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Exploration of Cultural Identity of Immigrants in Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight*

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Abstract

Prema , protagonist of Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* oscillates between her host and home cultural spaces problematizing her cultural identity. In her multiple revelations in her migrations from her home in the rural cultural space to the metropolis of Kathmandu, and from the capital city in Nepal to the US in the West, results in a series of self reinventions. In this process, she suffers problematic cultural identity vacillating between her home and host cultural spaces. She cannot be totally free from the cultural and historical genealogies of her home country that is deeply ingrained in her psychic. At the same time, she adopts the cultural practices of the host country. In fact, she adopts the new one without forsaking the old. So, her cultural identity involves in the process of negotiation which renders fluidity and inconsistency. The problematic of her cultural identity is analyzed through the critical frames of Stuart Hall's cultural identity and Homi Bhabha's third space in this article.

Keywords: being, becoming, diaspora, cultural identity, third Space

Introduction

Living in diaspora with multiple cultural allegiances problematizes the immigrant identity. In the diaspora, immigrants oscillate between their home and host country rendering confusion and dilemma in their cultural identity. They cannot be free from the legacies of their cultural and historical genealogies of their home country. Such legacies shape their interaction with the mainstream culture of the host country. Moreover, immigrants perpetuate certain cultural residuals of their home country in the diaspora. However, they cannot resist the influences of the mainstream cultural practices of the host country. The immigrants become part of acculturation process in their subconscious psychic space. Consequently, they oscillate between two cultures without forsaking the one. They occupy two cultural spaces at once while negotiating in the diaspora. In the same way, in Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight*, Prema vacillates between her past and present and cultural practices of home and host countries in course of her journey from her remote village of Nepal to capital city Kathmandu, and from Nepal to the US. Prema problematizes her cultural identity while exploring diverse cultural spaces. Such a problematic cultural identity can critically be examined in the theoretical frame of Stuart Hall's cultural identity and Homi Bhabha's third space.

Cultural Identity and Immigrants

Cultural identity refers to association with a particular group on the basis of various cultural categories, such as ethnicity and nationality, race and gender, and class and religion. At the same time, it is a matter of inclusion and exclusion in the literary imagination on the basis of distinctive features and behavioral patterns. In this sense, it is constructed

in a process of sharing collective ancestry and knowledge through food and dress, rite and ritual, and language and costume. Obviously, “cultural identities are points of identification, the unstable point of identification which are made within the discourse of history and culture” (Hall 226). In fact, cultural identities are maintained in the ‘unstable point of identification’ involving in dynamic processes of negotiation within a dialogue of the past and present. It “becomes a moveable feast: formed and transformed continuously” (598) in the globalized world with an increasing number of interconnections between and among cultures. In this sense, the current article applies Hall’s notion of ‘being’ to identify ‘points of identification’ of immigrants with their respective imaginary cultural categories. At the same time, I examine the continuity and reformulation of the ‘points of identification’ of immigrants’ cultural identities by using Hall’s concept of ‘becoming’ in the theoretical frame of cultural studies.

‘Being’ encompasses the historical and cultural experiences that provide a reference to define the subjectivity of an individual in Hall’s postulation of cultural identity. In this sense, ‘being’ emphasizes the similarities, the oneness and the underlying essence among a group of people. There is an authentic cultural identity, a true self, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Hall explains that “our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (223). The oneness is understood as fixed reference and meaning which reflects the general shared cultural codes and common historical experiences. This definition emphasizes that the authentic

cultural identity is hidden underneath the more artificially imposed selves. However, his concept of becoming stresses on the similarities and the differences among an imagined cultural group.

Hall's second definition of cultural identity emphasizes the similarities and the differences among individuals of an imagined cultural group. In this sense, cultural identity encompasses both common historical experience and cultural practices, and the ongoing process of interaction within a given time and place. Encompassing both the historical legacies and present negotiation of cultural identity, Hall explicates:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. (225)

Hall explains that cultural identity is contingent and not ahistorical or immutable. It is an ongoing process of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. Depending on the pre-given and pre-determined aspects, it undergoes a constant process of negotiation resulting in inconsistencies and multiplicities.

