



TRANSCULTURAL HUMANITIES IN SOUTH ASIA

Critical Essays on Literature and Culture

Edited by Waseem Anwar and Nosheen Yousaf

**With a Foreword by Amritjit Singh and
an Afterword by Fawzia Afzal-Khan**

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BEYOND IDENTITY POLITICS

Transcultural and multiple allegiances in Parajuly's *Land Where I Flee*

Binod Paudyal

The presence of Nepali migrants and Nepali-speaking Indians – and their transcultural experiences – in Bollywood, Indian anglophone literature and other popular discourses often remains invisible. When they are represented at all, their depiction is often dehumanising and portrayed in stereotypes as soldiers, coolies, servants and watchmen. For example, we can see the racist stereotypes of Nepalis in the role of security guards, soldiers and watchmen in an objectionable light. There is a list that can be referred to, like the *khukuri* sign from the Nepali *Topi*, slanted eyes, changed voices and incorrect Hindi in the Flipkart advertisement; Amir Khan's popular Coca-Cola ad; *Carwale.com*'s advertisement; Ashok Mishra's imitation of a Nepali watchman on *Indian Laughter Show* and in Bollywood movies like *Haseena Maan Jayegi* (1999), *Apna Sapna Money Money* (2006), *Tango Charlie* (2005) and *Santa Banta Pvt Ltd* (2016). Anglophone novels with stereotypical Nepali watchmen characters include Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and Karan Mahajan's *The Association of Small Bombs* (2016), to name only a few. Perhaps Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (hereafter referred to as *Inheritance*) is the most controversial anglophone novel with questionable representation of Nepali and Nepali diaspora.

Although Desai's novel is deeply invested in questioning the legitimacy of cultural identity, citizenship, home and belonging, it fails to understand the history and complexity of the Nepali diaspora. Throughout the novel, Nepali migrants and Nepali Indians, also known as Gorkhas, are excluded from the body politic of democratic Indian culture and treated like aliens, crooks and thieves, poor and less than human. In her attempt to represent 'others' – here, Nepali Indians and Nepali migrants – Desai represents a privileged Indian diaspora's experience of encountering the Other. She relies on her own position as a privileged Indian American and conveniently joins the ensemble of Indian cultural expression in which Nepali and Nepali-speaking Indians are represented as the 'other' of Indianness. There are several instances in Desai's *Inheritance* where the novel recycles existing stereotypes of Nepal, Nepalis and Nepali Indians. Some of the words used to describe Nepali migrants and Nepali Indians include 'beggar' (Desai 2006: 200), 'coolies' (2006: 247), 'a ragtag of Nepali rebels' (2006: 262), 'very troublesome people' (2006: 143), '[D]isgusting' (2006: 129), 'dirty' (2006: 128), 'group of idiots' (2006: 128), 'soldiers' (2006: 73), 'hooligans' (2006: 43) and thieves and murderers (2006: 43–44).

I discuss Desai's *Inheritance* at length here because it helps us understand how the Nepali diaspora is stereotyped in anglophone South Asian diasporic literature and how Prajwal Parajuly's novel *Land Where I Flee* (2013), in contrast, gives us a different picture of this population. Although the issues of the Nepali diaspora as invisible subjects are crucial in themselves to be brought to conversation, they remain almost silent and absent in South Asian literary studies. Sadly, there is almost no evidence in Indian literature depicting a more complete and diverse representation of the Nepali and Nepali Indian population. It is in this context that I examine issues of identity politics, particularly in relation to the politics of invisibility, in Parajuly's *Land Where I Flee* (hereafter *Land*) in order to investigate new ways of thinking about and understanding the Nepali diaspora, informed by global cultural citizenship, migratory politics and the transcultural experience related to such mobilities. My use of the term 'invisibility' refers to South Asian refugees, ethnic minorities, eunuchs and transgender, gay and lesbian and underclass and lower-caste minorities in South Asia whose visibility is denied in the national imaginary.

