

# REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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## **Lecture 35**

### **Lecture 35: Nepal Diaspora: Reading Manjushree Thapa's Seasons of Flight**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on refugees, migration, and diaspora. So today we are going to take up a case study. And we will look at the Nepali diaspora through our reading of Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight*. So, *Seasons of Flight* is a novel that was published in the year 2011 by Aleph Publishers. The story of this novel is based on a Nepalese girl named Prema who is struggling to live in Los Angeles, USA,



after winning a DV lottery, which granted her a green card, right? So, we see that this girl Prema suddenly gets a green card and then travels to Los Angeles, and the entire plot revolves around her struggles and the challenges she faces while surviving in a new land. In the novel, Prema's quest for identity represents those who have been displaced and who belong to neither part of the world. Manjushree Thapa was born in Kathmandu, Nepal.

She is a Nepalese-born Canadian essayist, fiction writer, translator, and editor, and later she moved to the US. So, Thapa is a recognized Nepalese diaspora writer who is well known for her works, including *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy*, which came out in 2005. and *The Tutor of History*, which was published back in 2001. So, Manjushree Thapa's first book was *Mustang Bhot* in *Fragments*.

So Mustang Bhot in Fragments came out in 1992. The 2001 novel, *The Tutor of History*, was part of her MFA thesis in the creative writing program that she pursued at the University of Washington in Seattle, and she attended the program as a Fulbright scholar. Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* narrates the story of a Nepalese girl, Prema, who won a green card lottery. It's a rare opportunity that promises a better life in America, so Prema subsequently travels to America.

This event marks a significant turning point in Prema's life, leading to a series of adventures and misadventures that she encounters in a new country. The story begins with the protagonist, Prema, who is settled in America, and it comprises the recollection of her past through memories. So, her reminiscing exercise actually shapes a larger part of the plot. Prema's primary schooling occurred in a village earlier in India, and then she came to Kathmandu. Prema's father, who happens to be a progressive man, supported her in shaping her career,

and he also allowed her to go to college, where she studied forestry. So we see this father-daughter duo in the novel radiating warmth and love for each other. At the age of 17, Prema leaves her family in a small village and goes to the capital city, Kathmandu. Her life in the city is entirely marked by poverty. Prema's early years were full of sorrow,

And we see that in the early part of her life, her mother passes away while delivering her younger sister named Bijaya. So the early part of her life is marked by challenges owing to poverty and the loss of her mother. So on one occasion, a Hindu ascetic comes wandering to Prema's birth village and gives an ammonite to Prema's mother. Her mother worships this ammonite stone as a shaligram or shalgram, which is considered an avatar of Vishnu according to Hindu mythology and faith. So Prema takes this illustrious stone, this shaligram, and she carries a train of memories along with it because this shaligram is bequeathed

### Introduction

- On one of the occasions, a Hindu ascetic came wandering to Prema's birth village and gave 'Ammonite' to Prema's mother. Her mother used to worship it at the centre as a Shaligram, an avatar of Vishnu. Prema takes this lustrous stone, Shaligram, which carries a train of memories and a symbol of belonging to the native land and culture.
- Initially, after completing her college in Forestry, Prema joined the NGO for the "Save Forest Environment Conservation Programme" and worked with a senior forester. Their work, often involving significant personal sacrifices, is a testament to their selflessness and dedication to the greater good of the environment.
- The NGO gives interest-free loans to the poor for rearing chickens and goats, vaccination, and health camps. While working in the NGO, some of Prema's friends suggest that she migrate to Australia, Europe, Canada, and America for higher studies. So, on the insistence of Kanchha, a Gurkha, she enters her name in the American green card lottery.



by her mother who is no more. It carries a train of memories and a symbol of belonging to her native land and culture. This shaligram, which she carries to the different places she travels, is a concentrate of her past memories, her sense of belonging to Nepal, and it is almost a concentrate of her native land and culture. Initially, after completing her college in forestry, Prema joins the NGO for the Safe Forest Environment Conservation Program and works with a senior forester. Their work, often involving significant personal sacrifices, becomes a testament to their selflessness and dedication to the greater good of the environment.

