

Home, Belonging and Diaspora: Manjushree Thapa's *Season's of Flight* and Nepali Identity Conflated with Indianness

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Abstract

Manjushree Thapa's novel, *Seasons of Flight* (2010) not only problematizes Nepali identity in the South Asian diaspora, but also positions it in an interstitial space moving between homeward connection and current metropolitan lifestyle. The identity of Thapa's protagonist, Prema, is constantly conflated with Indianness as she encounters different social activities and conversations. Thapa, by presenting a woman-centered story, challenges the assumptions of the American dream of freedom, affluence and multiculturalism, and interjects the undercurrents of the aspirations of immigrants. Prema, a woman from Nepal living in Los Angeles, seeks to find freedom in a modern metropolis amidst the ambivalences between reinventing herself in a new world, and her connections to her homeland, her language and her culture. However, Prema's identity is constantly interrogated and undermined in American society. Furthermore, 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.

Keywords: Diaspora, Interstitial Space, Third space, In-betweenness, Identity, Hybridity, Nepali

I. Diasporas

The early use of diaspora was mainly confined to the study of Jewish experience-their exile from their homeland and their dispersion throughout many places. This study was based on Jewish oppression and moral degradation caused by their dispersion from their ancestral homeland. So the earlier discussion of diaspora remained oriented to the conceptual homeland, be it the case with the Jewish dispersion from their homeland or any other people, which Rogers Brubaker refers to as victim diaspora, mobilized diaspora, or trading diaspora (2). But in the 1980s diaspora was extended to a more 'metaphoric designation' to describe different categories of people – "expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities" (Safran 83). Diaspora began to expand, breaking its narrow hold on Jewish experience alone.

The recent discussion on diaspora has some strong connections with Jewish experience. The members of diaspora retained a collective memory of their homeland, idealized it and continued to relate their homelands in various ways. So this continued to influence diaspora in its use of homeland as one of the essential

characteristics of diaspora formation. This focuses on the dispersion of people from their homeland as well as the global dispersion of people whether it is voluntary or involuntary. This dispersion and dislocation create the emergence of cultural identity abroad and physical or psychological longing for home with a sense of loss and inability to return.

Peter Brooker in *A Glossary of Cultural Theory* says that the symbolism associated with the sense of belongingness can produce strong nostalgic tendencies (74). Brubaker suggests that the sense of nostalgia and homeland is pertinent in diasporas' continued involvement in homeland politics and political movements. However, the use of diaspora in reference to the migrant populations does not encompass its full range because of the creation of transethnic and transborder linguistic categories such as Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone communities as diasporas, as well as the religious communities such as the Hindu, Buddhist, Shikh, Muslim or Catholic diasporas. There are other forms of diaspora such as Dixie diaspora, the Yankee diaspora, the white diaspora, the liberal diaspora, the conservative diaspora, and so on. This inclusiveness of almost every part of the population goes beyond what was once described as Jewish, Armenian or Greek diasporas and extends to larger group designations such as immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, oversees community or ethnic community. The extension of meaning of diaspora is what Brubaker calls a 'let-a-thousand-diaspora-bloom' approach has been so stretched that diaspora has almost

lost its significance and its power to make distinctions. “If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so.” The term loses its discriminating power – its ability to point out phenomena, to make distinctions. The universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora” (Brubaker 3). In this light diaspora has been overused and thus loses its meaning.

The definition of diaspora has been more complicated recently by the issues of global mobilization, technological advancement and multiple dislocations. However, all the definitions of diaspora, whether it is dispersion of people from their homeland, or voluntary migration, or attachment to multiple nations, signify that diaspora involves concepts of identity and belonging. And the belongingness becomes a vehicle for people to share their connections, kinship, shared values, cultural heritage, their similarities and differences – the important elements in identity formation. Khachig Tölölyan, the editor of *Diaspora: a journal of transnational studies*, argues that all diasporic communities are also ethnic communities but not all ethnic communities are diasporic (649). Thus diaspora seeks to encompass and address the wider range of areas, and issues, “Identities have become deterritorialized and constructed and deconstructed in a flexible and situational way; accordingly, concepts of diaspora had to be radically reordered in response to this complexity” (Cohen 2). However, Brubaker thinks that even though there is a wide range of dispersion of diaspora in semantic and conceptual space, there are mainly three core elements – dispersion, orientation to

a 'homeland' and boundary maintenance- which constitute the major definitions of diaspora.