Parajuly, born in Gangtok, in the Sikkim region of northeastern India, to an Indian-Nepali father and a Nepali mother, became the youngest Indian author to be offered an international, two-book, multi-country deal in 2011. While his first book, a story collection, *The Gurkha's Daughter* (2012), made its way onto the list of best-selling books in India and South Africa and won him international fame and success in Britain, South Africa, South Asia and later in the United States, his second book, *Land*, further established him as a writer of talent. Nevertheless, despite the scope of *Land* in the study of South Asian literary studies, postcolonial studies and diaspora and transcultural studies, scholars have not paid adequate attention to the virtues of this novel, especially because there is no significant amount of scholarship on the novel yet, even though it was published six years ago. As of now, a search in the MLA International Bibliography or JSTOR generates several reviews of the novel, but not a single scholarly article in a peer-reviewed journal.

Given the fact that Parajuly's work is different from other contemporary Indian writings in English in that its main focus is Nepali diaspora and their transcultural experiences related to such a position, the lack of scholarly interest in his work is tantamount to the invisibility of the Nepali diaspora itself in South Asian literary studies, which I am trying to foreground. Thus, a principal aim of this chapter is not only to demonstrate how Parajuly's *Land* challenges the existing stereotypes of Nepali and Nepali Indians by representing diverse and heterogeneous Nepali and Nepali diasporic characters, but also to show how the novel adds a new dimension to the study of transculturalism in South Asian literary studies. I contend that the exploration of transcultural experiences and identities in the Nepali diaspora and the Nepali-speaking community in India fundamentally challenges the existing definitions of citizenship associated with specific nation-states and nativist nationalism in India and South Asia to imagine a global community defined by transcultural humanism.

Reading *Land* enlightens, in that it challenges the existing narrative about the Nepali diaspora by exploring the diversity of class, gender, sexuality and national status within Nepali-speaking communities in Darjeeling and elsewhere. The novel explores issues of identity politics resulting from social taboos around homosexuality, eunuchs and inter-caste marriages, as well as the shifting status of nationality and multiple allegiances in the contemporary global world. Set in the Himalayan town of Gangtok, Sikkim, *Land* offers us a closely observed family portrait of Chitralekha Neupaney, a matriarch who maneuvers politicians for financial gain. Chitralekha's four grandchildren have left their hometown to relocate to different parts of the world. The novel begins with the four siblings visiting their hometown from New York, Colorado, London and an unspecified place in India to attend their grandmother Chitralekha's

Chaurasi, her landmark 84th birthday, celebrated as an auspicious day in Hinduism because of the significance of the lunar calendar and the number 1,008, while it ends with their return to the places of their new settlements. Agastaya, an oncologist, visits from New York while Bhagwati and Manasa join him from Colorado and London, respectively. Ruthwa, the youngest sibling, surprises everyone with his unexpected visit to the family. Finally, an uninvited guest, Nick, the American gay partner of Agastaya, arrives at the house, giving Agastaya a shock.

In the course of their journeys, the characters in the novel engage in transcultural exchanges and transnational affiliations, blurring social, cultural and national boundaries. The painful journey of Ram, a Bhutanese refugee from an untouchable caste, to Nepal and then to the United States; Bhagwati's marriage to Ram and her subsequent rejection by her grandmother Chitralekha; Agastaya's struggle to hide his homosexuality; the painful journey of self-discovery and the difficult life of Prasanti, an eunuch social outcast; the exclusion of Nepali Indians, also known as Gorkhas, from the body politic of democratic Indian culture; and the settlement of Chitralekha's grandchildren in different parts of the world reflect the reality of the contemporary Nepali diasporic society. Using a transnational and transcultural approach, this chapter, then, asks us to reconsider the scope of the Nepali diaspora as explored in *Land*, which not only challenges identity politics based on the social constructions of caste, religion, sexuality, class and national status but also helps us understand the fluidity and mobility of the Nepali diaspora across national and cultural boundaries. I discuss that in what we might call 'transgressive characters,' particularly in relation to eunuchs and Bhutanese refugees, whom I see as a major defining characteristic of transculturalism. My use of the phrase 'transgressive characters' refers to the characters who challenge the notion of identity based on 'the script' (Appiah 1996: 79) and whose identities are shaped by transcultural experiences by breaking down the social, cultural and national boundaries.