The NGO gives interest-free loans to poor people for rearing chickens and goats, as well as for vaccination and health camps. While working with this NGO, some of Prema's friends suggest that she migrate to Australia, Europe, Canada, or America for her higher studies. So, on the insistence of a Gurkha named Kanchha, she enters her name in the American green card lottery. Kanchha is the owner of a computer center who played an important role in Prema's life. He was instrumental in Prema obtaining her visa to travel to the US.

One of the very important motifs that we see throughout this novel is human rights violations. A significant manifestation of this motif of violation is communicated through the incident happening in the life of Kanchha. So while Kanchha is encouraging and, in fact, he plays a significant role in Prema's travel to the US, in Prema obtaining her visa and completing her logistics to travel to the US; he himself is beaten up mercilessly by the army on being suspected as a Maoist, right, so the army people suspected Kanchha of having been in collusion with the Maoists, and they take him away, and then Kanchha is never to be seen again. It is this violent situation that apparently forces Prema, who is the female

protagonist of this novel, to leave her country behind and settle in the US. She is deeply, you know, she is emotionally scarred, she is



emotionally injured and wounded. Once she finds a friend being harmed, being violated so mercilessly, he's facing an onslaught and then he's not to be found again. It affects her very deeply, and she moves her base to the U.S., So, throughout the novel, Thapa presents a war-torn Nepal, Nepal not as a very tranquil place at all times, but she is also presenting the side, the facet of war, the facet of the tumultuous situation in Nepal in order to depict how the innocent people are being caught, how they are being affected in this crossfire situation. The rise of the Maoist insurgency poses severe challenges to the state power and eventually leads the country into darkness.

Thapa mentions political unrest in Nepal as reflected in the newspapers. So two clashes between the Maoists and the army had claimed 14 lives. A curfew had been imposed in a border town. So this is how newspaper headlines and newspaper reports would go. So it's claiming lives of innocents, even as the Maoists and the army cross daggers.


The novel mentions several countries. With ongoing political turmoil, similar political turmoil that has led to vast immigration. So, during her stay in the US, Prema draws parallels between the Nepal situation, the war-torn country, situation back in Nepal with countries like Guatemala in particular and other countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. So, in all these places in the Middle East, in South America, in Latin America, we have similar

So, in all these places, Latin America, West Asia, we have similar kinds of unrest, similar kinds of emergent situations, situations of emergency. She reads about the life stories of other immigrants, mostly Guatemalan history, and compares her stories with the

immigrants living in the U.S. So, her interest in Guatemalan history also arises from her affair with this man named Luis Reyes, whose father left Guatemala to settle down in the U.S., Their affair, in fact, offers the protagonist a scope to access the historical background of Guatemala and various other countries that are war-torn, that are facing similar political turmoil.

**Political Unrest in Nepal: Conflict of Home Country and Diaspora**

- This affair, in fact, offers her scope to access the historical background of Guatemala and various other countries that are facing political turmoil.
- To understand the political scenario in Nepal as depicted by the author, Thapa, it is essential to understand the story of Prema and her sister, Bijaya.
- The author presents Prema as a foil to her sister Bijaya, who joins the Maoist movement and goes underground.
- Bijaya's introverted nature is not just a trait, but a sign of her deep capacity to reflect on the problems that her country has been facing. Prema, on the other hand, states: "I hate where we're from", expressing her disgust with the ongoing conflict.



So, to understand the political scenario back in Nepal, which has been depicted by the author Manjushree Thapa, it is essential to understand the story from the perspectives of these characters, Prema and her sister Bijaya. So, the author presents Prema as a foil, almost as a contrast to her sister Bijaya, who joins the Maoist movement and goes underground. So, Prema and Bijaya, although they are blood sisters, they have very different callings, very different futures to pursue. Bijaya's introverted nature is not just a trait but a sign of her deep capacity to reflect on the problems her country has been facing.

