

South-Asian Literature and Diaspora: Examining Manjushree Thapa's "Tilled Earth"

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Abstract

The phenomena and condition of being in a diaspora has been analysed from various perspectives by the scholars of diaspora-studies. Although the term "Diaspora" originally referred to the condition of the Jews who were dispersed from their 'promised land', the word has acquired new meanings over the years and it is now applied to any community or group that has been displaced from their native or 'original homeland' to two or more countries. The key issues that are often considered to be integral to our understanding of diaspora are the concepts or discourses of 'nation', 'ethnicity', 'homeland', 'identity', 'culture', 'assimilation' with the host-country, 'exile', 'alienation', 'otherization' and discrimination. This paper would attempt to study Manjushree Thapa's short story titled "Tilled Earth" in relation to these issues pertaining to diasporic communities or individuals.

Keywords: Diaspora, Nation, Identity, Homeland, Exile

The term 'diaspora' implies the phenomenon of dispersal or displacement of a community or a group of people from what they have considered to be their 'native' land or 'homeland', to some other regions or nations which, in turn, become their 'host country'. The reasons for displacement vary from community to community. It has been observed that the factors that often lead to migration/displacement are either external, which may sometimes be

forced or violent; or it may also be self-imposed or voluntary. However, the problems and issues that are deeply embedded in and integral to diaspora are ‘migration’, ‘displacement’, ‘settlement’, ‘nationality’, ‘assimilation’, ‘identity’ and ‘culture’.

Manjushree Thapa’s short story titled “Tilled Earth” narrates the story of a 26 year old Nepali girl who migrates from Kathmandu, Nepal to Seattle in the United States, apparently for higher studies. Migration from one’s native land to another country is often propelled by one’s search for greener pastures or for better living standards. The same motivations can be traced in the protagonist’s decision to leave her homeland for a distant country.

However, migration also entails a severing of ties with one’s homeland, including the family, relatives, friends and loved ones and the whole society and culture in general. Closely connected with the pangs of breaking the umbilical chord with one’s homeland, is the anxiety of settling down in a different country and living amidst unknown people and environment. Thapa’s “Tilled Earth” poignantly touches upon these issues through the experiences of the female protagonist. Not only that the nostalgic thoughts of her homeland disturb the protagonist, her confusion and clumsy attempts at soaking in the strange ways of an alien land torment her initial days of settlement in the USA. The common issues that are integral to the condition of being in a diaspora - like a migrant’s troubled relation with the host-land, attachment with one’s homeland, attempts at acquiring and assimilating the ways of the immigrated country, identity crisis and a sense of alienation - are all evident in this narrative.

The structure of the plot also works a metaphor of the disjointed, fragmented and fissured existence in a diaspora. The story does not follow a linear style of narration. The plot is elliptical, broken, apparently disjointed and this aspect of the story aptly reflects the theme of alienation and confusion of the central character while at the same time it is also an

attempt at synthesizing and re-assembling the loose ends of one's being. Much of the elliptical structure of the plot derives from the 'handbook' that the protagonist carries and refers to as a part of her first endeavour to understand the ways and codes of living in a foreign land.

The protagonist picks up the 'handbook' from Kathmandu that provides important information about 'American lifestyle'. She tries to adjust with the new environment and society that she finds herself in after she moves in to USA, by taking tips from that handbook which she had bought before leaving Nepal. The words and phrases which she randomly picks up and those which appear in the narrative, are the terms that actually describe and define the protagonist's situation and her state of mind in a symbolic manner.

For example, the story begins with the term that the protagonist is looking at: "*Antipodes*" (Thapa 172). The word means two points that are its opposite extremes - like the North Pole and South Pole. The term is metaphorical so far as the protagonist is concerned. She has come all the way from Nepal to Seattle. The two places are like 'antipodes', not just in terms of distance but also with regard to people, language, culture, society, social structure, institutions and lifestyle. Similarly, the next word that the protagonist contemplates on is, "Bolt-hole", and as the narrative explains, it means "a hole in the ground into which a pursued animal flees" (Thapa 172). This term too is a metaphor for the situation in which the protagonist finds herself in after she migrates to the USA. Unable to come to grips with the environment in an alien land, the girl retreats into her own room. Intimidated as she is by the people and their ways with which she is unable to relate or adjust, she feels like a "pursued animal" and therefore seeks shelter in her own "bolt-hole" – her room. Thapa writes:

The people she shares the house with intimidate her. They talk too fast in unintelligible twangs. She is unsure about the people she sees in the streets. Her

classmates at the community college are so animated. She doesn't move the way they do. She watches them. (173)

Robin Cohen mentions that an individual or a community in a diaspora often “believe they are not – and perhaps can never be – fully accepted in their host societies and so remain partly separate” (06). He further states that one of the characteristic features of a diaspora is that they have “a troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group” (17). The protagonist of “Tilled Earth” exhibits this anxiety and hesitations when she is confronted with an unfamiliar environment and society.