Dispersion is interpreted as forced or traumatic dispersion in multiple locations. The dispersion of Jews or Africans or Armenians "conceived their scattering as arising from a cataclysmic event that had traumatized the group as a whole, thereby creating the central historical experience of victimhood at the hands of a cruel oppressor" (Cohen 1). They are dispersed from an original 'centre' and retain collective memory about their original homeland. Their ancestral home is idealized and they believe that they are not fully accepted in their host societies, and thus dislocated and separated. Brubaker argues that even though the dispersion is taken as a criterion of diaspora is it not universally accepted as "some substitute division for dispersion, rather defining diasporas as 'ethnic communities divided by state frontiers'" (5). The second criterion Brubaker suggests is homeland orientation, which is associated with the concept of dispersion. When people are dispersed into different locations they begin to link their identity to their homeland. This imagined or real home carries an, 'authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty'. Furthermore this orientation to the idealized home encompasses the idea of collective efforts and commitments to the maintenance and restoration of the homeland and the eventual return to it, "a culture and a collective identity that preserves the homeland's language, or religious, social and cultural practice either intact or as time passes as mixed, bicultural forms" (Tölölyan 649).

Recent discussions on diaspora seek to deconstruct the foundational idea of homeland and ethnic/religious communities, as the concept of home “became increasingly vague, even miasmic, while all ethnicities, they suggested, had to be dissolved into their component parts and surrounding context – divided by gender, class and race and other segments and enveloped by a world of intersectionality, multiculturalism and fluidity” (Cohen 9). Thus the homeland connection becomes a problematic issue when one delves into particular cases where one community aspires to go back to the homeland but is never able to do so. Furthermore, the aspirations to homeland fade away with the passage of generations. As one starts unpacking the particular cases, the concept becomes more complex and moves away from the idea of reducing diaspora to homeland orientation alone. The argument that diasporas have continuous cultural connections to a single source and their desires to return has been challenged by the argument that ‘many aspects of Jewish experience itself do not qualify’ for this category. James Clifford argues that the definition of homeland orientation should not be taken as a universal feature of diaspora because all the diasporas do not fall under this definition. He says that South Asian diaspora is not so much oriented to roots in a specific place and a desire for return as an ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations falls outside the strict definition (306). Home arguably could mean the space where one feels warmth, comfort and which echoes the homeland, but there would not necessarily be a direct connection to a physical

home.

The third criterion Brubaker offers is boundary maintenance, which involves the preservation of distinctive identity in relation to host society. He argues that, “boundaries can be maintained by deliberate resistance to assimilation through self-enforced endogamy or other forms of self-segregation or as an unintended consequence of social exclusion” (6). This idea of boundary maintenance speaks for the distinctive identity of diaspora communities, which is held together by the idea of active solidarity across the state boundaries. Moreover, this is the process where group solidarity is maintained and mobilized. On the other hand there is a strong counter current of hybridity, fluidity, creolization and syncretism, which problematize this distinctive identity of a diaspora community. In this notion diaspora identity goes beyond homogeneity and shared cultural values and emphasizes the necessity of heterogeneity and diversity. The interaction between diaspora and nation creates a hybrid identity, which keeps diaspora in a unique situation that constantly challenges the stability in meaning and identity. Some diasporas persist—and their members do not go “home”—because there is no homeland to which to return; because, although a homeland may exist, it is not a welcoming place with which they can identify politically, ideologically, or socially; or because it would be too inconvenient and disruptive, if not traumatic, to leave the diaspora (Safron 91). Moreover, Safron’s idea speaks for the people in diaspora communities who find it hard to return to their homelands because of the

differences in political, ideological and social values, which, over the time, have undergone significant changes.