On the other hand, Prema states, I quote, I hate where we are from. unquote, expressing her disgust with the ongoing conflict. So, while Prema has made herself aloof from the situation in Nepal, she has moved her base. Bijaya is deeply involved in what she believes as social reformation and so now she is part of the militant group, she is part of the Maoist movement. So Prema recalls what Bijaya said once after the civil war in Nepal ended in the year 2006.

So this is what Bijaya had said after the end of the civil war. But I love my country. Bijaya's eyes glittered fiercely. Everything I have done, I do, is for my country, for the liberation of my country, my people. How can anyone hate where they are from?

She said, spitting out her words, it's like hating your mother, unquote. Through such remarks, Bijaya proudly reflects her deep sense of patriotism and inclination towards her

country. Bijaya feels proud of her small contribution towards freeing Nepal from internal conflicts and civil war. So Thapa here is creating a sense of tension between these two blood sisters, Prema and Bijaya. So staying in the country which supposedly reflected Bijaya's patriotism and leaving the country for a diasporic identity which apparently amounts to Prema's act of betrayal.


The two sisters are shown in juxtaposition. Prema is torn between the two ethical choices of remaining at home or immigrating to the US. Her immigration is also symbolized by a sense of ambiguity, especially after she wins the DV lottery. Prema also nurtures a sense of guilt, for which she temporarily severs her link with everything that reminds her of her belonging to Nepal. So she is, you know, withdrawing from her family, her boyfriend back at home, her colleagues, her acquaintances, and so on.




So she is therefore gradually engulfed by what Freud calls the mourning experience, which entails a process of an individual's sense of loss being accumulated or assimilated into his or her psyche. Deep down in her mind, she is also in a state of melancholia. Melancholia refers to a state of mind where the loss of loved ones or something one loves does not register, and the presence of the absent thing continues. So Prema is actually in a state of what Freud defines as mourning, and further, the state of melancholia defines it.

She does not know, or she cannot confront, what is absent or what she has lost. Her loss does not register in her mind. So when we talk of the loss of the beloved here, the most primary thing left behind is one's own country. So, like narratives of many other immigrants from developing countries, Prema also faces a lot of struggles in the new land of America upon reaching the US. She stays in Nepali ghettos in Los Angeles.

**Political Unrest in Nepal: Conflict of Home Country and Diaspora**

- Prema is torn between the two ethical choices of remaining at home or immigrating to the USA. Her immigration is also mobilized by a sense of ambiguity after she wins the DV Lottery.
- Prema also nurtures a sense of guilt for which she temporarily severs her link with everything that reminds her of her "belonging" to Nepal – her family, her boyfriend back home, her colleagues, her acquaintances and so on.
- She appears to be gradually engulfed by what 'Freud calls "mourning," a process in which an individual's sense of loss is assimilated into his or her psyche, deep down in her mind, she has been in a state of "melancholia," a state of mind where the loss of near ones or things one loves (e.g. one's own country) do not register and the presence of the absent thing continues' (Himadri Lahiri)





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So to keep her identity, she keeps an ammonite with her as a god and a memory of her dead mother. And she reinvents herself in America. So she carries the shaligram everywhere she goes. It is a reminder of her land, her culture, and her mother—the dead mother. She thinks, I quote, 'What is there to being human?'


The body which desires persistent and unreasonable things, thoughts and temperaments, instincts and capacity to harm, and history which lingers as a specter. So upon reaching the US, she makes efforts to relocate herself to the new land through the memories of her village—the temple, ammonite, language, and food habits. She puts in effort to become an American by adapting to the American lifestyle with her Latino-American boyfriend, Luis. But then she also feels alien. There is this constant feeling of something missing, which is symptomatic of melancholia.




