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Transforming Gender Role in Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight*

Nagendra Bahadur Bhandari, PhD

Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, Nepal

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3513-6624>

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Corresponding Author: Nagendra Bhandari, Email: nagendrabr29@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of gender identity of Prema, an immigrant girl from a mountainous village of Nepal to the metropolis of the US in Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight*. The novel synchronizes the spatial journey of this village girl with her mental and emotional transformation. In course of her journey, she persistently crosses the cultural and social expectation for a girl born in typical Hindu family of the hinterland of Nepal. Particularly, she takes crucial decision of her life independently, supports her family financially and enjoys liberated sexual life. For this, she resists numerous social and cultural restrictions and obligations which gradually transform her as an independent girl. In this paper, Prema's transformation process is analyzed through the critical frame of David Jefferess resistance model which emphasizes on transformation in perception, material reality and human relationship in resistance process.

Keywords: Gender identity, immigrant, resistance, transformation

Introduction

Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* narrates the story of Prema who constantly resists cultural and social expectations and restrictions to a Nepali village girl in course of her journey from remote mountainous village of Nepal to metropolis of the US. She undergoes hardship and suffering in her childhood as her mother dies while giving birth to her younger sister. Despite financial and familial adversities, she pursues her basic education in her village and goes to Kathmandu for further studies in forestry which enables her to get a job in an NGO working in the field of conservation. She supports her widower father financially which seems unconventional in a typical Hindu patriarchal society that considers only son as a breadwinner of a family. Besides supporting her family financially, she takes crucial decisions of her life by herself breaking the tradition of parental and familial intervention in the life of a girl. She personally takes decision of going to the US after winning the Diversity Visa program of American government. She simply informs her father at the final stage of her journey to

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the US. In the US, she leads life of an independent girl and enjoys liberated sexual life which is unimaginable for a typical Hindu girl born and brought up in a remote village of Nepal. In this context, it is pertinent to explore how she transforms herself as an independent, assertive and bold girl deconstructing the patriarchal Hindu cultural expectation to behave like a timid, submissive, complaisant and dependent girl.

This aspect of Prema's transformed gender identity as a girl from Hindu patriarchal society gets less critical attention in the critical appraisal of the novel.

Review of Literature

Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* has been mainly analyzed focusing on the experience of third world immigrants in the first world. The cultural disjunctions, sense of uprootness, quest of belonging, and sense of nostalgia are concerns of many critics. Similarly, the struggles of Prema not only as an immigrant but also a female draw critical attention of some critics. Moreover, some critics raise concern about the homogenizing practice of all South Asian immigrants in the umbrella of Indianess in the US. The representative critical appraisals are briefly discussed below.

Robert Simmons relates Prema's experience with the writer's personal experience as an immigrant and explains:

Seasons of Flight explores the cultural dissonances experienced by immigrants caught between the culture of their birthplace and the unfamiliar ways of their adopted home. Thapa as an author incorporates her opinions and perspective into the literature to better portray the experiences of her characters. The interpretation and comprehension of this story is largely dependent on the inclusion of accounts from the author's own life and experiences. (27)

Relating Thapa's own experience as an immigrant with the protagonist Prema, Simmons focuses on cultural dissonance that an immigrant undergoes in the diaspora. However, the situation of Thapa and Prema differ substantially. The former one enjoys an upper class life being a daughter of a high ranking diplomat and the latter one a green card winner immigrant from a poor family of Nepal who has to face lots of hardship in settling down in the US. Despite differences in social status, the immigrants are emotionally and psychologically torn between their home and host country.