Cultural identity destabilizes the notion of stability and consistency involving in a constant process of formation and reformation in relation to the ways they are represented in cultural systems. In fact, cultural identity changes in and through power relations that are spatial and contextual. It equally belongs to both the past and the future. Hall postulates that an individual assumes different identities at different times as it is not unified around a coherent self. There

are contradictory identities within individuals which keep on shifting. The fully unified, secure, and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, an individual is confronted with a fleeting multiplicity of possible identities which are in constant processes of negotiation (598). Obviously, identities are not externally fixed by some essentialized past, but formed by a continuous play of history, culture and power. The power relation between and among cultures affect how these identities are positioned in the dominant regimes of representation.

Like an individual's identity, culture itself is in the process of formation and reformation. In a rhetorical exigency of postcoloniality, Bhabha examines the dynamics of cultural interactions in an evolutionary process of conflict and progression. Such a process of amalgam renders cultural transformation that shapes an individual's identity. An intrinsic course in the lives of immigrants, cultural transformation operates in blending the cultural practices of the home and host spaces. The engagement in a transcultural conversation between the home and host cultural space slowly opens up avenues for transformation. Cultural transformation characterizes the in-between as a third element, and a fusion of two cultural entities that create a third identity after the original two have been altered. In this context, the cultural transformation which is related to Bhabha's notion of third space intrinsically involves in the formation of subjectivities of an immigrant.

Bhabha deconstructs the bipolar notion of human subjectivity in his conceptualization of the third space. Third space makes meaning an ambivalent process, not a fixed reference. It is caused by the openness of signs and symbols, and culture that can be appropriated, translated, rehisto-

ricised, and read as a new one. It is a space of hybridity and in-between cultural differences. Cultural identity emerges in this fluid, contradictory and ambivalent third space. Besides, the third space is “the cutting edge of translation and negotiation” which allows the articulation of different subject positions (Bhabha 56). Consequently, this third space is part of both other spaces and yet new. It detaches temporarily from already-existing parameters and allows examining them with new perspectives. Precisely, Immigrants negotiate their cultural identities in the interactive third space that allows new form of identities to evolve.

In Bhabha’s appraisal, the immigrants’ cultural identity evolves in the interactive third space of diaspora. Bhabha argues that cultural identity should not be classified on the basis of “organic”, pre-existing traits attributed to ethnic groups. Cultural identity is not limited to ethnic heritage, rather subject to continuous transformation in ongoing interactions. In the cultural encounter, cultural identities are negotiated and contested undermining stability, consistency and originality (37). In fact, the third space “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (37). Eleanor Byrne explicates that Bhabha’s third space “is not simply one thing or the other, nor both at the same time, but a kind of negotiation between both positions” (42). Similarly, Karin Ikas and Gerhard Wagner believe that this negotiation is a disseminatory site and leads to a sort of displacement of both groups from their origins. As a result, the cultural identities of immigrants are reviewed encompassing multiplicities while interacting in the third space of diaspora. In such a theoretical

frame, this article explores Thapa's lead character Prema in her fluid and problematic cultural identity to unfold the postcolonial third space in operation in the diaspora. Prema, embodiment of Nepal's mountainous girls, problematizes her cultural identity in her negotiation between her ancestry of Nepal and the host culture of the US in Thapa's *Seasons of Flight*.