Closely associated with the anxieties and fears of socialising with the people of the host-country are the connections with and memories of one's homeland that continues to haunt one in a diaspora. A diasporic community tends to idealise their native land from where they have migrated and the nostalgic ruminations about their lost home and its culture is a common and important feature of being a diaspora. Robin Cohen, while summing up the common traits of a diaspora, observes that a diasporic community retain a “collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history, suffering and achievements” (17). Aggravated by a sense of being out of place in a foreign land, the memories of homeland haunts the female protagonist in Thapa's story too:

Her thoughts stray to memories of the plump flesh of aubergine, of burnt fenugreek and spinach. Bitter melon is her favourite dish, deep fried with slices of okra. . . She finds that she whispers to herself in Nepali at bus stops, at doorways, in the shower, in bed in the middle of the night. (173)

Identity - the choice about asserting and retaining one's ethnic and national identity, or to create a new one keeping in tune with the dominant culture of the host country – is another

important issue integral to the diasporic situation. However, it may not be a simple case of choice for an individual living in a foreign land. This is because identities are often constructed and imposed by the society one lives in, and this ‘imposition’ of identity is usually based on a person’s ethnicity, race, gender and nationality. Therefore, a migrant’s identity is always enmeshed in different contestations – political, social, psychological and even official. The protagonist in “Tilled Earth” has been marked as a “non-resident alien” in her official document and such categorization has its own social and psychological implications – especially for her who has immigrated to USA with a view to assimilating with the local culture and with the fond hope of being accepted in the host country. Understandably, she doesn’t want to be discriminated against as an ‘outsider’ or an ‘alien Other’. The protagonist’s express desire is to assimilate, acquire the ‘American’ way of living, and feel ‘at home’ in that foreign land. It’s the issue of identity therefore, that perturbs her the most and so, in desperation, she calls up her distant cousin who lives in Indiana (USA) and tries to learn the basic things she needs to do while living in the United States. The anxiety of being discriminated due to her identity troubles her. Thapa writes, “It has been months and she still hasn’t learned how to talk to her classmates. Sometimes she remains too reserved, and sometimes she says things that are too intimate. Afterwards she avoids those to whom she has said too much” (176).

The protagonist, however never gives up her attempts to acclimatize with the people and to make friends. “She knows she has to make friends with Americans, and joins a group of her classmates at Denny’s after American history” (Thapa 173). Struggling to feel ‘at home’ in the newly migrated town, she establishes friendly relationships with Jenny and a Baptist family. Slowly she picks herself up and starts doing the things her cousin had suggested. She tries to ease her way into a new life. Her cousin tells her to get a job and not to be scared when approaching for one. “Pretend you’re American” - he says and that’s

exactly what the protagonist endeavours to do and eventually manages to do – that is to create a new ‘American’ identity for herself. The bond with her homeland is not as strong anymore and same is the case with her relation with her lover. She becomes more and more ‘American’ in other words, as the writer states, “Perhaps she has got unused to Nepali, to the way they used to talk. Perhaps she has started to think with American words” (179). Therefore, as a part of her attempts to ‘merge’ with the American identity, she finds a job at the Burger King outlet and makes more American friends – Denise and Matt – her workmates.

Identities, as the story affirms, are not fixed but fluid and dynamic – always changing and acquiring new dimensions. This aspect of identity, particularly with regard to diaspora, has been pointed out by Stuart Hall as he observes:

. . . instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (222)

The story “Tilled Earth” similarly focuses on the protagonist’s search for a new identity while she attempts at adjusting and coping in a completely new environment and, in the process, rediscovering herself. Leaving her old self behind, she gradually acquires a new identity, and this is largely facilitated by the freedom, the liberty and the independence that an individual is allowed to enjoy under the American social structure. She aspires to live the ‘American Dream’, by tapping the opportunities that the great country offers to its citizens. The fact that she manages to discover a new self, a new identity is aptly affirmed in the text:

One day, on impulse, she buys shorts and begins to run; she likes the unfamiliar feeling of her body in motion. It is something she could never have

done back home, where her legs were veiled. This is another woman running.