Similarly, Jadish Joshi and Mahesh Bhatta analyze the psychological ambivalence of Prema as an immigrant. Her psychological quest involves searching the absence. They observe:

Prema frequently dwindle between absence and presence. In the company of Luis, Prema feels as if she finds herself assimilated to American multiculturalism but the moment she idealizes her lost realm of culture, geography, innocence, purity and happiness; she is overwhelmed by absence.... 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. (78)

They find immigrants like Prema "structurally marginalized and ontologically insecure" (78). Such sense of insecurity leads them to explore their real or imaginary past which sometimes gives "rise to a politics of resistance and the growth of local identities" (78). However, such condition of psychological insecurities renders sense of uprootedness in immigrants.

Like Bhatta and Joshi, Manohar D. Dugaje explores the cultural displacement and sense of unrootedness of Prema. Prema, the protagonist of the novel, suffers traumatic experience losing her homeland as a result she 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. (Dugaje 10115)

Dugaje's analysis rests upon the emotional and psychological hardship experience by an immigrant which he terms as "immigrant psyche". Apparently, Prema, as an immigrant manifests nostalgia and repentances for her home country and undergoes a series of hardship in settling down in her host land.

Critiquing Dugaje, Himadri Lahiri asserts that Prema who witnesses political unrest and turmoil in her native land does not cherish an idealized image of her homeland. In "Diaspora from the Himalayan Region: Nation and Modernity in Select Literary Works" Lahiri compares and contrasts the immigrant characters on mountainous regions featured in writers Kunzang Choden of Bhutanese origin, Bhuchung D. Sonam of Tibetan origin, Manjushree Thapa of Nepalese descent and Prajwal Parajuly of mixed origin. Unlike other writers, Thapa's character Prema in *Seasons of Flight* does not harbor an idealized image of her home country as she leaves her country because of the internal domestic political situation. Lahiri elaborates:

In Manjushree Thapa's work, however, we find a contrasting picture. Her characters are, mostly, discontent with the situations in Nepal. ...Similarly, in her novel *Seasons of Flight* (2010) Thapa depicts a picture of a "war"-torn Nepal and shows how innocent people are caught in the cross-fire. The rise of Maoist insurgency poses serious challenges to the state power and eventually plunges the country into darkness. (Lahiri 78-79)

Lahiri explores heterogeneities among the immigrants from Himalayan region. Basically, the Tibetan immigrants, who are forcefully compelled to leave their home country, cherish an idealized image of their home country. Conversely, the Nepalese immigrant Prema in Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* leaves her country because of fear of Maoist insurgency does not cherish an idealized image of her home country.

Like Lahiri, Sunila Grurung explores the various factors leading Prema to immigration. For Gurung Prem is both an economic migrant and an expatriate as she aspires to get economic prosperity and an escape from the atrocities committed by the state and the then Maoist rebels. She explicates:

Thapa explores the various trajectories of modern day diaspora through her character Prema, who is a first generation economic migrant trying to make life in America, away from the poverty of her third world country, Nepal. Prema is also an expatriate who is deterritorialized because of the atrocities and violence in war-torn Nepal which compels her to leave her nation. Therefore, it is both voluntary, at the same time, involuntary diaspora. On one hand there is a sense of success and relief, for being able to escape the poverty and war in her homeland, and making survival, and progress in the host land. On the other, there is constant confrontation with the survivor's guilt for leaving, or escaping the turmoil of her homeland, abandoning her family, her people, and her nation. (176-177)

This sense of guilt triggers passion in her for resuming her lost connection with her friends and relatives of her homeland and even visits her homeland. However, Gurung's analysis does not discuss much about bicultural vacillations between her host country and home land.

Pooja Swamy discusses the depiction of memory, search for home and the problematic of identity for an immigrant woman in the novel. She analyzes Prema

struggles and remarks; "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 Premafree" (496). Swamy considers Prem's breaking of social convictions as an attempt of liberating herself from patriarchal constructs. In this sense, Swamy attempts to deconstruct homogenizing attitude of disparate groups of immigrants and focuses on female experience, however she does discuss how female immigrants' experience differ from their male counterpart.

