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Nationalism without Nation in Manjushree Thapa's Seasons of Flight

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Abstract

Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* unveils as to how Nepalese immigrants in the United States of America submerged in nationalistic sensibilities through different mediums. In the novel, Thapa critiques the false consciousness of nationalism rigorously and monolithically defined by the state on the basis of geographical boundaries. In the era of globalization, the sense of nationalism can transcend the territorial boundaries of the nation, thus bringing a vibrant idea of nationalism without nation to the forefront. In the novel, by implicitly showing the ongoing movement between two or more social spaces or locations facilitated by increased global transportation and telecommunication technologies, Thapa is trying to express the idea that more and more migrants have developed strong transnational ties to more than one home country thereby blurring the congruence of social space and geographical space.

Keywords: Nation, Nationalism, Globalization, Immigrants, Mobility

Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* dramatizes national imagination beyond the geo-cultural boundary of a nation. At the heart of this novel is the projection of how the nationalistic feelings those Nepalese immigrants in the United States of America repeatedly experience. By showing Nepalese immigrants in the United States of America submerged in nationalistic sensibilities through different mediums, Thapa critiques the false consciousness of nationalism rigorously and monolithically defined by the state on the basis of geographical boundary. In the era of globalization, the sense of nationalism can transcend the territorial boundaries of the nation, thus bringing a vibrant transnationalism to the fore.

The novel unravels the multiple facets of experience of Prema, the protagonist of the novel, "being

Nepali" in the US. Prema, a Nepali girl from a rural hill-town happens to win a green card in a US government lottery and immigrates to Los Angeles who is overwhelmed by her environment at every moment of her life. In the multicultural American social set up, Prema strives and aspires to locate herself. As she remains aloof from her Nepali language, cuisine, homeland and Hindu religion, Prema attempts to safeguard her national identity in her new location by defining to everyone who asks her where she is from. She is frequently asked if she was from India, but she says that she is from Nepal, the country of Mt. Everest. A very simple question, "Where are you from?" (*Seasons of Flight* 1) and the series of conversation that follow compels her to think about her national identity.

Migrating people are dislocated from their indigenous homelands and are relocated elsewhere. The effect has been the production of permanently shifting localities. Prema constantly has to define her national identity amidst different people in America. More commonly the Americans would say 'Naples' as if it was a part of Rome. Prema heard a lady saying: "My husband and I went to Rome for our honeymoon, but we never made it to Naples" (1). Prema, all the time, negotiates her identity by trying to locate herself to her hill-village, to the Shiva-Parvati temple, the ammonite given by her mother, Nepali Language and food on the one hand and she wants to be real American through her physical and mental attachment with her Latino-American boyfriend Luis on the other.

Prema breaks her ties with her family back at home and the Nepali community in Los Angeles in an attempt to assimilate her identity into a "vague pluralism of American multiculturalism" (A.Thapa 8). Identities are increasingly liminal and hybrid as capital, commodities, information, technologies, images and ideologies circulate across the borders due to "ethnoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, ideoscapes and mediascapes" (Appadurai 31). It produces the growth of new local identities. She, as a subject engages to channel existential fears and feelings

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of loss and despair. It is at such times of homelessness and alienation, the protagonist in the novel tries to reinterpret and redefine her national and cultural identity in a foreign land.

In the era of new global cultural economy supersaturated by overlapping, disjunctive and complexity, nationalism can be visible beyond the national boarder in different forms which Thapa is very much conscious of in the novel by showing her female protagonist meandering here and there in the state of homelessness and alienation by trying to reinterpret her national identity. Though, Prema tries to assimilate her identity into a vague pluralism of American multiculturalism, she can never find any link to either genealogical or geographical origin, therefore, she often takes recourse to nostalgia. By submerging into nostalgia she strives and aspires to locate herself in the supreme boundary of her own nation and hometown. One way for the Nepalese immigrants' generation like Prema to deal with identity crisis is to reestablish connections with its past through nostalgia.

