

## Between Tradition and Modernity: Reading Manjushree Thapa's Novel, Seasons of Flight

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### Abstract:

Traditional norms and conventions are fundamentally established to serve for human being irrespective of any caste, creed, sex and religion to live harmoniously in a society. Marriage is believed to be a solemn occasion in one's life to provide a social and cultural recognition. Women, being part and parcel of the society are required to be equally treated as male members of the society. If this is reversed and women are subjugated or marginalized or social and traditional norms are imposed on them in the pretext of preserving tradition and patriarchy, then the possibility of destroying the so-called tradition is very positive and pertinent. In this article, an endeavor has been made how the protagonist of the novel, **Seasons of Flight**, Prema seems to transcend all traditional norms of patriarchy to achieve her ambition. She breaks all social barriers and moves to the USA to live as she dreamt. Several people come to her life but none can satisfy what she really and heartily needed. Prema's search for identity and her conflicting nature against patriarchal hegemony finds a space in the discourse of the novel. The protagonist tries to assimilate with the American culture, her inveterate efforts to retain her identity etc. leads to open a new paradigm in literary discourse.

**Key words:** identity, hegemony, patriarchy, tradition, Diaspora, transnationalism

### Introduction:

Usually the word 'Tradition' has a close association with the term 'modernity.' What is understood about tradition is the representation of old values of society, culture or religion. Tradition is a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance connected with the origins in the past. Traditions are usually presumed to be an ancient, unchangeable entity having utmost importance. Even T.S. Eliot in his famous essay Tradition and

Individual Talent seems to have criticized English writings for not using tradition in proper way.

Modernity and modernism both attempt to express diverse aspects of the modern era. Modernity in literature is a historical period and social condition that focuses the circumstances of modern societies, culture and people. In literature, modernism often seeks to break with tradition and establish new forms and expressions. It aims to transcend the past and create something entirely new. It is an art or a literary discourse that attempts to represent 'reality' based on some major issues such as – individualism, searching for new forms, violence and alienation, race relations, class struggle and a sense of the loss on ontological ground etc. This reflects the loss of faith in moral and ethical values. Modernity is characterized by a shift in paradigm where the locus of judgement moves from the traditional to individual leading to locate the meaning based on individual experience. It highlights a sense of changing world influenced by new developments. Writers of this trend tend to pursue more experimental and usually more individualistic forms of writing.

#### **A brief introduction of the novelist and her works:**

The author, Manjushree Thapa was born in Kathmandu in 1968. She studied in St. Mary's School (Kathmandu), the National Cathedral School (Washington DC) and the Rhode Island School of Design, where she majored in photography. She has an MFA from the University of Washington, which she attended on a Fulbright scholarship. She writes travelogue, non-fiction and novels. Presently Thapa lives in Kathmandu, where she helps to manage a centre for public interest and advocacy, and writes a regular column for the Nepali literature, which includes translation of many original works. Thapa is one of the South Asia's best-known women novelists from the third world country, Nepal.

Thapa's first and foremost write-up appears in the form of a travelogue entitled Mustang Bhot in Fragments published in Nepal in 1992. Her debut novel named The Tutor of History was published in 2000. Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy is known as her best book which was published in 2005. It was chosen for the Letter Ulysses Award in 2006. Tilled Earth was published in 2007 is a collection of short stories. A biography of a Nepali Environmentalist named A Boy from Siklis: The Life and Times of Chandra Gurung. Thapa's another novel entitled Seasons of Flight appeared in 2010. The Lives We have Lost: Essays and Opinions on Nepal is one of her collections in the genre of non-fiction. In 2016 her novel All of Us in Our Own Lives was published. Apart from these, Thapa is credited to have published non-fiction, The Country is Yours, a collection of contemporary Nepali literature.

#### **A bird's eye view of the novel under study:**

The novel, **Seasons of Flights** was published in 2010, deals with the story of a young woman named Prema who immigrates to Los Angeles after winning a green

card US government lottery. She tries to invent a new life in the unfamiliar metropolis. It is a woman's personal story as an immigrant narrative. She endeavours to establish herself in America, tries to get back her identity at the cost of her committed work as a caretaker to an old and infirm woman called Esther. Prema meets Luis in America who is from Mexico, aged thirty-three years. She visits various places with Luis and both of them become very close friends. Prema has had physical relation with Luis. But nothing satisfies her need. She feels she doesn't belong to the host land where she once dreamt to be a part of it. She leaves Luis and consequently makes relations with several others. Prema visits Christopher's guru, Mata Sylvia to regain her sense of belonging. She visits wetland and enjoy the beauty of nature with plants and animals. She meets a woman called Fiona, an environmentalist, who is found searching El Segundo Blues, butterflies on the federal endangered list. Prema decides not to marry and have kids. At last Prema realizes that her tormented soul will find solace in reconciliation. So, she begins her homeward journey.