Mikhail Epstein's concept of transculturalism,¹ viewed through a postcolonial lens, helps us explore how the characters in *Land* engage in the transcultural process that allows them to escape from 'unconscious predisposition and prejudices of the "native," [and] naturalized cultures' (Epstein 2009: 327). Epstein views transculture as 'a new sphere of cultural development that transcends the borders of traditional cultures (ethnic, national, racial, religious, gender, sexual, and professional)' (2009: 330). Epstein's concept of transculturality is particularly useful here to see how the characters in *Land* transcend their rigid identities and 'find themselves "outside" of any particular culture, "outside" of its national, racial, sexual, ideological, and other divisions' (2009: 349).

Land offers an interesting account of transculturalism in which the characters form 'multifaceted, fluid identities resulting from diverse cultural encounters' (Nordin *et al* 2013: ix) within as well as beyond the national borders. Since 'the very act of reading literary texts is potentially a transcultural experience' (Nordin *et al* 2013: x), Parajuly's novel 'invites the reader to identify with the perspectives of fictional characters from unfamiliar geographical locations, as well as from a variety of cultural and social backgrounds' (Nordin *et al* 2013: x–xi). In fact, the Nepali diasporic characters in the novel themselves embody a transcultural space because of their unique identification with multiple cultures, languages and nations. As Tanka Subba points out, 'Nepalis in India are historically, racially, culturally and linguistically heterogeneous but socially constructed as a homogeneous community in India or elsewhere outside Nepal' (2018: 7). Since most Nepali Indians can and do speak the Nepali language, their identity 'becomes a subject of multiple perceptions' (Subba 2018: 7). In an interview with *Foyles*, Parajuly was asked whether the Neupaney family in the novel have more in common culturally with Nepal or India. In response, he rightly said, 'Nationally, India. Culturally

Nepal. That's what makes the Nepali-speaking people in Sikkim, and the neighboring Darjeeling, so interesting' (www.foyles.co.uk/prajwal-parajuly).

As the story in the novel proceeds, we find that *Land* traces how the four Neupaney siblings are different individuals with diverse challenges, but then how each of them hopes to find some sort of [self-]discovery through their awkward family reunion. Bhagwati, who disgraced her family 18 years earlier as a teenager by eloping with Ram Bahadur Damaai – a Bhutanese refugee from an 'untouchable caste' (Damaai) under the stratified Hindu caste system who also has the eponymous and socially discriminating last name – has now relocated in Boulder, Colorado. She still toils to be accepted by her grandmother on the one hand and to deal with hardships in the United States on the other. Agastaya struggles to hide his homosexuality from both his family and society in general. Manasa, an Oxford graduate, marries the son of a former powerful home minister of Nepal and now lives in London; she remains tense and frustrated throughout the novel because she is compelled to become a caregiver to her handicapped father-in-law at the expense of her own career. Similarly, Ruthwa, once a well-known South Asian writer but now disgraced because of charges of plagiarising from V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* (2001), tries 'hard, too hard,' as the narrator puts it, 'to live up to the image he had once created for himself' (Parajuly 2014: 173). He also attempts to mend his relationship with his grandmother and his siblings, which went sour after he famously and controversially portrayed his grandmother's supposed rape in his first novel, *Himalayan Sunset*. Chitralekha herself wonders whether she had made mistakes in raising her grandchildren, especially after the death of her son and daughter-in-law in an accident, which might have contributed to her strained relationship with them. In fact, Prasanti, the eunuch servant whom Chitralekha treats as a family member, seems to be the only happy and carefree character in the novel.