There are various ways of connecting with the past, but the most important is remembering. Remembering is the material objects and photographs on display or people we encounter that are tangible links to the past. Prema's encounter with Mata Sylvia in Los Angeles, a preacher of Hindu religion, reciting lines from Bhagavad Gita, The Mahabharat, The Ramayan, 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. Prema is confused when she listens to Mata Sylvia reciting lines from Hindu religious book.

An encounter with her mother in "Nepali home" through memory is a space where she could find a trace of identity and completeness though too fragile to call her own. The construction and reconstruction of her indigenous identity through historical symbols and religion supply her alternative identity to everyday insecurity. Nationalism has overwhelming impression in one's life; it is in a sense a spiritual force that constantly and continuously stirs one's feelings and emotions in alien territories. As Ernest Renan puts:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth

are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together. (19)

Unlike the territorial boundary, nation for Renan is a spiritual principle which bears immense potentiality to bind one with the glorious memories of living together with the members of same community to get rid of the ignominious present due to the situation of homelessness. In the novel, Prema by remembering her home town, cuisine, and Hindu religion she locates herself in her own national territory despite being in American metropolis.

Prema, a traveling woman, is always in search of her fixed cultural and national identity. Stuart Hall in Cultural Identity and Diaspora sates, " 'cultural identity' can be thought in terms of one, shared cultural, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (234). The oneness underlying all the other is the truth, the essence of Neaplitan which Prema is trying to discover, excavate and bring into light. Though she is physically located in Los Angeles, she is occupied by the memory of genealogical and geographical links to her village. The narrative in the novel goes:

Some days her village felt centuries away, and the other days it was too close; she could not get far enough away from it. Her family home was sturdy, two-storied, of stone. It had felt sheltering, and safe, when she used to run through the bamboo groove past the Shiva-Parvati temple that bordered the terraced rice fields, to school. (2)

At the center of this nostalgia is a concern for meaning; and national and cultural identity newly problematized by the conditions of contemporary life. Who am I? What am I doing here? These questions continually make her ponder. 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.

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In the cosmopolitan city like Los Angeles, Prema frequently dwindle between absence and presence. Prema, in the company of Luis, feels the presence as she finds herself assimilated to American multiculturalism but the moment when she idealizes her lost realm of culture, geography, innocence, purity and happiness; she is overwhelmed by absence. Her search for presence continues throughout the novel.

Prema 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 Luis, her boy friend in Los Angeles, says: "Hey Prema, know what I had for dinner last night?" "Dull-bath. A kind of Nepalese, I mean, Nepali food" (61), she is very happy and says she cooks it often but "just – the ingredients. I don't know where to buy them" (61). When Luis says:

'There was also – tur-curry?'

'Tarkaari. Vegetables.'

'It was great. Really great.'

'That is nice, ' she said. 'Yeah.' (61)

The moment she discusses about the Nepali cuisine, she feels like eating them and being very near to her 'nation' and 'home'. Due to the pervasive migration caused by globalization, the artificially drawn national boundary has become so fragile that for the immigrant Nepalese people in Los Angeles to enjoy typical Nepali food and meet the localities produced by Nepalese diaspora is not a far cry.

For the diasporic people like Prema, construction of the national and cultural identities is possible by relocating and regrouping them in a new points and scenario that can be more potential to evoke the sense of nationalism than the kind of nationalism evoked within the limited territory of national boundary drawn by the state. As Jana Evans Brazil and Anita Mannur put:

Diasporic movement marks not a postmodern turn from history, but a nomadic turn in which the very parameters of specific historical movements are embedded and –as diaspora itself suggests- are scattered and regrouped into new points of being. (3)

When Prema visits Neeru-didi and sushil-bhinaju, she is very happy to see them offering Nepali food. She exclaimed with joy when she finds two plates of hot dumplings before them: "Momos! Can you believe? Momos in America" (171). We see how rhetoric of nostalgia – a rhetoric saturated with gastronomic images of food, feasting, and festive dining – is used as a plea for Nepalese to resist against the hullabaloo of multicultural social set up. Manjushree Thapa, in the novel, uses food and eating as a marker of nationalism so as to reflect a means of security and solace for the immigrants. Prema, in the company of Nepali people in Los Angeles by eating, drinking and merrymaking regroups herself in the new localities produced by Nepali immigrants in America. In so doing, she can feel as if she is in her own country of origin.