Johann Gottfried Herder, an 18th-century philosopher, argues, I quote, 'The foundation of the construction of identity rests on the perceived wholeness of a community derived from the totality of its expressions—' 'language, customs, dress, architecture, religion, food,' unquote. So, Prema's sense of homelessness and alienation motivates her to search for her identity through religious and cultural practices. Religion, particularly Hinduism, plays a pivotal role in shaping and preserving Prema's Nepalese identity.

and this also takes us back to Slavoj Zizek, who would argue, who has very famously argued that the population in diaspora try to, you know, counter their minoritized status, their invisibilized status, through very commonly and very frequently, through a very frequent, you know, practice of clinging on to one's religion, religious practices. In other words, one becomes religiously more orthodox, more conservative. The reactionary behavior and clinging on to one's ghetto, one's own small community, you know, kind of enables one's identity that faces crisis and

### Nostalgia, Alienation and Identity

- Johann Gottfried Herder, an eighteenth-century philosopher, argues "the foundation of the construction of identity rests on the perceived 'wholeness' of a community derived from the totality of its expressions – language, customs, dress, architecture, religion,[food] (qtd. in Bhatt, My emphasis)
- Prema's sense of homelessness and alienation motivates her to search for her identity through religious and cultural practices. Religion, particularly Hinduism, plays a pivotal role in shaping and preserving Prema's Nepali identity.
- While staying in the Nepali ghettos in LA, Prema meets Mata Sylvia, a preacher of the Hindu religion. She recites lines from Hindu scriptures, like the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayan*, and the books about Osho and Vivekananda. Her religious identity keeps her rooted to her home country and culture in the USA.





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In the larger scheme of things that faces almost an erasure, an effacement in the larger scheme of things in the new land where their own clothing, their own language and habits do not matter and seem to go unnoticed, right? So in the face of such things, as Slavoj Žižek would argue, religion matters very much and people tend to become very reactionary. They try to, you know, sometimes they can also, this can, this minoritized status in the foreign land can change, even lead to radical behavior, you know. Someone who was a very moderate and liberal practitioner of a religion in a new land would end up becoming a very radical, a very extremist practitioner, would develop, you know, communalist and might develop a communalist identity and identification.

So while staying in the Nepalese ghettos in Los Angeles, Prema meets Mata Sylvia who is a preacher of the Hindu religion. She recites lines from Hindu scriptures such as Srimad Bhagavad Gita from Mahabharata and also from Ramayana and she also refers to books about Osho and Vivekananda. Her religious identity keeps her rooted to her home country and her culture in the US. So we see Religion almost becoming a soft power that kind of counters one's minoritized, invisibilized status.

It props up one's identity. It becomes a source that shapes one's identity in the new land, in the absence of one's prominent linguistic or cultural group. Religion is something that almost creates a vicarious home or community in a displaced situation or in the diaspora. So in the novel, we see that Mata Sylvia's religious practices in the US take Prema back to her Nepalese home. Memories of her mother's bedroom, shrine, and idols of the gods flash in front of her.

So, nostalgia and memory of her native Nepalese culture pose resistance to Prema's sense of belonging in an alien land. Prema constantly searches for her fixed cultural identity in America. So, in this regard, scholar and critic Mahesh Bhatt states in his study of this novel, I quote Bhatt here, he states the following. Thapa depicts the incidents in the life of Prema such that she feels her physical location in Los Angeles, but her genealogical and geographical roots lie in Nepal. Prema longs for her new identity.

She feels something which was protected in Nepal has been lost in America, and that is her roots, her belonging, unquote. So, in this context, Stuart Hall in his work *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* states that cultural identity can be thought of in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective one true self which hides inside the many other more superficial or artificially imposed selves that people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common, right? So nostalgia, which is a powerful force in a diaspora space, bridges the gap between



the past and the present. Memories from the past, particularly those associated with food, offer a comforting escape from the harsh reality of the present. Prema nostalgically yearns for her happy childhood days and often recollects the memories of food and festive meals.


So, Thapa here brings in food as a marker of identity. Food gives comfort and security in an alien land and sometimes it becomes a tool for feeling secure and regaining, you know, disintering that sense of heaven in a new land. So, the warmth is restored through even the memory and the process of cooking and eating the familiar food back from home. So, in the novel, on the occasion of Prema's lover, Luis saying, hey Prema, know what I had for dinner last night? Dal Bhat.




