



Beyond the Tourist Gaze: Mobility, Identity, and Freedom in Manjushree Thapa's Seasons of Flight

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Abstract

Travel literature often depicts journeys as leisurely and self-discovering adventures. In contrast, Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* unveils migration as an economic necessity that also leads to freedom. The protagonist, Prema, experiences difficulties in balancing her Nepali roots with her new life in the United States, revealing travel as a means of both escape and adaptation. This paper explores how her journey challenges societal expectations, reinterprets mobility as a feminist act, and blurs the distinctions between migration and tourism. Drawing on critical concepts of "mobility justice" by Mimi Sheller, "feminist geography" by Doreen Massey, and "transnational identity" by Stuart Hall, this study attempts to explore how migration redefines traditional travel narratives by emphasizing gender, survival, and cultural blending.

Keywords: Economic migration, mobility, transnational identity, freedom, travel narratives

Introduction

Travel writing often talks about leisure, self-discovery, and the blissful experiences of tourists. But how many stories do we hear about the ones who were driven by necessity rather than privilege? In *Seasons of Flight*, Manjushree Thapa moves away from conventional travel writing and talks about the experience of economic migrants who see migration as a necessity and also a form of freedom. Prema's story explores the tensions between her Nepali roots and her new life in the US through the lens of cultural identity and adaptation. As a travel story, it shows the pleasures and difficulties of leisure travel, but it also examines the realities of economic migration and the search for a better life. This paper examines how Prema's journey undermines social norms and reclaims mobility as a

feminist act. Through addressing gender, economic survival, and cultural blending, Thapa's work invites us to rethink traditional travel narratives. This research uses the critical concepts of "mobility justice" by Mimi Sheller, which focuses on providing mobility access for everyone, and "feminist geography" by Doreen Massey, which focuses on gender impacts on spatial experiences. It also uses the idea of "transnational identity" advanced by Stuart Hall, which focuses on people who have multiple cultural identities in a globalized world. Besides, this paper seeks to demonstrate that more than escape, migration is a movement toward freedom. Through Prema's experience in *Seasons of Flight*, we can see travel as both a struggle for survival and an act of resistance by enjoying a sense of freedom.

Literature Review

Critics and scholars from around the world have examined *Seasons of Flight* through various lenses: diaspora, the quest for identity, nostalgia, and the uprooted identities of immigrants. However, there has been limited focus on the themes of economic migration and the pursuit of freedom within the context of this novel. In this regard, Dr. Sandhya Tiwari in her article "Migration and the Impact of Cross-cultural Experiences in Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight*" highlights that diaspora literature often revolves around the concept of a homeland, reflecting the dislocation and harsh exile experienced by characters in many diasporic narratives. As she notes, "Thapa mainly deals with migration, nationalism, colonialism, diaspora, and globalization, has done more than represent or recover the lives of people who are living under the forces of these historical aspects and socio-cultural formations" (35).

In the same way, Dr. Manohar D. Dugaje, in his article "Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight*: A Flight into an Alienated Land," argues that in the novel Thapa "delineates the predicament of the protagonist caught in the vicious circle of irremediable isolation in the modern life" (12). The critic here overlooks how Prema tries to adjust in the host land, the USA, with a renewed sense of freedom. Likewise, Pooja Swamy, in her article "Remapping Women's Identity in *Seasons of Flight* by Manjushree Thapa," argues that the novel depicts the struggle of marginalized women to find an identity in a patriarchal society, where Prema is "escaping from her native hill land from obscurity, nothingness in search of free individuality and fulfillment" (495). Her criticism, however, lacks a discussion of economic migration and the protagonist's freedom-seeking tendencies.

In his article "Transforming Gender Role in Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight*," Nagendra Bhandari contends that "The novel synchronizes the spatial journey of this village girl with her mental and emotional transformation. In course of her

journey, she persistently crosses the cultural and social expectation for a girl born in typical Hindu family of the hinterland of Nepal” (115). Bhandari shows how Prema’s journey reflects her inner transformation and defiance of gender norms. However, he overlooks the impact of economic migration on her choices.

Punya Prasad Bhattarai, in his article “Transnational Identity in Thapa’s Seasons of Flight,” explores Prema’s fluctuating identity. He states, “Prema has to undergo fluidity and instability in America because she has to live under two cultures. Adopting two cultures create[s] [a] hybrid identity in Prema. Thus, living in two cultures ultimately creates loneliness and frustration in her life” (39). However, Bhattarai does not give attention to the sense of freedom Prema experiences beyond the rigid patriarchy of her homeland in his criticism.