The topics of caste, homosexuality, transgender and class are difficult and serious issues to express among South Asians and their diasporic communities, but Parajuly handles these issues tactfully and skillfully by making his narrative lucid, humorous and insightful. For instance, he uses witty language and a satirical tone when probing the absurdity of the caste hierarchies rigidly maintained by Chitralekha (Parajuly 2014: 212). The place of caste systems in Indian society, particularly in Brahmin communities, still remains central even today. The novel shows us the angst of Bhagwati at the pretensions of the upper-class Brahmin family when she observes Chitralekha, who gladly puffs the same *beedi*, a type of cheap cigarette, that Nick, a 'beef-eater' and 'a non-Hindu,' has smoked – but nevertheless rejects her granddaughter's Damaai husband and children (2014: 211–212).

Bhagwati's decision to marry Ram, a Bhutanese refugee from an 'untouchable caste,' was consequential because she had not planned it, nor was she in love with him. Rather, it was Bhagwati's unsuccessful results on the Board exam that forced her to elope with Ram. The South Asian obsession with perfect grades functions here as a driving force for Bhagwati's unfortunate decision to marry Ram. When she hears from Manasa that she did not pass the exam, which turns out to be a typo later upon reevaluation of the exam, she instantly understands that there is no place for a failure in the great Chitralekha Neupaney's family, and her failure would bring 'humiliation' to the family because even 'scoring inadequate marks in an exam would be entangled with tales of affairs, alcohol, drugs, pregnancy and depression' (Parajuly 2014: 84). In order to avoid her grandmother's potential anger and the havoc, Bhagwati runs off with Ram. Her marriage to Ram gives her a new identity, that of an 'untouchable' at first and then of a stateless and classless person later. In a society defined by class, religion, sexuality and caste, Bhagwati is transformed into an invisible subject, not accepted by her own grandmother for the next 18 years.

Parajuly exposes the hypocrisy of the caste system particularly by juxtaposing Chitralekha's refusal to accept Bhagwati's husband and children against her easy acceptance of Nick, a 'non-Hindu' American (2014: 211). Chitralekha not only treats Nick as a guest but also shares a *beedi* with him. Ironically, 'beef-eater' is a term Chitralekha uses frequently to refer to Bhagwati's husband's low caste (2014: 212). She looks down on Ram's caste as the lowest of the low castes, asserting that Damaai are the lowest rung of the social ladder and eat cow, a holy animal in Hinduism. But Chitralekha fondly befriends Nick, a non-Hindu 'beef-eater.' The bond between Chitralekha and Nick angers Bhagwati, who 'had for the last year and a half been toiling to get Aama to approve of her children. Aama had remained resolute, unmoved, but here she was, best friends with a man whose last name she didn't know' (2014: 212).

The ludicrous nature of the caste system, with its intersection with both class and religious status, is evident as well in the portrayal of Ram, who is more devoted to Hindu gods and rituals than any other character in the novel. Despite being 'untouchable,' he spends hours every morning on the rituals of worshipping, a practice that he continues even in the United States. The fact that we never see Chitralekha, a Brahmin old lady, performing any Hindu rituals or worshipping Hindu gods underlines the irrationality of caste systems in India and South Asia.² Chitralekha's beliefs in caste hierarchies can be said to be informed by, to use Louis Althusser's concept, 'the ideological state apparatuses' (1971: 146) in that she draws her understanding of the caste system from her upper-caste position and ruling ideology in the society. In other words, since Chitralekha was brought up in a society in which social stratifications remain strong, she inherited her position of a Brahmin woman and internalised the caste system as an actual reality. She refuses to acknowledge the changing times in which such hierarchies are fading away; instead, she accepts the old ideologies of the caste system and denies the possibility of social mobility. In contrast, although the caste system is one of the oldest forms of social stratification, Bhagwati challenges such a system as a social construct. After all, she was not a Damaai at birth; rather, her new identity was imposed on her by the society.