This is a kind of Nepalese, I mean Nepali food. So, when Luis says that he ate Dal Bhat, Prema becomes so happy that she starts cooking Dal Bhat or lentils and rice very often. So, it becomes a connector that takes her back to her space of familiarity, right? So, on another occasion, a character called Neeru, who is another immigrant, offers Prema Nepali food. She is ecstatic when she finds two plates of hot dumplings before them.

### Nostalgia, Alienation and Identity

superficial or artificially imposed 'selves' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common".

- Nostalgia, a powerful force in diaspora space, bridges the gap between the past and the present. Memories of the past, particularly those associated with food, offer a comforting escape from the harsh reality of the present. Prema nostalgically yearns for her "happy days" of childhood, often recollecting memories of food and festive meals.
- Thapa brings in food as a marker of identity. Food gives comfort and security in an alien land. Sometimes it is a tool to feel secure in an alien land.
- In the novel, on one occasion Prema's lover Luis says: "Hey Prema, know what I had for dinner last night?" "Dull-bath. A kind of Nepalese, I mean, Nepali food". Prema becomes so happy that she starts cooking 'daal-bhaat' (lentils and rice) often.




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Momos, can you believe momos in America? Prema exclaims, right? So, therefore, different forms of nostalgia build a sense of resistance from assimilating with the US culture. So, nostalgia becomes a moment of regaining or bringing to life one's individuality, one's individual culture and baggage of history that one carries with oneself, which resists assimilation, integration and being bulldozed by the metaculture of America. So we see that food or clothing habits back from one's home, even nostalgia is a moment of resistance that prevents any kind of assimilation, that regains, that restores the memory from home and that prevents one's own baggage of history, one's own baggage of legacy from being bulldozed by the meta-American culture.

Here, Bhatt states in his reading that Thapa's novel succeeds in creating a rhetoric saturated with gastronomic images of food, feasting, and festive dining. All these are used as a plea for Nepalese to resist being ushered into an adulthood of Western-style capitalist modernity. So, it is a kind of imploration, a kind of beseeching to the Nepalese diaspora to maintain their individuality, their uniqueness through their mundane habits, through their cultural practices. So, this rhetoric, which is filled with the sensory experiences of food and dining, serves as a powerful tool for evoking the reader's empathy and understanding of the characters' struggles in the process of maintaining their cultural identity in a foreign land.

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- On another occasion, a character called Neeru, another immigrant, offers Prema Nepali food. She was ecstatic when she found two plates of hot dumplings before them: "Momos! Can you believe? Momos in America (Thapa)!" Prema exclaimed.
- Therefore, different forms of nostalgia build a sense of resistance from assimilating with the USA culture. Bhatt states in his reading that Thapa's novel succeeds in creating a 'rhetoric saturated with gastronomic images of food, feasting, and festive dining – is used as a plea for Nepalese to resist being ushered into an adulthood of western-style capitalist modernity.'
- This rhetoric, filled with the sensory experiences of food and dining serves as a powerful tool to evoke the reader's empathy and understanding of the characters' struggle to maintain their cultural identity in a foreign land.



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This is a way of connecting the reader, you know, making them understand what a character struggles with when their self is negotiating between two different cultures, two different, or rather several different practices. Their own identity lies at the crossroads of multiple practices, multiple identities, and multiple possibilities. What an individual in diaspora undergoes and how they constantly negotiate with their own being and becoming. So, in conclusion, Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* offers a unique perspective on the immigrant experience, presenting these experiences through the lens of a third-world woman who is repositioned, who is grafted into a developed country such as the US. So, the cultural problems, the sense of uprootedness, the questions of belonging and unbelonging simultaneously, and the sense of nostalgia are some of the main themes of this novel, which make it a significant reading in Nepalese diaspora literature.

So, with this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let us meet with a new topic and another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.



Nepalese Diaspora in New York

### Conclusion

- In conclusion, Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* offers a unique perspective on the immigrant experience, presenting it through the lens of a third world woman in a developed country like the USA.
- The cultural problems, sense of uprootedness and belonging, and sense of nostalgia are some of the main concerns of the novel, which makes it a significant reading in Nepalese diaspora experience.