When home as a category of security is lost as a result of immigration and rapid socioeconomic changes, then new avenues or a new home – a new identity – for sublime security are sought. Longing for home is a strategy for coping with the sense of homelessness. Yearning home as a strategy means making and shaping a political space for oneself in order to surpass the life of contradictions and anxieties of homelessness in the milieu of pluralistic transnational social clamor of America. This may simply involve becoming a member of an exile community, by finding common places of assembly such as gurdwaras, mosques, or meditating place as of Mata Sylvia. 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. She claps when she hears: "Jaya Krishna, jaya Krishna, Radhe swami jaya jaya. Jaya Krishna, jaya Krishna, Radhe swami jaya jaya. Jaya Krishna, jaya Krishna, Radhe swami jaya jaya" (157). With her involuntary clapping she feels secure in this desolate land.

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. They hug each other in American style. Neeru says: "There's only one Nepali restaurant in Los Angeles, it's called Kathmandu Kitchen" (170). So she in her restaurant, The Shangri-La, offers Nepali food: dal-bhat, momos. In the transnational community, Prema

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involves joining a local identity-based group that seems to provide her answers and security. Patricia Clavin puts transnational community thus:

It is better to think a transnational community not as an enmeshed or bound network, but rather as a honeycomb, a structure which sustains and gives shapes to the identities of nation- states, institutions, and particular social and geographical spaces. It contains hollowed-out spaces where institutions, individuals and ideas wither away to be replaced by new organization, groups and innovations. (439)

Prema, in the transnational environment keeps visiting Nepali people and their localities in Los Angeles and revitalizes her Nepali identity in an innovative way. In a honeycomb of Nepali community in America she is replaced by Nepalipans even if she is far from Nepal. In this globalized era people keep migrating from one country to another in such a way that the so-called national boundary turns out to be very much brittle. And still nationalistic feeling remains intact in different forms which Anderson calls imagined community. Anderson, critiquing the monolithically defined nationalism by the state goes far away and defines it, "nationalism is an imagined community[...] it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6).

Prema comes across with so many Nepali people in America as she identifies them as the image of her communion; and her global interactions with other Nepali people dispel her in a complex, overlapping and disjunctive social milieu. The flash of her nationalistic feeling comes to the fore when Prema teaches Luis to speak Nepali. She thinks by teaching Nepali, she could establish a linguistic link and possess him wholeheartedly. She says:

'Ka, Khha, ga, gha, nga.'

'Come again?'

'The first five letters of the alphabets. Ka, Khha, ga, gha, nga.'

'Um.' He said, 'Ka, ka, ka, ka, ka.'

She laughed. (135)

She laughs at his inability to pronounce Nepali alphabets. She corrects all the Nepali words when they are mispronounced. 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)." She does not like Luis pronouncing her name 'Pray-muh.' Prema seeks security taking recourse to language as she is afraid of losing her national identity.

Those who engage in resistance politics tend to feel a genuine sense of loss as expressed in the recreation of a real or imagined past, or through the distant and often romanticized memory of a home. In the process of identity mobilization, these are all likely to become political weapons. 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 in Nepal. Her effort to reconnect with previous relations revives the ties that had become numb while updating and renewing her national and cultural identity. As she feels increasingly uncertain about her daily life, the search for national and cultural identity takes its course.

Manjushree Thapa thus, in her novel, *Seasons of Flight*, superbly and craftily depicts national imagination beyond the geo-cultural boundary of a nation. The novelist very brilliantly projects how the nationalistic feelings come into being amidst Nepalese immigrants in the United States of America. By showing Nepalese immigrants in the United States of America submerged in nationalistic sensibilities through different mediums, Thapa pungently darts her criticism against the false consciousness of nationalism rigorously defined by the state on the basis of geographical boundaries. In the novel, by implicitly showing the ongoing movement between two or more social spaces or locations facilitated by increased global transportation and telecommunication technologies, more and more migrants have developed strong transnational ties to more than one home country thereby blurring the congruence of social space and geographical space.

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