While Parajuly's critique of the caste system helps us understand the damage such a system brings to South Asian society/societies, his exploration of gender roles in the novel also challenges us to rethink the traditional representation of female characters in South Asian literary works. Parajuly's female characters are disparate, with distinctive characteristics. As we witness in *Land*, Chitralekha is not a traditional South Asian woman who conforms to patriarchal ideologies; rather, she challenges the gender roles by performing as a powerful matriarch who not only runs a business in her 80s but also manipulates politicians and officials for her financial gain. Despite her age, she still remains active and independent. Unlike Chitralekha, Manasa submits herself to the patriarchal culture by giving up her career to serve her ailing father-in-law. There is an absence of details about Manasa's experiences that shape her consciousness and identity. For instance, we are told that Manasa is an Oxford graduate and that she married into a rich Brahmin family in Kathmandu. But we are never told about the cultural background of her husband's family that would force an Oxford graduate daughter-in-law to stall her career and become a full-time nurse taking care of her crippled father-in-law in today's world. However, what is important here is that Manasa occupies a transcultural space, forming her multifaceted, fluid identity resulting from her diverse cultural encounters and her allegiance to different nations. As Parajuly puts it,

Manasa: Nepali-Nepali. Formerly Nepali-speaking Indian. Now Nepali. Nepalese. Anglicized or Sanskritized, one and the same thing. The holder of a non-electronic

passport. But almost a Brit – soon to be owner of the powerful, powerful burgundy passport with the fancy, fancy coat of arms.

(2014: 226)

Manasa inhabits a transcultural space through which she, to quote Dangnino, ‘escape[s] the restrictions and essentializing elements imposed by each single culture and access the right to be free from the conditioning and the dependencies of any given, native, or primary culture, thus reaching a full transcultural condition’ (2015: 127).

As discussed previously, it is very rare for the reader to see a diversity of Nepali-speaking Indian characters in terms of class, gender and sexuality in South Asian literature. If there is a representation of this ethnic group at all, they are represented as one type or, at times, as a stereotype – that of a working-class people who are doormen, soldiers, domestic workers etc. However, Parajuly’s characters are diverse and heterogeneous in term of caste, sexuality, class and gender. Agastaya, for example, is an oncologist in New York, but he is also gay. Another character, Prasanti, is a eunuch and a servant whose existence is often ignored in South Asia, whereas Ram comes from an untouchable caste and has a heterosexual orientation. While Agastaya belongs to an upper class, Prasanti and Ram come from a lower class.

One can sense that *Land* makes a sharp contrast between Prasanti’s life and the Neupaney grandchildren’s lives not only to give a voice to Prasanti, an invisible subject, but also to transgress various borders constructed through gender, caste, class, nationality and religion. Despite being a doctor in New York, Agastaya lives a clandestine life as a gay man who cannot come out of the closet. In many ways, Agastaya’s inability to reveal his homosexuality comes from his double minority status in the United States. He is first a South Asian immigrant and secondly gay. Because Agastaya has internalised heterosexuality, he is too ashamed to disclose his sexual orientation either to his friends and family or to the strangers in New York. The fact that he even dates a girl at his family’s insistence and tries to be sexually aroused by looking at pages of a glamorous magazine (Parajuly 2014: 250) presents his homosexuality as if it was nonthreatening to the family structure. These instances suggest negative views and attitudes about diversity related to sexual orientations in India, as well as in the South Asian American community in the United States. Overall, Agastaya’s situation invites a normal, impartial reader to sympathise with the South Asian gay community in general.

We also notice that in comparison, despite being the eunuch servant, Prasanti seems to be happier than Agastaya or any other character in the novel because she is not worried about class status. Born as Prasanti, the son of a Nepali Indian priest, she had gone through a painful journey of self-discovery until one day, Chitralakha found her in a train. She had left her house at 11 after discovering that she was not a boy in the traditional sense. A *hijra* guru finds and adopts her in Gangtok, making Prasanti her disciple. Prasanti’s harshest and most difficult life begins when the *hijra* guru takes her to Mumbai, where she discovers how mainstream society discriminates against and denies social status to *hijras*. The social hypocrisy forces her to get what her *hijra* guru called ‘nirvana’ done – the removal of the ‘ugly stick sticking out of [her] body’ (Parajuly 2014: 159), not only because the emasculation operation is a central ceremony of *hijra* life (emasculation is believed to be the transformation from impotent male to potent *hijra*, as well as a link to special connection to Hindu god and mother goddess) but also because this allows her to become a prostitute, the only option she finds left open for her survival in Mumbai.