Though scholars provide different underlying features for diaspora, contemporary diaspora is complex because its formation is manifold. Classical diasporas are more or less directly associated with exile, trauma and collective identity, as in the cases of Jews, or Armenian or African diasporas, whereas contemporary diasporas are characterized by dislocation and fragmentation. Globalization is having the most impact on the contemporary phase of diaspora formation because of the profound advancement in technology. Especially information technology has massively increased cross-border communications and exchanges, thereby reducing the emotional distance between homeland and host societies. This also laid the basis for the expansion of economic transactions among states on a global scale. So these changes in modern society are slowly erasing the physical borders, Brubaker argues that there is a tension between boundary maintenance and boundary erosion (6).

Moreover the contemporary diasporas are the result of mass migrations, decolonization and emancipatory social movements. The diversity of diaspora stretches from dispersion to “a process of collective identification and form of identity marked by ever-changing differences that chart the shifting boundaries of certain communities hierarchically embedded as enclaves with porous boundaries within other, larger communities” (Tölölyan 649-50). Thus the scope of diaspora increases to unlimited area and

communities where national borders have been decreasing due to global transportation, communication and economy.

It is problematic to define and keep diaspora in a substantial and concrete universal baggage. Diaspora moves beyond the specific location and culture of traditional definition to encompass different facets of diverse cultural and regional connotations. It is a question whether we can speak of an unprecedented porosity of borders or is it severely limited, whether diaspora identity is eroded by the sense assimilation. These questions become pertinent in defining diaspora, and significantly seek reconfiguration of a diasporic identity in a rapidly changing global sphere. In any case hybridity is emerging. This hybrid identity corresponds to the idea of diaspora formation in more diverse contexts, and seeks to define diaspora in terms of multidimensional facets in contemporary society.

II. South Asian Diaspora

When it comes to the issues of South Asian Diaspora studies and scholarship, most of the scholars seem to gloss over the very rich and diverse cultural heritages and languages of all the South Asian countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and merely focus mainly on four countries – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, colonized under the British Empire, and ignore the rest of the South Asian countries.

Judith M. Brown in her work *Global South Asians: Introducing the Modern Diaspora* provides this outline:

In 1947 the British withdrew from their imperial rule of two hundred years, leaving a partitioned subcontinent and two independent nation states, India and Pakistan, followed swiftly by an independent Ceylon, later known as Sri Lanka. Pakistan was composed of widely separated western and eastern wings, and the eastern wing split away to form Bangladesh in 1971. To accommodate these changes the whole area is most conveniently referred to as South Asia, and its peoples as South Asians. (1-2)

The omission of the three countries creates a big void in diaspora studies and undermines the Nepali, Bhutanese and Maldivian's presence in the South Asian diaspora communities. Similarly, Knut A. Jacobsen, P. Pratap Kumar disregards the roles of Nepali Hindus and Buddhists in the formation of diaspora. They ignore the need to incorporate these aspects to "explore and analyze the social, religious and cultural reality of people in the diaspora belonging to Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism and originating from four of the South Asian nation states (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka)"(ix). To place the South Asian diaspora in one baggage is essentially problematic, because it undermines the heterogeneous cultures and languages of South Asian nations and their histories and national identities.

John R. Hinnells discusses a wide range of religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, in "South Asian Religions in Migration: A

Comparative Study of the British, Canadian and the U.S. Experiences" in relation to mainly Indian heritage and culture (3). Knut A Jacobsen and P. Pratap Kumarin South Asians in the *Diaspora: Histories and Religious Traditions* claim to fully address the overwhelming problems encountered by South Asians in the West, and vow to explore different facets in the making of South Asian identity (ix). However, the discussion remains limited to a vague categorization of South Asians. John R. Hinnells suggests viewing "the South Asian young in the West as the 'skilled cultural navigators,' people who move comfortably between the culture of home and wider society, just as bilingual people switch easily between languages," (6) but he does not define who these South Asian young people are. Furthermore, this work does not mention the population of Nepal where the majority of the people are the followers of Hinduism and, consequently, a large portion of the Nepali diaspora in the West consists of the Hindus. The absence of a Nepali diaspora in research and scholarship questions the validity of South Asian diaspora studies, and demands more inclusive research and investigation of the field. It is problematic to use 'South Asian' for just some part of the region while dismissing an entire area of cultural diversity and uniqueness. However, this research does not attempt to explore the entire field of South Asian diaspora but simply interrogates the current scholarship and its dismissal and homogenization of South Asian Diaspora studies. In questioning the validity of current South Asian diaspora studies, this research opens up the padlock that