### **Critical analysis of the novel from different perspectives:**

The present paper attempts to explore the fundamentals of tradition and modernity through the novel, **Seasons of Flight**, by Manjushree Thapa. Thapa presents Nepal and its varieties of socio-economic, cultural and political aspects through her kaleidoscopic writings. Thapa has written a number of books, namely in the genre of fiction, travelogue, short stories and some translations. She is one of the best known South Asian women novelists. Thapa's debut novel **The Tutor of History** (2001) showcases two poles of Nepali society, one is a diverse cultural practice such as man-made patriarchal social systems and the female representation being victim of such systems, on the other hand, the political upheaval led by people of Nepal seeking democracy. The novel itself is a new voice of the people reflecting their choice to welcome democracy and to bid adieu to the long-ruled system of monarchism. Indra Bahadur Rai, an Indian Nepali novelist and literary critic from Darjeeling, India, remarked "the schism between Nepal traditional and Nepal emergent and its anguished resolution is the essence of Manjushree Thapa's novel. Her main characters are typical yet very convincingly individualized. There is a kernel of indestructible humanity in them, which relentlessly urges to reach fulfillment." (The Tutor of History) Nepal, unlike other South Asian countries was never colonized by the British. It was rather ruled by internal feudal dynasties. Manjushree Thapa has mirrored the protagonist, Prema in the novel **Seasons of Flight** in an unusual course. She is very much indifferent to the traditional women. She departs from Kathmandu to the USA without letting anyone know. Even she hasn't informed to her father and Rajan, her boyfriend as well that maintains her to be an unconventional or bohemian character so far as Nepali social systems are concerned. Prema had had physical relationship with Rajan before moving to the USA. She continues to keep her affairs and relations with different partners in the USA. Unlike other women she does not rely only on one man to spend the rest of her life. Thapa, perhaps has built the character of Prema

against Victorian ideology. Hence, she rejects the idea of monogamy and tames several relations to achieve her interests.

To explicate Prema's unconventional nature that believes a woman to be more obedient and religious by a patriarchal society is rightly maintained by Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). To quote Friedan "The feminist mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is fulfillment of their own femininity." (Pp, 70)

Again, to showcase the dejected landscape of women engulfed by patriarchy and their domestic roles imposed, Friedan further remarked:

The new mystique makes the house-wife mothers, who never had a chance to be anything else...Beneath the sophisticated trappings, it simply makes certain concrete, finite domestic aspects of feminine existence – as it was lived by women whose lives were confined, by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children – into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity. (Pp, 70)

For Prema, the traditional view of women role as housewives and mothers was a hindrance to her individuality, self-exploration and freedom of choice. For her, these hidden agencies work as a religion to weaken her wishes and choice.

The novel reflects Prema's bitterness on traditional and patriarchal concept of gender role. Her mother, on the other hand, was a devoted worshipper of Hindu God and its rituals. She became very happy by performing the traditional role that a female is expected to perform. Prema's introspection to her mother's deep attachment to religion is vividly supplemented by the way she worshipped an ammonite as an incarnation of Vishnu, the Lord of protection in Hindu mythology. Thapa, in this context asserts:

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 vermillion powder. Praying for what? The ammonite sat at the centre of the shrine, with pictures of the deities - Krishna, Parvati, Shiva, Laxmi – placed lovingly around it. (Pp, 13)

Prema criticizes and opposes the concept of what her mother passionately admits. Prema's mother's blind adherence to these religious and traditional beliefs jeopardized her life in early stage. As a child Prema witnessed how her parents wanted to have a son which caused untimely death of her mother. The concept that a son only has to perform rituals associated with death to liberate the soul of the deceased is still

evident in some Nepali orthodox families. In a conversation with Luis, the Latino-American boyfriend of Prema, she recollects: “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 Krishna love?” (Pp,183)