Khem Guragain also focuses on heterogeneities among immigrants' community from national paradigm. He contends the tendency of homogenizing all South Asian diaspora with in umbrella of Indianness in the US. He argues that the identity of Prema, is constantly conflated with Indianness when she encounters different social activities and conversations. Guragain reiterates: "Prema's identity is conflated with Indianness, as she struggles to negotiate between her past and present, and aspires to find herself and identity in America" (51). Her Nepali origin is often conflated with Indian in the diaspora.

Briefly, critics explore various facets of diasporic experience of immigrants in Thapa's *Seasons of Flight*. Simmons relates Prema's experience as an immigrant with Thapa own experience as an immigrant. In the same, Joshi and Bhatta explore psychological ambivalence to her host and home country that Prema undergoes in the diaspora. Dugaje and Lahiri discuss Prema relation with her home country Nepal. Dugaje argues that Prema undergoes a traumatic experience living in her home country. However, Lahiri asserts that Prema does not possess an idealize image of her home country as she leaves her country because of political unrest. In the same way, Gurung explores the economic and political factors of home country which forces Prema to leave her country.

Unlike other critics, Swamy raises feminist concerns and argues Prema's struggle is both as an immigrant and as a female. Moreover, Guragain opposes the tendencies of homogenizing all the South Asian immigrants under umbrella of Indianness. Thus, the study of gender identity transformation in critical frame of David Jefferesse's theory of resistance which emphasizes on transformation in perception, material reality and human relationship retain relevance.

Resistance as Transformation

David Jefferess emphasizes both on new type of human relationship and change in material condition in his transformative resistance model. He advocates a mutual interdependence of human beings rejecting the antagonistic bipolar dichotomies of the self and the other; the colonized and colonizer, along with transformation of material condition. The transformative resistance "requires both the affirmation of human connection and the alteration of structures of exploitation" (Jefferess 105). He analyzes Mahatma Gandhi's resistance of colonial power in India and South African reconciliation initiatives as case studies to postulate his transformative model of resistance.

Jefferess asserts that Gandhi's resistance model emphasizes changes of the material condition and human relation both. Gandhi advocates *swaraj* (self-government), *sardoya* (the welfare of all), *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satyagraha* (truth-force) in his struggle for liberation from British colonial rule. Jefferess argues:

for the way in which what Gandhi called his 'experiments with truth' and particularly concepts of *swaraj* ('self-government'), *sardoya* ('the welfare of all'), *ahimsa* ('nonviolence'), and *satyagraha* ('truth-force'), which guided and

were the subject of those experiments – provide insight into ways in which resistance can be imagined and articulated alternatively to the dominant theories of resistance within postcolonial studies (96).

Gandhi advocates an “anticipatory discourse of transformation” (101) by criticizing modern civilization as a form of suppression, not only focusing on colonial exploitation. He rejects violent opposition strategies in his advocacy of *swaraj*, *ahimsa*, *satyagraha* and *sardoya* while seeking liberation from all social relationships within the repressive structures of modernity. Jefferess also finds space for new human relationship in South Africa peace process led by Nelson Mandela.

Jefferess takes the South African post-apartheid reconciliation process as his second example of transformative model of resistance. This process is linked to material and social transformation, depending not on antagonistic relationship, but the production of a discourse of mutual responsibility which “deconstruct the antagonistic discourse of apartheid power” (172). He argues that “this project of reconciliation deconstructs colonial knowledge and produces an alternative discourse demanding an alternative structure of relations through recognition, redistribution, and connection” (Shahjahan *Engaging The Faces* 277). This process attempts to change the colonial discourse of knowledge and meaning, not for the past, but for the present and the future. In this process, it also aims to propose an alternative structure of relation for mutual harmony by acknowledging the past. So, this process provides “space for the memories of the past and acknowledges the abuse, violence and ideology of apartheid” (Shahjahan ‘no’ to ‘yes’ 228). By acknowledging the past, this process attempts to foster new human relationship on the basis of the new discourse. So it is a constant process of transformation of both the narratives within which people make sense of their experience and the material and social structure produced by these narratives.