limits and dismisses the very field that it attempts to explore.

III. *Season of Flight*

Manjushree Thapa's novel *Season's of Flight* (2010) revolves around its protagonist, Prema, a woman who immigrated to America from a misty hill region of Nepal, and lives in Los Angeles. Thapa, through Prema's interstitiality, interrogates the issues of Nepali identity, belonging, sense of home connection, and Nepaliness conflated with Indianness in a modern metropolitan city. Prema's quest for fulfillment and 'desire to reinvent herself' get shattered in America where she lands after winning a Green Card Lottery from her birth place in Nepal. Moreover, her Nepaliness and her identity get constantly conflated with Indianness, as she encounters challenging situations. Prema is not able to say she is a Nepali but, instead, she claims to be an Indian throughout her journey to find completeness in her life. Prema's dilemma and identity crisis consistently questions the efficacy and meaning of Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of 'hybridity' and 'in between space' as possible opportunities for negotiations and ideal spaces for enforcing agency individuals in an otherwise, indifferent, foreign world (38). 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. Jane Fernandez in her article "Framing the Diaspora: Politics of Identity and Belonging"

argues:

The several definitions of diaspora: whether involving the dispersion of a classical group/people, or forced dislocation from the homeland, or voluntary migration, or indicating an attachment to multiple nations/histories, has one thing in common. In all these varying categories, the underlying premise that girds the issues of diaspora involves concepts of identity and belonging. (29)

In America, Prema feels sexually liberated and is able to enjoy her body, having got an opportunity to have casual sex with many American men, which, otherwise, would be unthinkable in the Nepali cultural setting. On the other hand, she is constantly questioned and pushed to the margins of American society because of her inability to comprehend fully English expressions, her skin colour and her cultural differences. Prema, therefore, remains unfulfilled and torn between her past life in Nepal and her newly discovered 'confused' life in America. Furthermore, memory of home and her past constantly revisit her and keep problematizing her present, thereby shattering her dream to assimilate into American culture and to form an acceptable identity within the diaspora community.

Prema's story, in *Seasons of Flight*, starts in a small village near Kathmandu, a poor Maoist, war stricken village in the hills of Nepal. Prema's story moves quickly through the loss of her mother in childhood and the commonplace hardships of poverty, to a college degree in forestry, resulting in a job with an NGO in

the hill bazaar, and a romance with a fellow worker in the NGO. Prema's younger sister runs off with the Maoist rebels when they come calling despite her objections, and her resigned, undemanding father only wants to see his daughter go forward in life.

One day, unenthusiastically, Prema signs up for the US Green Card Lottery. When she wins, she is more driven by a faint hope of opportunity for liberation from her present situation, and decides to leave her birthplace for good. The narrator says:

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)

When she finds a lover in the US, an attractive Guatemalan, she responds with an ardour native to her own passionate nature and her culture. Prema accepts living with her boyfriend, Luis, but cannot enjoy the relationship with him for long. Her sexual encounters with other men are also very casual and short-lived. She knows that her path is an ever-directionless “zigzag trail” (Thapa 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.