This is a 'whole new you'. (Thapa 181-82)

Thapa further points out, "Every time she passes by the library she continues to search the American Heritage Dictionary for words that will help her speak about her new life" (182-83). The protagonist has now evolved in the narrative as she grows more confident and sure about her new identity, her new life, her new avatar. She is ready to loosen her ties with her homeland in her process of acquiring a new identity. Hence, she finally calls her lover from Nepal to tell him that she is not sure of their relation anymore and therefore may have to reconsider her decision to marry him. As the protagonist begins to acclimatize herself with the American life-style, she realises that she is no longer the person she was before she migrated to this country. Evidently, a change in 'identity' has also changed her allegiances to the ties with her homeland. She had left her homeland Nepal and came to America in search of freedom. "She didn't love her lover any more, and she didn't love her parents. She just wanted to escape" (Thapa 183). And, she has found her 'freedom' in USA. She wants to enjoy her newly found freedom, and that includes economic freedom as well:

Her pay cheque comes in, just under two hundred dollars every two weeks. . . Every day after work she runs, lifting her feet higher, stepping further. What she likes above all is feeling light between steps. She takes new paths each time and doesn't mind it when she loses her way." (Thapa 184)

Thus, from a hesitant and timid girl that she was in the beginning when she had first arrived in Seattle, she evolves into a character that is self-assured and confident.

Over the years, diaspora-studies have sought to interpret the condition of being displaced and having to settle in an alien country through different lenses. There was a time, when the urge to return to homeland was seen as an integral feature of diaspora. However,

diaspora scholars later began to question the notions of fixed identities, attached with fixed homeland and ethnicity. Vijay Mishra claims that the “truth about diasporas” is that “diasporas do not return to their homeland” (02). The possibility of a return is almost non-existent for most of the displaced communities and also for many people who had voluntarily migrated. Therefore, what bothers a diasporic individual more is not the urge to return to homeland but his desire to assimilate and ‘make’ his host-land his ‘home’. Finding a home, away from home is what concerns a diasporic individual and in the protagonist of “Tilled Earth” one can trace the same urge and anxiety. Avtar Brah has rightly pointed out this tendency of diasporic people as she writes:

Among other things, I suggest that the concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins while taking account of a homing desire, as distinct from a desire for a ‘homeland’. This distinction is important, not least because not all diasporas sustain an ideology of ‘return’. (16)

Thus, diaspora need not necessarily entail a longing to return home but it is in fact a "homing desire". What we see in the narrative is a dramatization of this very fact. Right from the beginning of the story, Manjushree Thapa charts out the protagonist's struggle for and striving to make America her 'home'. It is her “homing desire” that is being dramatized here. She doesn't want to feel like an alien in Seattle. She doesn't want to be treated as one either. That is why she stops going to the Baptist preacher's family, because, as she says, they make her 'feel' like a "foreigner". She wants to be one of them as she desperately wanted to feel "at home" there in the land where she had migrated to. Ironically, after severing all her ties with her homeland, and after almost becoming 'like' an American, her official permit to stay in America expires and she too, like her cousin, ends up becoming an "illegal alien". As the narrator in the end of the story states, the protagonist has become a classic case of "neither here, nor there" (Thapa 186)

Nevertheless, the plot of “Tilled Earth” charts out the journey of self-discovery of the protagonist while trying to liberate herself from the bondages with her homeland and her past. Migration, thus, is seen as a liberating experience rather than a restricting one. The condition of being in a diaspora is sometimes described as ‘celebratory’ as it allows an individual to dwell in a realm that is beyond the narrow and divisive considerations of ‘nation’ and ‘ethnicity’. Vijay Mishra comments on this ‘positive’ way of looking at diaspora as he observes, “Celebrating diaspora as the exemplary condition of late modernity – diasporas, diasporic communities are said to occupy a border zone where the most vibrant kinds of interactions take place and where ethnicity and nation are kept separate” (01). Robin Cohen has also listed this as an important feature of being in a diaspora as he remarks that a diasporic individual sees “the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism” (17). One gets to see a reflection of a similar vein in the plot of Manjushree Thapa’s “Tilled Earth”.

Thus, the short story “Tilled Earth” demonstrates the evolution of the central character living in a diaspora. The female protagonist learns to adjust and acclimatize herself in a foreign land after migrating from her homeland Nepal and gradually evolves from a timid and hesitant character to a confident and self-assured individual. She sheds her initial inhibitions and focuses on her efforts towards her understanding and assimilating in the new environment. And, in this journey of rediscovering and re-adjusting herself, she embarks on a mission to assume a new identity that would be more in conformity with the lifestyles and culture of the host-land. As a result of the transformation or metamorphosis that the character undergoes so far as her attitude towards the host land is concerned, her ‘self’ at the end becomes like the ‘tilled earth’ where the seed of a new life is ready to be sown. The narrative, therefore, succinctly brings out the major issues of migration, nation, identity, culture and assimilation that are crucial to diaspora studies.

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