Jefferess takes examples of Gandhian resistance model and the idea of reconciliation in South Africa to propose his alternative model of transformative resistance. He problematizes the notion of resistance as opposition as well as the binary, simplistic constructions of victim and perpetrator. His resistance as transformation model does not only aim to liberate the oppressed from dominating structures and subvert the colonial power, but also to liberate the deep structures of human society. In this sense, resistance is an attempt of the transformation of both discursive and material consequences of power imbalance. In this sense, Jefferes proposes resistance model that emphasizes transformation in perception, material condition and discourse of oppression based on mutual interdependence. With such theoretical frame, this article analyzes the resistance Prema to the patriarchal notion of gender role in Manjushree Thapa's *Season of Flights*.

Prema's Resistance

Prema is brought up in a typical Hindu religious background in a remote village of Nepal. She observes the passionate devotion of Nepali females to the Hindu religion and its social practices. She recalls how her mother used to worship ammonite as an incarnation of Vishnu, a god of protection in Hindu mythology. Thapa narrates:

A Hindu ascetic who came wandering through Prema's birth village had given it to her. Her mother, devout, used to worship the coil at the centre as shaligram, an avatar of Vishnu. She kept it in her bedroom shrine, and every morning sprinkled rice grains on it and made offerings of flowers and vermilion powder. Praying for what? The ammonite sat at the centre of the shrine, with pictures of the deities – Krishna, Parvati, Shiva, Laksmi – placed lovingly around it. (3)

Her mother passionately devotes to the Hindu god and its rituals. She seems quite happy

to perform the traditional role of female. However, the *Manusmriti* which is considered as code of conducts for the followers of the Hindu relegates female in secondary position.

The *Manusmriti*, in verses 5/158, states that women have no divine right to perform any religious ritual, nor make vows or observe a fast. Such notion of religious scripture plays vital role in shaping people's perception and behaviour. So, Nepali orthodox parents want to have a son to perform their death ritual to liberate their soul. Prema's parents also want to have a son which causes the untimely death of her mother which Prema has witnessed as a child. She recalls this incident in her conversation with her American boyfriend Luis: "She kept getting pregnant because she wanted a son!... One baby before me, two afterwards – they all died. And she – All she wanted was a son! In Nepal they still – People still – All these stupid white people American Hindus call this Krishna love?" (Thapa 59). This incident renders a sense of outrage to the young Prema which gradually takes the form of resistance to the patriarchal social construct of Nepali society.

Prema's anger is further evident in her strong criticism to the Hindu religious scripture the *Manusmriti* and the social position it ascribes to female. In her conversation with her American boyfriend Luis, she criticizes: "The Manusmriti. Do you know its message?" To which Luis responds, "Is that part of the Bag-bad Geeta?" Prema comments, "The book where it says women are slaves. You must not listen to them; you must beat them if they disobey you. All stupid!" (Thapa 158). In her opinion, such religious doctrines shape male's perception and treatment to female. Consequently, females are subjected to domestic violence in an attempt of taming them to be better human beings. Moreover, such narration of female inferiority help perpetuate male hegemony by brainwashing female who willing submit to the secondary role in domestic and public sphere like Prema's mother who readily become pregnant regularly to have a son.

Not only uneducated female like Prema's mother, but also educated people cannot get rid of religious indoctrination of religious scriptures in Nepal. Prema observes how a school teacher, her landlord in the town in Nepal persuades her young daughter to get married even at the age eighteen. Although the teacher claims himself progressive, he persuades his daughter to get married even without completing her high school education. Moreover, when his daughter becomes pregnant, the girl's mother says: "If it's a son, her in-laws won't pressure her to have more children. It's not that I wouldn't want a granddaughter –girl, boy, what difference to progressives like us? It's just that her in-laws..." (46). Although the mother says having grandson pleases her daughter's in-laws, it also reflects her own preference half heatedly. This daughter of the teacher whose parents are educated and who live in the town also face similar familial and social expectation like Prema's mother. Prema realizes that the changes of time and even spread of education has not yet substantially brought change in people's perception about son and daughter. Jefferess rightly underscores the need of changing perception in order to really transform the existing relationship of exploitation. For this, Prema opposes the religious scriptures and practices which basically shape people perception in Nepali society.