Prema has to undergo a cultural transformation in order to embrace American culture, and assert herself and identity. The

diaspora experience 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” (Hall 235). Thapa links the Nepali language, Hinduism and nationhood through her protagonist, Prema. Prema continuously seeks to fit herself into American society, which consistently denies her Nepaliness and her desire to retain her separate identity amidst the multicultural people of the Los Angeles metropolis. Language and religion become the strongest markers of nationality and ethnic identity in the foreign land. Hindu rituals and practices largely shape Prema’s cultural values. She seeks to find solace and comfort in an ammonite, a Hindu religious emblem, which she has acquired from her mother’s shrine. Prema’s mother “used to worship the coil at the centre as a shaligram, an avatar of Vishnu. She ... 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, Pravati, Shiva, Laksmi—placed lovingly around it” (Thapa 3), and Prema carries this memento with her wherever she goes and contemplates it, perhaps seeking some spiritual power to heal her wounds and relieve her anxiety. When Luis takes Prema to the Society for Universal Transcendence, a place for meditation and spiritual awakening where Mata Sylvia gives speeches on ‘divine love,’ Prema encounters again the Hindu deities that her mother used to keep in her shrine. But she is not convinced that the belief in

divine love could actually make any changes in a person's life. Prema questions herself: "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?" (Thapa 155). Prema is more furious about the superstition and hypocrisy of the Hindus and the treatment of women as inferiors – slaves:

"The Manusmriti. Do you know its message?"

"Is that part of the Bag-bad Geeta?"

"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)

Prema is more frustrated when she realizes that her mother died young, even if she believed in those deities and worshiped them every morning. However, religion becomes an important tool to reconnect Prema again and again to her family, to her past and to her cultural roots despite her unwillingness to adhere to the superstitious practices of the Hindus and their discrimination against women.

Prema is caught between two cultural clashes. On the one hand she has the past, her Nepali cultural background, on the other, she has to adapt to the new American culture. Identity is not something universal and a timeless subjectivity as the Western humanistic ideals propose but "Rather than being a timeless essence, what it is to be a person is said to be plastic and changeable,

being specific to particular social and cultural conjunctures. In particular, subjectivity and identity mark the composition of persons in language and culture” (Barker and Galasinski 28). Prema is in a hybrid position. Hybridity challenges the very idea of center and margin and challenges the established hierarchies. Thus, hybridity subverts the notion of identity as fixed and stable. It assumes it to be changing as we encounter different cultures. No language or culture can be presented in pure form but always leading to the zones of shifting boundaries and hybridization. The instability of meaning in language leads us to think of culture, identities and identifications as always a place of borders and hybridity rather than stable entities. In reality, cultural differences create a big gap between Prema and her boy friend, Luis. When Prema realizes that Luis does not understand her past and her feelings, she decides to leave him at the very point of her realization that she does not belong to anything, anywhere:

It was Prema’s turn to harden. “You said you want to go to my world,” she said. “And I said you can come with me –”
Luis snapped. “How the fuck is Macarthur Park your world?”
Then he took another deep breath. “Look, I am trying, here, Prema. I’m really trying. This isn’t easy for me either. It’s like you’re –You are shutting me out. This *isn’t* about your being foreign. It’s about –Fuck! I don’t know what it’s about!”
Her anger flared up. “You do not need to take me anywhere! I will go by myself!”
“Um, Prema? You want to tell me what’s going on?”
“Nothing!” she shouted. “I want to go there! You do not! So why don’t I go where I want, and you go where you want?” (Thapa 185)

Prema and Luis cannot get along any longer as a result of cultural differences. Homi K. Bhabha argues that when two cultures come together, they undergo changes and find the places of interactions and negotiations. After the interactions of two cultures there emerges a third one a 'third space' or an 'in-between space' or 'hybrid' identity where the hierarchies are broken down and people can assert their identities and sense of agency. Bhabha further contends:

The importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity [to me] is the 'third space', which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Rutherford, "Third Space: Interview with Homi K. Bhabha 211)

But Prema and Luis cannot find any suitable space where they could negotiate and break down the past together with the perceived hierarchies and live in an ideal 'third space' and have a respectable hybrid identity. Luis burst into anger when he thinks that Prema is not sharing everything with him, "we *are* really different. We're completely different, in fact. I'm also finding it hard going some days" (Thapa 185). Prema and Luis do not see any possibility of negotiation and cultural assimilation but aspire to go in different directions. The past cannot be removed from one's life but it constantly haunts and affects the way one acts.