Deepthi V. G., in her article “Cultural Dislocation and Contesting Identities: The Matrix of Diasporic Consciousness in Manjushree Thapa’s Seasons of Flight,” focuses on the challenges of cultural dislocation and identity struggles. She mainly focuses on how the protagonist, Prema, faces difficulties in adjusting to life in America. She spotlights her struggles with language, cultural differences, and feelings of being caught between two countries: Nepal and the United States. Deepthi argues that Prema, like many immigrants, experiences a loss of identity and finds it hard to feel at home in a foreign land. As she argues:

Prema’s quest for identity in *Seasons of Flight* represents the plights of the displaced belonging to neither part of the world. Cultural dislocation whether forced or chosen, constructs a loss of identity and lack of connection to the cultural roots and forces the community to find an imagined home in order to dismiss the fretfulness of being the ‘Other’ in an alien land. (488)

While the critic provides a strong discussion on cultural displacement, she overlooks how Prema also finds freedom and independence in America. Living in a diverse city, she gains opportunities she never had in Nepal. Her journey is not just about struggle but also about growth and self-discovery. Travel and migration bring challenges but also new opportunities, which the critic does not fully discuss herein.

Mahesh B. Bhatt, in his report “Adaptation of Minority in Diaspora Novel: A Case Study of Manjushree Thapa’s Seasons of Flight,” examines how Thapa portrays the experiences of an immigrant woman adapting to a new cultural environment. As he argues:

Through a fictional character Prema, Thapa has portrayed an immigrant woman who has made her life ever-changing and mobile as she is uprooted in LA, from her original social milieu of Nepal. Prema brings in the images of Hindu religion,

Nepali language and food – Momo – as imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation. It is her attempt to recreate a lost sense of cultural identity. (9)

While this perspective highlights her sense of loss, it pays little attention to how Prema also embraces new experiences and freedoms in Los Angeles. She is not only bound by nostalgia but also explores independence, relationships, and opportunities that were unavailable to her in Nepal. Bhatt's critique falls short in terms of discussing Prema's agency in shaping a new life with new aspirations in the democratic landscape of America.

Among various critiques of *Seasons of Flight*, the themes of economic migration and personal freedom remain untouched. While many criticisms focus on Prema's cultural displacement and identity struggles, they often are indifferent to how migration also opens doors to new possibilities and opportunities. My paper aspires to bridge this gap by examining how Prema undergoes economic mobility and independence in her new environment. By offering a critical perspective on her journey, this paper aims to bring about the balance between loss and liberation. This paper also aims to show that migration is not just about fragmentation, alienation, and nostalgia but also about self-reinvention and self-discovery by searching for new opportunities and possibilities in the host land.

Mobility, Identity, and Freedom in Manjushree Thapa's Seasons of Flight
Prema, the protagonist of the mentioned novel, leaves Nepal in search of a better life in the United States. Despite facing challenges as an immigrant, she experiences a new sense of freedom. In Nepal, she felt trapped by societal expectations and a lack of opportunities. In the U.S., she gains independence, both financially and personally. She explores relationships on her own terms and makes choices without external pressure. Her migration is not just about survival but about self-discovery. Though loneliness and uncertainty remain, she values the autonomy she never had before. Economic migration gives her stability, but freedom gives her a new identity. Prema's journey shows that migration is not just about struggle but at times, it is also about growth. Through her character, Manjushree Thapa emphasizes the liberating possibilities of leaving home.

In the narrative, the conversation between Prema and her father reflects doubts about whether a woman can migrate to America. It explores concerns about her journey and the challenges she may face. At the same time, it highlights Prema's belief that she will find freedom from societal restrictions in the host country. The conversation unfolds as follows:

'Ba, I'm going to America.'

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

‘I’m going to live there, Ba.’

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

‘No,’ she said. ‘I’m going to live there. Forever.’

There was a pause. ‘Do you know anyone there?’ He asked.

‘A friend is making arrangements.’ (Thapa 58)

Prema’s conversation with her father reveals his disbelief and concern about her migration. While he expects her to return, she firmly states her decision to settle in America. It unfolds her desire for independence despite uncertainty.

Mimi Sheller, in her article “From Spatial Turn to Mobilities Turn,” argues that “the mobilities paradigm departs from this earlier tradition in part because of its far more transdisciplinary emphasis on cultural mobilities, meaning, representation, affect, and embodied social practices as much as the large-scale political and economic geographies that were the focus of the spatial turn” (11-12). Her idea emphasizes that the mobilities paradigm changes away from the traditional focus on space as a fixed container for social processes. Instead, it adopts a transdisciplinary approach that considers various aspects of movement such as cultural mobilities, meanings, representations, and embodied social practices. Prema’s migration to America is not just a physical relocation; it involves a deep exploration of her identity. Through Prema’s narrative, *Seasons of Flight* exemplifies the importance of understanding mobility as a dynamic process that influences personal identity and social connections rather than a fixed one.