Parajuly’s careful depiction of Prasanti’s life helps the reader understand that despite being invisible to people, she accepts her *hijra* identity, believing that she is ‘special’ (2014: 134). Typical of the *hijras*, a term used in South Asia to refer to transgender individuals or eunuchs,

Prasanti adopts feminine gender roles and mostly appears in the attire of a female. Interestingly, the history of *hijras* dates back thousands of years, and they appear (and are celebrated) in ancient Hindu texts such as the *Mahabharata* and *Kama Sutra* (Khaleeli 2014; G. Reddy 2005: 89–91, 108–114). But since the British colonists passed a law in 1897, classifying *hijras* as criminals, they have been ostracised and discriminated against to the extent that they started forming their own communities based on cross-dressing and sometimes using secret code languages for protection purposes. It is important for the readers to note that, in South Asia, *hijras* identify themselves as Muslims and practice Muslim culture but worship a Hindu goddess (Khaleeli 2014; D. S. Reddy 2005: 89–91, 108–114).

Despite the religious and cultural significance of *hijras* in South Asia, people acknowledge Prasanti's existence just as a '*naanchnewali*,' a dancing girl who entertains people, denying her any social privileges. Indeed, Prasanti represents the entire eunuch population in India, whose gender was not recognised by Indian Constitution until very recently, let alone accorded social acceptance (Khaleeli 2014). Because of social discrimination and political disenfranchisement, *hijras* in India are forced into prostitution for survival, yet Prasanti lives her 'life on her own terms. She was her sexuality, revelled in her in-betweenness, lusted openly, lived unapologetically. Gender, sex, sexuality – they meant nothing to her. How fortunate she was to be so transparently, so blatantly, unmistakably gay' (Parajuly 2014: 77). Prasanti can be seen dwelling in what Homi Bhaba calls the 'in-between and liminal' space, which he also recognises as the 'Third Space' (1994: 37), where fixed and essential notions of identities are deconstructed and transgressive identities with 'an all-inclusive, nonoppositional point of confluence, an overlapping of culture' (Dagnino 2015: 131) are constructed. Prasanti's transgressive identity and her courage to interact with the world also challenge the cultural perceptions of eunuchs as well as the political complexities related to identity dynamics based on Indian social stratifications, including the religious divide under the rigidities of caste and class systems.

While Parajuly's depiction of the hidden life of eunuchs is probably the most touching section in the novel when it comes to giving voice to the invisibility of the subjects, Parajuly's major contribution to South Asian diasporic literature might well be his depiction of Bhutanese refugees, particularly important for the study of a shifting status of nationality that strongly implies transculturalism along multiple allegiances. Bhutanese refugees have remained (and still remain) stateless people for more than two decades in the refugee camps of Nepal, which Parajuly fascinatingly yet convincingly depicts not only in *Land* but also in his first story collection, *The Gurkha's Daughter* (2012). There has not been any other known major South Asian literary work prior to Parajuly that depicts stories of Bhutanese refugees, an important but still-ignored contemporary topic in the field of South Asian literature and South Asian American literary studies more broadly.

Despite their constituting a significant proportion of the recent refugee population entering the United States, discussions of Bhutanese refugees have yet to receive attention and place in South Asian diasporic literature. The majority of Bhutanese refugees living in the United States are descendants of Nepali migrants who had settled in Southern Bhutan in the late 1890s. After living and prospering there for more than six decades, these ethnic Nepalis were granted Bhutanese citizenship through the 1958 Citizenship Act (Trieu and Vang 2015: 349). However, the 'Bhutanisation' campaign promoted by the Bhutanese king Jigme Singye Wangchuk's 'One Nation, One People' policy of 1989, which was based on discriminatory and narrowly conceived national identity, forced the Nepali ethnic population to flee their country and become refugees in Nepal (Trieu and Vang 2015: 349). These refugees lived for two decades in limbo in Nepal until they were allowed to resettle in the Western countries in 2007 through the

UN refugee agency. In 2006, the US government offered to resettle 60,000 of the Bhutanese refugees – but this number has been far exceeded, and the total number of Bhutanese refugees in the United States had already reached 70,265 in 2013.