Prema’s reaction is more emphasized when she criticizes Hindu religious scripture, the Manusmriti vehemently. She opines that the Manusmriti places female in lower position in social milieu. It is evident from her conversation with Luis. Prema denounces it: “The book where it says women are – slaves. You must not listen to them, you must beat them if they disobey you. All stupid!” (Pp,183) For her, the traditional view of women’s role as housewives and mothers was a hindrance to her individuality, self-exploration and freedom of choice. For her, these hidden agencies work as a religion to weaken her wishes and choice. Prema, elaborating her point of view declares that this sort of religious book and its doctrines provoke male’s outlook towards female. Moreover, such perception on female intensifies male hegemony. With the exception of Prema’s mother who was an uneducated female, there are many educated people who cannot escape from the canons of religious scriptures. Her landlord, a school teacher induces his young daughter to get married at the age of eighteen. Needless to mention, when his daughter becomes pregnant, the girl’s mother says: “If it is a son, her in-laws won’t pressure her to have more children. It is not that I would not want a granddaughter – girl, boy, what difference to progressives like us? It’s just that for her in-laws.” (Pp, 46)

Prema’s hostility towards Mata Sylvia and her religious congregation is reproduced in an unconventional, anti-religious atmosphere. Prema is critical towards many of the holy books: “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.” (Pp,179) Mata Sylvia’s preaching of spirituality and kindness about Hindu religiosity amongst American followers does neither affect nor inspire Prema. Instead, her childhood wounds enliven faster. In an utter setback she recalled her mother’s bedroom shrine crowded with the Gods: “Krishna, Parvati, Shiva, Lakshmi, 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?” (Pp,180) Hence, the circumstances arouse Prema’s psychological agony; such religious practices do not have any significance in Prema’s life. Rather they seem to encourage gender biases. Her profound hatred towards Hindu religious scriptures and practices echoes her revolutionary zeal to replace the existing pattern of gender discrimination.

### **Globalization and transnationalism:**

Globalization has interconnected the world and changed the dynamics of literature. Literature or literary texts produced today reflect heterogeneous complex ideas consisting of cultural hybridity, diaspora, migration, global issues. It is a reflection of humanity and a way to understand each other. Globalization has brought a paradigm shift in literary text and its theme, style and in story. It has facilitated people from emerging countries to migrate to the developed countries to enjoy economic and other privileges. Likewise, the third world countries have also got an easy access to spread and explore their art, culture and nationalism in other countries. Therefore, globalization has become an opportunity for global society. Manjushree Thapa, a South Asian woman novelist puts forth globalization and its impact on literary discourse. Considering these facts, the character of Prema explored in the novel *Seasons of Flight* is an offshoot of globalization. Literature serves as a mirror to reflect the values, beliefs and social dynamics of a particular nation, time and place. Prema's journey to the US can also be viewed as one of the post-modern phenomena in the context of globalization. The versatile Indian author, Chetan Bhagat has also used effect of globalization, freedom and liberty as major themes of his novels. It has been a universal feature of the people of Third World countries to migrate from one place to another voluntarily or forcibly in search of economic sustenance. The text evidences 'migration' as a common custom of young, educated or uneducated people living in Nepal. Prema's friend had hatched elaborate schemes to migrate to India, or farther to Australia, Europe, Canada, America. At a certain age Prema had also thought to go abroad, but as soon as she got a job, she had settled in hill bazaar.

It seems that Globalization and multiculturalism have become a linkage between global and local cultures. As all small rivers and rivulets at the end converge in the ocean, one must admit the undeniable fact that globalization has affected the lives of everyone dwelling on the planet irrespective of class, gender, ethnicity. Leaving one's own country willingly may also be an ambition of fulfilling personal desires. But the same event in the early days was treated as transportation of labours. Hence, globalization in the present era has proved to be the defining feature of human society.

Though transnationalism is a recent coinage, it deals with the linkages between national and the transnational spaces through different established networks. It usually refers to migrants. Basically, stories of migration, immigration and displacement are central to transnational literature. It reflects the interconnectedness of the world and the movement of people, cultures and ideas across borders. Prema, the protagonist of the novel, at last faces transnational identity crisis in America because she is from a poor country like Nepal which is unknown for most of the



people living there. She is tired of justifying her national identity. Prema fails to choose her proper and final direction. She is confused. She returned home in Nepal where her father waited. Her father was overjoyed to meet her after a long gap. She meets all her friends and relatives in Nepal. But she cannot adjust in Nepal, despite being of Nepali origin. She is in a state of uncertainty.