Thus identity does not become an already accomplished fact and already constructed idea but “as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (222). In this sense identity is not a stable being as envisioned by the Western humanism but it is fluid and constantly changing. Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity ‘is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’ and also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather- since history has intervened - ‘what we have become’” (225). Prema desperately wants to get freedom and affluence in the American society but is not able to transform herself and come out of her past, her home and her cultural prejudice. She struggles for a complete life, “Even she a Nepali from the high, misty hills. Nobody lost in America. A nothing. An ephemera. Even she needed to lead a complete life” (Thapa 194). But Prema feels that she is constantly defeated and looked down upon in this new land.

Prema desires to stay with a Nepali family where she could have some sense of belonging and chance to learn about the new ways of life in America. She seeks her community and language in order to retain her selfhood and belonging because members of the expatriate community, according to Robin Cohen, “believe they are not – and perhaps can never be – fully accepted in their host societies and so remain partly separate” (6). Staying with a Nepali family and working together with many Nepalis, Premadoes not see any possibility of realising her dream for freedom:

That was Prema's life in Nepal. There was nothing really wrong with it. Though the country was at war, she was safe. Had it been in her power, she would have changed a few things, of course. She might have lived in a town rather than in a bazaar, a town large enough to have a cinema, and shops, and restaurants of the kind she and her friends used to go to in college. She might have had more like-minded friends for company. She might have been more-free. (Thapa 10)

Prema cherishes a dream to 'reach America' but repeatedly fails and is pushed down by the differences she has with the modern metropolitan culture. Even though she encounters many hurdles in the confusions of getting a truer America and embracing its values, Prema gets a sense of comfort and narrows down her estrangement from her birthplace and family when she meets with the Nepali community in Little Nepal in Los Angeles.

Nepali identity is conflated with the Indian identity in South Asian diaspora communities especially in the Western societies where Nepalis are taken as Indians. Prema chooses to say her birth place is India, "Inside when Prema asked if there was a vacancy, the proprietor, an elderly Korean woman, looked at her sharply. 'Where are you from?' she demanded. Prema hesitated then said, 'I am from India.'" (Thapa104). This demonstrates the absence of a Nepali cultural presence and its complete difference from Indian culture. David N. Gellner in his article "Ethnicity and Nationalism in the World's only Hindu Kingdom" contends that, "Nepal's political culture and recent history have been very different from its officially secular neighbor, the Republic of

India” (3). Nepal, which was never under any imperial power and legacy, is kept under the same umbrella of colonized nations and appropriated as a part of the Indian subcontinent, and thus seen as a very product of Western discourse as the “other” in Edward Said’s argument in *Orientalism* (7). It is not seen as necessarily different from an Indian heritage and culture. Right at the beginning of the novel Premais asked where she is from. She tries explaining: “‘It is near India’, or ‘Where Mt Everest is’, or ‘You’ve heard of the Sherpas?’, so that they might say, ‘Geez, that’s real far’, or ‘I could have sworn you were Mexican/ Italian/Spanish’, or ‘You speak good English’” (1). Thapa introduces a story about displacement, self-definition and Nepali women’s search for fulfillment. Though the author presents some stronger national markers of Nepal, such as the Mt. Everest or the Sherpas, to identify Nepaliness, she deliberately chooses to situate Nepali identity undermined by and conflated with Indianness, initiating a debate on the questions of Nepali identity in the diaspora.