Prema's Cultural Identity

Prema's cultural identity evolves in the diasporic third space in Thapa's *Seasons of Flight*. Residing in the diaspora, she vacillates between the culture of her origin; Nepal and culture of host country; the US. Basically, she manifests her fascination to the Western dress, manner, festivals and relationship in her becoming process. At the same time, she cannot be free from the influence of her being; the cultural and historical genealogies of her home country Nepal. Consequently, she nostalgically recalls the people, places, and her experience of her homeland. In a sense, she lives in bicultural space of diaspora adopting new cultural practices without forsaking the old one. As a result, her cultural identity involves in the process of negotiation which produces a new form of fluid and dynamic cultural identity which undergoes in a constant interaction and negotiation juxtaposing ambivalence to her home and host countries and cultures.

Fascination to the West

The process of Prema's becoming involves in adopting the Western cultural practices and lifestyle with her continued fascination to the US. Her fascination to the West initiates in her pre-migration days particularly caused by the socio-political situation of her home in Nepal. Nepal Communist Party of Maoist led insurgency (1995-2006 AD) and its

repercussion in social life of Nepal instigate many Nepalese youths to leave their home country in search of better future prospects. Moreover, the material progress and independent lifestyle also fascinate Prema to the US in her initial year in the diaspora. Gradually, she adopts the Western fashion and manner, and learns to use electronic appliances of domestic sphere of her host country. In addition, she selects American boyfriend and socializes with his relatives and friends in order to westernize her. In this process, she even begins to celebrate the Western festivals like Christmas. Precisely, Prema's process of acculturation of the Western lifestyle introspects Hall's theoretical frame of becoming.

The existing socio-political situation of home country Nepal enacts as a push factor for Prema's and her friends' motivation for the migration to the US. They are appalled by the rise of Maoist insurgency (1995-2006 AD) and its consequences in Nepalese society especially in rural area. The human right violation and extra judicial arrest and killing from both the rebel and State sides jeopardize sense of security to Nepalese youths. In this backdrop, the computer shop owner Kanchha in *Seasons of Flight* 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. At the same time, middlemen and corrupt elements reap undue personal advantages out of political turmoil. Consequently;

Prema was convinced 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. Should she not leave this shabby, third world country having received a chance – having won the lottery? Was this not an

opportunity to keep progressing? America was rich, it was – proper, solid. (Thapa 51)

Such appalling condition of native country leads numerous youths like Prema to leave their native country for security and better future prospects.

Prema intends to move to the West for future prospects in her dismay in Nepal. Eventually, Prema shares with her friends their plan to migrate to India, or further, to Australia, Europe, Canada, and America during the final year of her study of forestry in Kathmandu. Thapa’s narrator reveals those youths’ common reasons to leave their native country: “there is so little in Nepal, everyone just wanted to leave. And also, for those who felt they were from a shabby third – world country, it was hard not to believe that life in a richer land was more –proper, solid” (6-7). In response to her friends’ motivation to move to foreign country, Prema wonders whether she should go abroad. However, going abroad is not an easy task for every youths of the third world. In the narrative design of *Seasons of Flight*, Prema wins a green card lottery to migrate to the US in a Diversified Visa (DV) plan. Immediately she starts her preparation to move to the US: learning English language and driving car. In the meantime, Prema, in her efforts to know of the American life, reads books and magazines. Then, she collects information about the US from *Los Angeles Times* online at cyber –café. In that situation, learning English language becomes her top priority since “language is one of the barriers in efforts for adapting a foreign culture” (Joshi and Bhatta 74). In fact, winning the lottery helps materialize her dream of going to the US.

In *Seasons of Flight*, the material progress and comfortable lifestyle in the US attract Prema in her initial

period of immigrant life. She is fascinated by the broad roads, lights, traffic system, telephone facilities, TV programs, and TV advertisements as soon as she reaches to the US. Her fascination does not remain there. She involves in becoming progress in Hall's term by enthusiastically embracing the Western lifestyle and manner. So, she even leaves the residence of Nepalese couple and goes to live with Meg and Susan so that she could enjoy freedom. While living with them, she begins dating with Andy and has casual sex with him. Apparently, she gradually adopts American dress up and manner in her westernizing process.