### **Maoist revolution and political disturbances:**

Political unrest and social turmoil in Nepal during Maoist insurgency (1995-2006) were a frequent phenomenon that ruined economic prosperity and sense of security. Prema seems to defy this situation and puts her effort to trace out a solution for her individual safety and security. Maoist insurgency in the country had very serious consequences. It led to violate the human right, random judicial arrest, killing of innocent people by the rebel as well as by the king's army etc. had made Nepali people scary. In a contour of such terrifying situation Kanchha, a computer shop owner who was instrumental in obtaining Prema's visa to the US and who was beaten cruelly by the army and whom they took away, never to be seen again. This is one of the violent incidents that ignites Prema's motif to escape her country. On the other hand, the country, Nepal itself had to face class inequality. Tremendous socio-cultural disparity survived amongst several racial, caste and regional groups. One important factor i.e., the exclusionary nationalism promoted by the state began to be challenged during 1990s. A new form of nationalism emerged from the society consisting of political parties like the Nepal Sadbhawana Party<sup>1</sup>, Rastriya Janamukti Party<sup>2</sup>, Mongol National Organization etc.

These organizations empowered the traditionally marginalized groups and attracted them into the communist fold. In such state, the Maoists waged a "People's War" against all these atrocities and made commitments to end all forms of inequalities. Therefore, the marginalized sections got influenced and instigated towards the Maoist's ideology. To highlight the impact of the Maoists on the poor villagers Thapa has vividly disclosed through Prema's father, "When the Maoist rebels came by the village, they had had to force others to join them." (Pp, 65) Bijaya, Prema's sister was the exception, who was one of them to join the Maoist group voluntarily. Prema's fear of insecurity in this critical juncture soars high that prompts her to think 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." (Pp, 66)

Prema was not a kind of girl to remain tacit. She had courage to fly across the foreign land. Her fortune bloomed when she won the green card lottery through Diversity Visa Plan of the American Government. Prema's dream, internal disturbances caused by Maoist's rebel in the country and winning of lottery together added an inner spirit in Prema to choose an adventurous goal, though it would have proved fearsome act for a girl from such background. However, this transitional role displayed by Prema against the backdrop of her socio- economic position leads to defy

her traditional gender role. Prema's father asked her, "Do you know any other there?" (Pp, 74), vindicates parental affection as well as patriarchal hegemony of pushing female character into the weak space. Since, a female is conventionally believed to be assisted by a male member in a traditional Nepali family.

What seems to be more important in this context is that Prema responds her father by saying, "A friend is making arrangements" (Pp, 74), reflects her latent protest against conventional concept that puts female in the threshold weaker zone. Thus, Prema stands as a rebellious character fighting for freedom like other female immigrants who choose conventional way to leave her country. Usually, a female migrates to other countries owing to matrimonial relations or for pursuing higher studies.

But Prema's displacement or migration seems something unconventional as she needs no support from her family members to move to the USA. By breaking the conventional norms prescribed by the patriarchal society to the Nepali females, Prema seems to prove herself a modern and individualist.

Projecting Prema's yearning to adopt western culture it is explicitly exposed that she doesn't have the least hesitation to defy her own culture and other social restrictions that she loved and respected being a typical Nepali citizen. She deliberately attempts to buy swim suits for beach at Los Angeles that cost \$24.99 for a red bikini and \$4.47 for flip-flops. "She changed into it at a public toilet – restroom – examining, in the mirrors by the washstands, the way the bikini curved over her breasts and back." (Pp, 79) Thus, Prema continues to change and tries to get adjusted and to adopt American culture. She calibrates all long list of "Dos, DONTs and NEVER" (Pp, 25) prescribed by Natalie, the granddaughter of Esther, her employer. Nevertheless, Prema influenced by western values, seeks more freedom and independence. She rejects what one calls it to be 'chastity' of traditional marriage system and motherhood etc. which according to her opinion is nothing but social system to sustain female suppression in traditional patriarchy. Thapa reiterates how Prema's mother ends her life due to these social practices. "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." (Pp, 55) Even, the subject of marriage had never come up between Prema and Rajan, her ex-boyfriend in Nepal. She was determinant to overcome female submissive nature what her mother couldn't. Thus, "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." (Pp, 55)



As a distinctive protagonist, Thapa endeavours to depict Prema from a modernist's perception who tries to survive and adapt to the changing world. She seems to accept American values gradually and exerts to resist patriarchal social construct. Regardless of her relation with Rajan in Nepal, she continues to change her boyfriend one after another after reaching the USA. She forgets Rajan and quits previous relationship that she had. She fails to preserve her relation with Luis. Luis too falls short to get Prema adjusted to a new country and new culture. He makes an effort to retain his relationship. In order to sort out confusion between them, Luis appeals her: "Let's work things out together, okay?" "He wanted her to stay. The relationship was a trap. It confused her. Or Luis confused her." (Pp, 202) Prema leaves the house and Luis both. Their relationship is snapped. Prema is disillusioned with Luis. Luis requests her: 'So take me to your world!' 'I do not have world!' Prema cried. 'I left the world I had, and I do not belong in the one I am in now-your world. I do not have any place to take you, Luis. I do not have a place in the world.' (Pp, 212) Thapa presents Prema, as one of the most regretful characters who seems to have lost all she had. In this framework the author essentially attempts to showcase the sense of loss and separation as the recurring themes of the present novel, *Seasons of Flight*. Prema is habituated to put up with loss that she had since her childhood. She lost her mother, a sibling to be born and Rajen in her country. Bijaya, her sister is separated by the Maoist rebels. Prema is disheartened several times in her life which perhaps helped her to be stronger and more individualistic.