The importance of the Nepali language in Nepali identity formation in the diaspora is consistently undermined and looked down upon by even the South Asian diaspora scholars. The Nepali language becomes one of the strongest tools for the Nepali diaspora community to come closer and share their anxieties and separation. The sense of displacement, whether it is forced or chosen, on the one hand, creates the lack of connection to the cultural roots and, on the other hand, brings the community together to find an imagined home so as to relieve the anxiety of being the other in a

foreign land. Michael Hutt in “Being a Nepali without Nepal” argues that, “The Nepali language is the basis of Nepali ethnic identity outside Nepal: it is the primary basis for self-identification with the diaspora community” (116). Prema seeks to go to a Nepali community, called a Little Nepal, after she realizes that she can no longer live with her boyfriend, Luis, on the grounds of their cultural misunderstanding and conflict. Prema is happy and relieved after she rejoins the Nepali family and starts visiting their community to share and talk with them in her own language. Jonathan Rutherford in his article “A Place Called Home: Identity and the Cultural Politics of Difference” argues that, “In the hierarchical language of the West, what is alien represents otherness, the site of difference and the repository of our fears and anxieties” (10). Prema’s otherness stems from her difference in language and culture. Her frustration and sense of defeat mount every time she talks with ‘Americans’ because she does not understand English expressions and is challenged constantly:

“Maybe let us walk?” she said.

“Walk?”

“The shop is just there.” She gestured. “We can take the footpath.”

“It would still take, like, twenty minutes. And footpaths?”

“They are called sidewalks. Anyway there’s no-”, He said, “I don’t think there’s any sidewalks there.”

This left Prema utterly defeated. (Thapa 160)

Conversely, Prema enjoys the Nepali language and feels a sense

of connection and belonging when she finds someone speaking her language, “He replied in Nepali. “They don’t live here any more. But Neeru-didi will be at the restaurant if you want to meet her.” Curious, he added, “Where are you coming from, Didi?” For the first time in years, Prema spoke in Nepali, the language of her sorrows” (Thapa 167). Language becomes a medium to connect oneself to roots and gives a sense of pride to the diaspora community. Rutherford argues that, “Only when we achieve a sense of personal integrity can we represent ourselves and be recognized - this is home, this is belonging” (“A Place Called Home: Identity and the Cultural Politics of Difference” 24) but Prema’s longing for belonging and home in an alien environment is not fulfilled. She is not able to achieve her personal integrity and belonging. The narrator, in *Seasons of Flight*, says, “Her compatriots spoke in the Nepali language among themselves; and their talk invariably turned homeward: the Maoist rebels, the king and the army, the faltering movement for peace. They talk of Americans- ‘foreigners’ – with some perplexity” (Thapa 92). One of the most efficient instruments of successful social integration is represented by the case of a shared language that enables immigrants to communicate effectively with their hosts. Prema’s difficulty in the perfection of the English language and her cultural background obstruct her aspirations for assimilation in the American society. Pratikhya Bohra-Mishra argues that, [T]he minority immigrant surrenders his (or her) symbols and values and acculturates to the language and values of the core

group or the Anglo-American majority” (1530), but Prema is unable to surrender her values to the mainstream culture and abandon her past. Instead, she seeks respect and recognition of cultural differences. Bohra-Mishra further discusses the acceptance of cultural pluralism, which is “based on the idea that society benefitted when distinct ethnic groups retained their cultural distinction” (1531), and Prema pines for the acceptance of her identity in the mainstream American culture on the basis of differences, maintaining the distinct characteristics of separate culture and language, even though it has been modified or hybridized by the contact with other cultures.

IV. Conclusion

This paper claims that diaspora has proliferated far more extensively than the earlier Jewish experiences, and any attempt to categorize it in a modern, globalized world becomes challenging and problematic. However, diasporas most commonly incorporate homeward connections, a sense of belonging, and are strongly connected to identity. Identity, in a new culture and society, becomes fluid and always a matter of constant interaction and negotiation – a hybrid. In addition, the current discussions of South Asian diasporas, nevertheless, limit its area within formerly colonized countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) and largely ignore others (Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives) in the South Asian region. Therefore, the current debate on South Asian

diasporas is problematic and questionable. Moreover, Manjushree Thapa, in her novel *Seasons of Flight*, highlights dismissed areas and issues of Nepali diaspora formation and Nepali identity conflated with Indianness and exposes the ambivalences of a young Nepali woman, living in a modern metropolis, with a strong sense of past, homeward connection and belonging in a new land, with a constant search to reinvent herself.

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