In her becoming process, her cultural identity gets transformed by adopting the dress up, social manner and skills of using appliances of her host country the US. For this, she starts buying cloths that suits on beach at LA. "At one of the stalls, 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" (Thapa 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. She "continuously seeks to fit herself into American society" (Guragai 13) by embracing lifestyle and manner of her American boy friend Luis.

Prema's choice of an American boyfriend as a part of her western lifestyle can be reframed in a process of becoming in Hall's postulation. Her relationship with her boyfriend Luis

reveals her inner transformation. “She asked him out in the end. Her swim in the ocean had changed her somehow. For the first time in America she was happy. She felt it was possible to reinvent herself. Every morning now, leaving the hot, stifled inland for the coast, she kept wanting to go farther” (85). Her desire to go further in American space lead her to be in live in relationship with her American boyfriend Luis. She even goes to meet his parents, relatives and ex- wife. In this socialization process, she attempts to develop her familiarity with the western people and their cultural practices.

In fact, she enthusiastically joins her husband in celebrating the western festivals, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas. She joins her husband and his ex wife Camilla to celebrate Christmas.

Christopher and Camilla laid out the dinner: a smattering of Thai vegetables with broken tofu, paella, black daal, roasted beets and peppers, yams, asparagus, sprouts and raw vegetables. Before eating, Christopher made everyone form a circle and pray. ‘Merry Christmas,’ he said. ‘Thank you for coming to our humble home. Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas.’(153)

In such celebration “Prema was unable to keep up as the conversation grew animated, topic tossed back and forth so blithely (153). However, she joins them to be a part of their Western culture. Such interactions with the Western people in her cultural practices gradually transform her ‘being’. Precisely, Thapa’s Prema embodies dynamic girls inclined to the western lifestyle.

Briefly, Prema’s fascination of the western lifestyle and cultural practices are her becoming process. She seeks opportunities to visit to the US in her disenchantments with

the political conditions of contemporary Nepali society. Initially, the material progress especially the infrastructures, big city, and amenities of the US fascinate her. Then, her acculturation process can be seen in her acquisition of American manners, dress up and rituals. Moreover, she selects American boyfriend and socializes with his friends and relatives, and celebrates American festivals with him. In a sense, she fully immerse into the Western cultural space. However, at the later part of the novel, Prema finds something missing in her life. “Prema’s desire for connections to the “Americans” - their affluent life, and their freedom - creates a void in her sense of belonging and her diasporic identity” (Guragain 11). She begins to explore her being, Nepalese origin when she realizes rootlessness in embracing the western culture.

Attachment to Homeland

Prema’s being remains quite influential in her cultural negotiation in the diaspora. Thapa’s lead character, in her failure to forget her cultural origin even after following the western cultural practices, makes efforts incessantly to reconnect to her cultural root. She recalls her childhood days with her mother in the remote village of Nepal. She also shows her fondness to Nepalese cousins which emotionally connects her with her origin. Moreover, she resumes her communication with her friends whom she has left behind in Nepal. She also visits the Nepalese ghetto and other Nepalese immigrants in the US. Besides, she resists socializing with other Americans on her husband’s request. Apparently, she cannot be free from her cultural and historical genealogies even after embracing the Western lifestyle of her host country.

The void, which Prema experiences after embracing the Western culture, renders nostalgia for her Nepalese origin in her. She intends to recapture her childhood days in retrospection which she has experienced in the hinterland of Nepal. Apparently, Prema meets Mata Sylvia, a preacher of Hindu religion. She recites lines from Hindu scriptures, like the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayan*, and the books, such as Osho and Vivekananda in Los Angeles. This takes Prema back to Nepal. She recalls her mother's bedroom shrine:

Prema's mother used to worship the coil at the centre as a shaligram, an avatar of Vishnu. She H every morning sprinkled rice grains on it and made offerings of flowers and vermillion powder. Praying for what? The ammonite sat at the centre of the shrine, with pictures of the deities—Krishna, Pravati, Shiva, Lakshmi—placed lovingly around it. (Thapa 3)

For Prema, an ammonite is a constant support and memory of her childhood spent with her parents in Nepal. So she carries this memento with her wherever she goes. This keepsake of her mother is a constant reminder of her past. She also attempts to explore her being through cultural semiotic food in diaspora. Such a memento connects her to her original cultural space, parents, and past.