### **Diasporic Sensibility:**

Thapa's protagonist, Prema in the novel, *Seasons of Flight* echoes the manifestation of diasporic sense and sensibility of what V.S. Naipul has presented in the character of Mohan Biswas in the novel *A House of Mr. Biswas*. Naipul who is regarded as the mouthpiece of displacement and rootlessness explores significant dimensions of the theme of alienation and quest for identity. Likewise, the character of Nazneen in the novel *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali and Jasmin in Bharati Mukharjee's novel *Jasmin* illuminates the theme of exile and alienation as Prema faced in the USA. It seems that there is no end of Prema's search for the identity. She finds neither any suitable partner nor any place where she can have her mental support. When Luis said, "You're shutting me out. When all I want is – take me to your world!" Prema cried, "I don't 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." (Pp, 212) Her desire to be in America, particularly in Los Angeles where she attempts to reinvent herself in a different way, gets shattered. She is repeatedly denied to be as Nepali her country is no longer known to the people whomsoever she meets. Prema's identity is conflated with Indian identity. With utter uneasiness Prema once says: "I am from India," thinking at least Americans had heard of India. She is not capable of identifying herself as Nepali descent. She is persistently marginalized in the American social set up due to her inability to comprehend English communication

and her racial and cultural differences as well. Prema's predicament arising out of identity crisis places her in sadness. She is neither a Nepali in real sense nor an American. She is searching to be reestablished. Prema's sheer desire to be adapted to the 'Americans' richness, their freedom, creates a void in her sense of belonging and her diasporic identity.

Prema's longing for illicit relationships with several partners justifies her existential uncertainty and sense of insecurity as faced by many characters in the contemporary novels. Rejecting all conservative values she once used to comply with, keeps on dating with several persons. She dated Gary Song, a Ph.D. candidate, Haroun Rahman, Bobby Sorensen, Jose Marco, Simon Conway but she felt no sweet, it was only mute emotion with these men. For Prema, "if the purpose of biological sex was to foster love and marriage, so as to aid with child-rearing, she did not need a relationship, because she did not want to be married or to have children," (Thapa-234). To transcend the hegemony of conventional patriarchy, according to Virginia Woolf is to go beyond the male chauvinism. Woolf says- "As a woman I have no country, as a woman, I want no country," (Pp, 109). Woolf scrupulously presents nation as a prison that enslaved women's liberation. By the term 'nation' Woolf means to suggest not only a defined nation but the same that subjugates its subjects. For Woolf, she needs no country to live, rather a woman needs liberation and freedom of living nowhere. But Thapa's protagonist Prema, is a conflicting figure against norms and ideologies. Prema does not surrender before a man, neither does she care for the hegemony of patriarchy. She is a threat to the tradition-bound society and an embodiment of modern woman who looks for innovation, trying to get rid of the typical old rules of patriarchy.

### Conclusion:

Prema, the protagonist built in the modern perspective faces relentless hurdles to justify her existence. Her dream to reinvent herself in the US gets jeopardized due to her vacillating nature. Thapa, very meticulously places Prema nowhere. She awfully desires to get autonomy and prosperity in the US but seems helpless to change herself and come out of her past hangover. Though Prema proves to be an able protagonist to defy her traditional values and patriarchal obligations in the process of assimilating herself in the host land, she at the end belongs to neither part of the world. This is indeed a modern tragedy that Thapa attempts to showcase through her protagonist, Prema. Prema repents for not being able to leave her dreamland, neither can she abandon her own country where she belonged. She endures her cultural dislocation which constructs a loss of identity and breach of connectivity to her cultural roots. Her alienation and homelessness is an individual case of insecurity that Prema faces in the foreign land. Hence, towards the end of the novel, Prema renews her relation and reconnects with her roots by visiting her country, Nepal, but she chooses to go to abroad again exposing incompleteness of her dream.

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