Although Bhutanese refugees represent a significant proportion of global stateless people rebuilding their lives in the United States, very little is known about the experiences and unique perspectives they can offer to South Asian diaspora studies. I argue that Parajuly's exploration of Bhagwati and her husband's migration to the United States helps us understand not only the class spectrum of contemporary immigrants from South Asia but also the shifting nature of their identity and national allegiances. The position of Bhutanese refugees challenges us to rethink the notion of home, belonging and nationality – in large part because they usually belong to nowhere. As Parajuly portrays in the novel, Bhagwati, a Bhutanese refugee from India, especially belonged nowhere. Who was she?

[Born] a Nepali-speaking Indian with a dead father from Sikkim, a dead mother from Nepal and a live grandmother from Kalimpong who was married into Sikkim. Post-marriage – a Nepali-speaking Bhutanese who lawfully relinquished her citizenship so she could belong. Post the ousting of 106,000 Nepali-speaking people from Bhutan: an inhabitant of a state of statelessness in the refugee camps of Nepal. Post America's magnanimity: a refugee now in America with a shiny green card that would probably never land her a job commensurate with her expectation.

(2014: 18)

Given the nature of mobility of Bhagwati and her husband and their cultures across nations, they de-territorialise the definite national and cultural identities, suggesting that individuals cannot confine themselves within the narrow concept of national and cultural boundaries in this globalised world characterised by migration and transculturation. In this regard, the representation of Bhagwati and Ram is similar to Arjun Appadurai's suggestion that the notions of nativeness and native places have become very complex as more and more people identify themselves, or are categorised, in reference to de-territorialised 'homelands,' 'cultures' and 'origins' (Appadurai 1996: 34).

Bhagwati had not thought that her unprecedented marriage to a Bhutanese man would become a painful ordeal leading to statelessness. After all, Ram was not a refugee when she married him – it was only his caste that downgraded her social status. But once Ram and Bhagwati, along with other more than 106,000 Nepali-speaking Bhutanese, were herded out of the country, they became stateless and invisible subjects. I call Bhagwati and Ram 'invisible subjects' because their impoverished economic conditions, aggravated by their low caste and stateless identity, make them invisible. The 13 years Bhagwati, Ram and other refugees spent in the refugee camps of Nepal were the most difficult ones not only in terms of economic status but also in terms of their social status. Bhutanese refugees were discriminated against and perceived as a burden by the Nepalese people, leaving the refugees to live in a buffer zone between Nepal and Bhutan. They were recognised neither as Bhutanese nor as Nepalese. As Parajuly puts it:

When she and other Nepali-speaking Bhutanese were herded out of Bhutan because they weren't Bhutanese enough to be Bhutanese, they wouldn't let go of the hope that Nepal would take them in, but their ancestors had been gone from Nepal and been in Bhutan too long for them to be Nepalese.

(2014: 17)

As we witness in the novel, the position of Bhutanese refugees challenges the national identity guaranteed by citizenship. They were citizens of Bhutan but practiced Nepali culture and spoke the Nepali language, which became an issue with the Bhutanese government. The government of Bhutan coerced them into speaking the Bhutanese language and practicing Bhutanese culture in order to prove their allegiance to Bhutan. Here, national identity is predicated upon the practice of Bhutanese mainstream culture and language rather than on citizenship status. But when they refused to let go of their ethnic Nepali culture and language, the Bhutanese government threatened to prosecute them, which forced them to flee their country of citizenship. But once in Nepal, the Bhutanese refugees' practice of Nepali culture and languages and their Nepali sensibilities could not make them Nepali. Their national identity in Nepal was predicated upon citizenship rather than cultural practices. Therefore, day in and day out, Bhagwati and 'the other refugees struggled as non-contributing members of society, loathed by the Nepalese outside the camps – the Nepalese from Nepal; the real Nepalese' (Parajuly 2014: 17).