Prema's reminiscences of Nepalese cuisines are quite evident in America. Such reminiscences bring feelings of warmth, pleasure and security to her. At one point, Luis exposes Prema's revelation: "Hey Prema, know what I had for dinner last night? "Dull-bath". A kind of Nepalese, I mean, Nepali food", she is very happy and says she cooks it often but "just – the ingredients. I don't know where to buy them" (61). The moment she discusses about the Nepali cuisine,

she feels like eating them and being very near to her home. In the same way, Prema feels immensely pleased when Neeru offers her Nepali food. Similarly, she exclaimed with joy when she finds two plates of hot dumplings before them; “Momos! Can you believe? Momos in America” (171). These Nepalese food items reconnect her with her origin reviving the time she has spent in her homeland.

Prema undergoes physical and emotional journey to reconnect herself with her Nepalese origin. She recollects the time she spent with her family, including parents and siblings at the Hill Bazaar in Nepal.

For the first time in years,
Prema really thought back to Nepal.
The war.
She thought of her father. Was he safe?
Her sister. Was Bijaya still a Maoist?
Was she even alive?
She thought of Kanchha, back in the hill bazaar.
Had he ever been found? (168)

Moreover, she resumes her communication with her Nepalese friends Trailokaya and Rajan. In same way, she revisits her Nepalese friends whom she has left behind in order to embrace the western culture in LA. Such reminiscences and attempt of reaching out with Nepalese friends reveals her quest of exploring her being; Nepalese origin. The influence of her being remains quite active which resists her to completely assimilate into Western culture.

Nostalgia emerges as a form of cultural resistance for assimilating into American culture in Prema’s case. Being nostalgic for her homeland, she resists to Luis’s request of visiting to Steve and Camilla places. In Luis insistence to take

her into his world and friend, she replies, “I do not have a world! I left the world I had, and do not belong in the one I am now-your world. I do not have any place to take you, Luis. I do not have a place in the world” (186). Then, she leaves Luis’s home and takes her belonging and goes to Long Beach with Neeru and Sushil. She even quarrels with Luis on phone. Nostalgia, thus, takes her back to reinvent her lost cultural identity.

Briefly, Prema explore her being nostalgically recalling her friends, relatives and childhood experience of her homeland Nepal. In fact, she questions her sense of belonging in the Western cultural space while following the Western cultural practices with her American boyfriend. So, she rejects to socialize with other American people on his request. Instead, she visits Nepalese ghetto, meets fellow Nepalese immigrants and resumes her contact with her relatives and friends of Nepal. Similarly, she explores her being by consuming Nepalese cuisines. In fact, she straddles between two cultural spaces: acquired Nepalese and adopted Western while negotiating her cultural identity in diaspora.

Cultural Negotiation

While negotiating in the diaspora, Prema fails to exclusively indentify with either home or host cultural space. At times, she embraces the Western cultural practices with her American boyfriend Luis. In such occasion, she breaks off her all connections with people of her homeland. However, she remains ambivalent with the Western culture and begins to explore her cultural root by breaking her relationship with her American boyfriend. She resumes her connection with Nepalese friends and relatives of the diaspora and home. She even visits her homeland. Apparently, she vacillates between her being; Nepalese origin and becoming

process of adopting the Western cultural practices in diaspora while negotiating her cultural identity. As Bhabha asserts both her being and becoming jointly contribute in the formation of her cultural identity.