In her article “Bringing Space Alive: Doreen Massey’s World of Connected Geography,” Mallarika Sinha Roy references an interview with Doreen Massey from *Social Science Bites* in 2013. In this interview, Massey expresses her frustration with the social sciences, particularly philosophy, for focusing more on time than on space and treating space as a residual category. She emphasizes her work’s goal: to “bring space alive” by highlighting how “the dimension of multiplicity actualizes space as organizations of societies we live in” (22). This focus raises fundamental political questions about how we can coexist and live together with others.

In the U.S., Prema purchases a western dress, a symbol of the freedom she lacked in her homeland of Nepal. By wearing a red bikini and flip-flops, she expresses her individuality and challenges the cultural and social restrictions imposed on her.

As she examines herself in the mirror, she experiences a sense of liberation. Prema “bought a red bikini of \$24.99 and flip-flops for \$4.47. She changed into it a public toilet-restroom- examining, in the mirrors by the washstands, the way the bikini

curved over her breasts and back” (79). This moment reflects her resistance to traditional norms and her ability to adapt to her new environment. Doreen Massey’s ideas about multiplicity and the ways in which space can be redefined through personal experience connect with this experience of Prema. Prema’s journey unveils the dynamic interplay between cultural identity and the quest for freedom in a new land.

Prema expresses her strong disapproval of the Manusmriti, highlighting its oppressive views on women: “The book where it says women are slaves. You must not listen to them; you must beat them if they disobey you. All stupid!” (158). The open defiance against such outdated beliefs in the USA signifies a broader feminist awakening caused by her experiences and travel. Travel itself can be seen as a feminist act, as it provides women like Prema the opportunity to challenge and resist patriarchal norms. In fact, Prema’s journey becomes a catalyst for her empowerment and a rejection of the restrictive cultural ideologies she left behind in Nepal. It is the indication of the transformative power of travel for women.

Prema is also critical of the patriarchal view that regards women merely as machines for bearing children. In Nepal, her mother was frequently pregnant in the hope of bearing a baby boy. This reflects a deep-rooted societal expectation in male-dominated society. Prema dismisses this notion as outdated and absurd in America. She shares her thoughts with her boyfriend, Luis, emphasizing that such attitudes should not be accepted. As the narrative goes:

In Nepal, patriarchy promotes gender discrimination, while in America, such discrimination is less pronounced. In this regard, Prema says: “She kept getting pregnant because she wanted a son! You know how many times? One baby before me, two afterwards—they all died.” (183)

This shows the emotional toll on women who are valued primarily for their ability to bear sons. This leads to a cycle of suffering and loss. In contrast, Prema’s awareness of these issues in America reveals her critical perspective on gender roles and encourages her to advocate for equality, justice, and freedom for women. Through her reflections, the narrative emphasizes the importance of recognizing and challenging harmful cultural norms that affect women’s lives.

Prema is also enjoying her transnational identity with a great sense of freedom and excitement. Her conversation with her boyfriend Louis in Los Angeles reflects this fact:

“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).

When Luis says:

'There was also – tur-curry?'

'Tarkaari. Vegetables.'

'It was great. Really great.'

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

This conversation reveals Prema's freedom and excitement in her transnational identity. By sharing her culture through food, she takes pride in her Nepali roots. Her happiness in discussing traditional dishes shows her connection to her heritage. Her ability to engage with Luis reflects her openness to new experiences. This exchange exposes how living in a new country allows her to celebrate her identity and embrace cultural sharing.

In his article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall discusses the problematics of cultural identity in the context of diaspora and transnationalism. He argues that identities are not fixed or static but are fluid and shaped by various cultural influences and historical contexts. Hall states that "Cultural identities reflect the positions of those who are 'in' and those who are 'out'" (223). He also discusses the impact of globalization on cultural identity, noting that "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented" (227). Speaking from Hall's perspective, Prema's experiences unpack the complexities of transnational identity formation, where she undergoes feelings of belonging and exclusion while embracing the fragmentation and fluidity of her cultural identity. This journey allows her to celebrate her heritage while adapting to new cultural influences, ultimately enriching her understanding of who she is in a global context.

Conclusion

In *Seasons of Flight*, Manjushree Thapa, thus, shows that migration is not always driven by feelings of alienation, frustration, or nostalgia. Instead, it can also create new opportunities for freedom and independence. For Prema, the United States is not just a place of struggle but a land of possibilities. It allows her to explore new paths, make choices, and shape her own future. She experiences personal growth, gains confidence, and learns to adapt to a new culture. The novel spotlights how migration can lead to self-discovery by making it a journey of both challenges and transformation. Through Prema's story, Thapa presents a balanced view of migration, showing both its difficulties and its rewards.

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