Her antagonism to Hindu religion even manifests in the diaspora. She criticizes Mata Sylvia, a Hindu religious preacher and her religious preaching in the US. Mata displays religious ambience: "a portrait of a glint-eyed man: some Hindu guru or the other. The shelves in the room were lined with books: "the Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharat, the Ramayan, and books about Osho, Krishnamurti, Vivekananda, Ram Das, Sai Baba, Aurobindo, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi" (155). She preaches spirituality,

love and kindness of Hindu religion among her American followers. However, such preaching does not impress Prema who does not:

feel this love. She felt, instead, the wounds of her childhood. She recalled her mother's bedroom shrine, crowded with the gods: Krishna, Parvati, Shiva, Laksmi, the avatar of Bishnu in a fossil. Had her mother felt the divine love that this Mata was whispering about? Had it made her feel safe? Even as her love for Prema's father made her lose her life? (55)

She considers such religious practices as a means of shaping people's perception to perpetuate gender discrimination. Her opposition to Hindu religious scriptures and practices manifests her keen desire of changing discourse of unequal gender relationship.

Besides discourse and perception, Prema also involves in transforming her material condition in her resistance process. She searches way out to improve her condition against political and social turmoil of her native country. When she is working in an INGO, the rise of Maoist insurgency (1995-2006 AD) jeopardizes sense of security and chances of economic prosperity in Nepali society. The human right violation and extra judicial arrest and killing from both the rebel and the state sides renders terrors and fears among Nepali people. In this backdrop, the computer shop owner Kanchha disappears after the security body's arrest. Similarly, the compulsory recruitments from Maoist side force many of the youths like Prema's sister to join them. Prema realizes that "the war would escalate from here on. The Maoists would not give up, and neither would the king and the army; and people who had nothing to do with either side would get drawn in" (51). Instead of silently tolerating her deplorable condition, she musters courage to embark the journey into the foreign land: the US by winning the green card lottery with in Diversity Visa Plan of the American government. This journey which seems quite adventurous for a girl of Nepali cultural background, leads her to change her socio-economic condition that enable to resist traditional gender role.

The conversation between Prema and her father when she informs about her American journey reveals her gradually evolving sense of independence and her father's anxiety about her future without any supportive hands. Prema says:

'Ba, I'm going to America.'

'When will you come back, Chhori?' he asked his voice soft and gravelly on the line.

'I'm going to live there, Ba.'

'And when will you come back?' he asked, uncomprehending.

'No', she said. 'I'm going to live there. Forever.' There was a pause. 'Do you know anyone there?' He asked.

'A friend is making arrangements.' (58)

Father's inquiry "Do you know anyone there?" shows not only parental love but also patriarchal mentality of regarding female as weak who always need someone most possibly male member of family to look after her. However, Prema's response "A friend is making arrangement" reflects her resistance to the conventional female role by searching help from outside her family of her own.

Unlike other female immigrants who accompany with their husband and family members, Prema decides to go to foreign land solely. Conventionally, females of the third world countries like Nepal migrate to the foreign land because of marriage or to see their children. Prema's migration is unconventional as she chooses to leave her homeland on her own taking decision independently. She does not need either marriage or children to assist her journey to the host land. In this sense, she discards the conventional role that a patriarchal society assigns to female. Her migration enacts as her resistance process

that leads her emotional and material transformation.

