prema's life is fluid and unstable in America.

Conclusion

Identity of the immigrants in the host land is fluid and unstable. Prema has to undergo fluidity and instability in America because she has to live under two cultures. Adopting two cultures create hybrid identity in Prema. Thus, living in two cultures creates ultimately loneliness and frustration in her life. However, she prefers to live in the multicultural society of America. Liberty and freedom is the essence of trans nation which keeps Prema stay in America. Divorce and step relations are commonly found in American culture. Immigrant like Prema has to live in between position adopting American culture and retaining culture of homeland at the same time. Memory of the past at homeland provides peace and solace for the immigrant living in the territory of destination. Attempt of adjust and assimilation in American culture results in uncertainty and rootlessness. However, she enjoys life in America being fragmented culturally.

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