In negotiation of her home and host cultural space, Prema fails to solely identify with either of them. In order to assimilate with the western culture, she makes efforts to be an American by adapting American lifestyle with her American boyfriend Luis but “she feels alien, something is missing” (Bhatta 9). In the same way, after reaching America, she disconnects her contact with her father and never thinks about her sister. Moreover, she breaks her contact with Sushil and Neeru in Little Nepal in LA. However, she feels alien and there is something missing in her. Then, Prema makes efforts to relocate herself through her memories of village, temple, ammonite, language and food. That too is not successful. Then she thinks, “What is there to being human? The body which desires, persistent and unreasonable; thoughts and temperaments. Instincts. A capacity to harm. And history, which lingers as a spectre”(Thapa 3). In fact, she simultaneously travels in both cultural spaces in the process of her negotiation of cultural identity in the diaspora.

Her ambivalence to her home and host culture renders in her confusion and dilemma. This is quite evident in her relation with her American boyfriend. When she finds a lover in the US, she responds with passion and fondness. She accepts living with him. However, she cannot enjoy the relationship with him for long. Similarly, her sexual encounters with other men are also very casual and short-lived. “She knows that her path is an ever-directionless “zigzag trail”” (161) but she has an “intensifying hope to reach her destination – an illusionary America, which keeps

distancing itself from Prema in every attempt she makes to embrace it”(Guragain 12). In a sense, her cultural identity gradually evolves out of her negotiation in the culturally hybrid space of diaspora.

Prema’s cultural identity emerges negotiating between her being; Nepalese origin and becoming; the Western culture. On the one hand, she has the past Nepalese cultural background and on the other hand, she is in the Western cultural milieu. She is in fact in cultural hybrid space. This hybridity subverts the notion of identity as fixed and stable. As a result, she does not like permanent home, committed relationship and stable career. So “she leaves Luis all of a sudden. She revisits the places where she has lived earlier, not to renew her old contacts but to draw a map of how far she has moved forward in her search for the concept of America and reinvented herself”(Lahiri 82). She even goes back to Nepal to “make sense of the cartography of her journey” (83). She does not like to settle in Nepal. Rather she is haunted by Luis’s apparition in airports, which seems to “suggest that Luis is perhaps the nearest image of true America available to her at that point of time” (83). In fact, she represents an immigrant woman who has made her life ever-changing and fluid.

Precisely, Prema internalizes her hybrid cultural identity while negotiating between her being and becoming process. Both her being and becoming jointly contribute in the formation of her cultural identity. Her attempt of finding her place in either cultural space renders confusion and dilemma in her. So, she cannot satisfy herself while embracing the Western cultural practices with her boyfriend. She, then, begins to explore her connection with her Nepalese origin. This cultural space also remains inadequate in defining her

cultural identity. Apparently, her cultural identity encompasses hybridity and plurality while evolving in shared cultural space of her home and host country.

Conclusion

In recapitulation, the bipolar notion; home and host culture, the past and present and the West and the East fails to conceptualize Prema fluid and unstable cultural identity. Her cultural identity evolves in the shared cultural space of the diaspora. At times, it belongs to both cultural spaces; home and host. Such simultaneous belonging to two cultural spaces which is in Bhabha terms a 'third space of enunciation'. It is something living in the "beyond" which encompasses all the past, the present and the future. In other words, Prema has some legacy of her past; Nepalese culture and life. As an active force, this legacy keeps on haunting her present. Her stay in American is influenced by her nostalgia and reminiscences of her past. At the same time, her 'being' is in constant negotiation with her present. This negotiation is her 'becoming'. This becoming is an unfinished project. It is in constant process of making. As a result, her cultural identity is in process of making. It is also part of future. She is in constant processes of reinventing herself. This reinvention deconstructs the binary of home and host cultural spaces involving in the constant process of transformation.

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