Her journey to the US facilitates her resistance to the cultural and social restrictions to the female. In an attempt to liberate herself from the legacy of her past, she gradually adopts the Western dress up and social manner in the diaspora. For this, she starts buying cloths that suits on beach at LA. She “bought a red bikini of \$24.99 and flip-flops for \$4.47. She changed into it a public toilet-restroom- examining, in the mirrors by the washstands, the way the bikini curved over her breasts and back” (79). Then, she goes to LA beach. Similarly, she attempts to get adjusted in her employer Esther's home.

At Ester's home: “All the closets were jammed with appliances: vacuum cleaners, humidifiers, dust busters, air purifiers, irons, ironing boards” (14). Moreover, Natalie, the granddaughter of Ester prepares her a long list of “DOs, DONTs and NEVER” (25). She adjusts such situation and tries to adopt American culture. This acculturation process of adopting dress up and manner of her host country also reflects her quest adopting the Western cultural values of freedom and independence.

Leading an independent life in the diaspora, she resists the traditional marriage and motherhood which, in her opinion, function as social institution to perpetuate female subjugation in patriarchal social construct. The way her mother suffers due to these social practices leads her to reach into such a conclusion. Thapa elaborates:

Although well into the age of an arranged marriage, Prema had no desire to find a husband. A dread seeped through her at the thought of childbirth. She had seen it consume her mother. In the years following her death, Prema had spent hours in the bamboo grove, cursing her mother's frailty, vowing to be flinty, strong. And she had become so. (42)

Prema no longer likes to play the role submissive female like her mother. Rather she determines to resist to the social expectations to female for which she takes education as a means to fight against patriarchy. She “had rejected her mother's faith in the gods. She had gone to college, whereas her mother had not passed out of high school. She worked, she was modern. In no way had she replicated her mother's life” (42). Prema gradually develops her sense of resistance to the patriarchal social construct while observing the plight of her mother who embodies typical traditional female.

In her revolting process against patriarchy, she persistently evades stability and commitment in her relationship which, in her opinion, restricts her quest of freedom. In Nepal, she consciously avoids to acknowledge her relationship with Rajan with whom she often makes love. Even years later, she “could not be sure whether what she and Rajan had had was what American would call a relationship” (54-55). Coming in the US, she completely breaks up her connection with Rajan. In the same way, she fails to show her committed relationship with Luis in the US. He wants to sort out confusion between them and requests her; “let's work things out together, okey?” (202). But she realizes; “the relationship was a trap. It confused her. Love confused her. Or Luis confused her” (202). So, she goes out from his house and life. After that, she goes on date with various partners: Gary Song, Haroun Rahman, Bobby Sorensen, Jose Marco and Simon Conway but she “avoided getting into relationships. She went on dates; and these dates sometimes led to sex” (234). About her relationship, she confesses that “someone as jagged and unmade as she: how could she fit into the format of a relationship, American or Nepali?” (235). Both in Nepal and America, she finds the relationship and marriage restrictive to the female quest for freedom. She wants to go beyond such social and traditional practices to transform female's status.

Conclusion

In recapitulation, the untimely death of her mother during the childbirth in an attempt of giving birth of a son implants a sense of revolt against patriarchal social construct in young Prema's mind. She considers Hindu religious and cultural notion of relegating daughter at marginal position is responsible to the untimely death of her mother. Then, she opposes the Hindu religious scriptures particularly the *Manusmriti* which shapes people perception about gender role. She persistently attempts to transform the perception of female as weak, submissive and dependent and the discourse that shape such perception. Evidently, she takes important decision of her life: going to the US independently and informs her father in the final stage. she independently manages her journey and settlement to the US. Her quest for freedom also leads her to embrace the Western lifestyle and dress up in the diaspora. Moreover, she does not want to restrict her independence by involving in committed relationship and marriage. In all this process of her resistance of traditional gender role, she involves in earning money at home and aboard in order to change her socio-economic condition. Briefly, she transforms herself as an independent female by changing her perception and material reality and human relationship.

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