Bhagwati's uncertainty about her belonging to a particular place comes from her allegiances to multiple nations. For instance, on her way to Bhagdora Airport from her grandmother's house, she visits Phuntsholing, a small town in Bhutan near the border between India and Bhutan, to see what she had left behind 15 years ago. Her visit itself is an indication that she feels an attachment to Bhutan, her adopted country after her marriage. When asked where she came from, she gives different answers to different people, depending on her estimation of the person's nationality, based on their physical appearance. She says that she is from Sikkim to one person, from Nepal to second inquirer and from Bhutan to the third. Indeed, all three responses are true and represent her allegiance to multiple nations. She was an Indian by birth; Bhutanese by marriage; Nepali by her culture, language and ancestry – and now a soon-to-be American by citizenship and place of settlement. Indeed, Bhagwati's life reflects the transient nature of contemporary identity as she finds herself, to use Epstein's words, 'transcending rigid identities' and dwelling 'outside of any particular culture, outside of its national, racial, sexual, ideological, and other divisions' (2009: 349).

For the last 18 years, she had been 'forced from one country to another and to another, from one home to the next, one camp to a different one' (Parajuly 2014: 172). Her emigration to the United States gives her a sense of a new home and hope because she believes that her husband's untouchable caste will not be an issue in the United States. Nevertheless, because of her refugee status, her life is not as easy as she had hoped. Although she now possesses 'a shiny green card' (Parajuly 2014: 18) as a permanent resident, this status alone cannot land her a job commensurate with her expectations and education. Rather, she has to change jobs multiple times – sometimes she is fired while at other times she gets tired of low-level manual labor. More disappointing is her discovery that she is perceived as a refugee and an invisible subject by Americans. In the kitchen of Tom's Diner in Boulder, Colorado, for example, not only does she remain invisible to the outside world, both literally and metaphorically, but she also receives uninvited physical contact and harassment from coworkers.

Bhagwati and other Bhutanese refugees represent what I call a 'micro-minority.' I use the term to refer to their doubled minority status – first, they are an ethnic minority, and second, they are refugees, a status which is often disdained by mainstream Americans within a larger minority group. For instance, Brian, a white waiter who works in the same restaurant, harasses Bhagwati frequently. He and other coworkers call her not by her name but by her status, a 'refugee.' When Brian's harassment increases, Bhagwati cannot tolerate any more and slaps him. Brian pours out his repressed anger and frustration against immigrants and refugees, calling her a 'bitch' and lamenting 'what's this country come to, taking immigrants like you?'

(Parajuly 2014: 20). Brian represents those working-class white Americans who feel threatened by the growing population of immigrants and refugees in the country.

Some of the reviewers of *Land* have criticised this particular assault scene as unreal and artificial. For example, Khem K. Aryal, in his review of the novel, argues that Bhagwati's coworkers calling her a refugee repeatedly 'is next to impossible in the [sic] American society.' He further claims, '[S]he's been said to have been sexually abused time and again at the workplace, and that's another impossibility.' Aryal argues that the novel fails to deliver the promise it makes because 'the novelist fully depends on a realistic portrayal of people and events without realizing the need to justify the premises within which the story is told' (Aryal 2014). But after all, this is a work of fiction – and, as Ursula Le Guin (2014) said, writers need to be 'realists of a larger reality.' In fact, Parajuly's depiction of the harassment scene reflects a larger reality of the predicament of refugees in American society. As I am writing this chapter, we have been in what critics call the 'Trump era,' in which we are witnessing hundreds of incidents of harassment, racism and hate crimes against South Asians and other minorities being reported every day (see recent reports by Southern Poverty Law Center, FBI, the South Asian American Leading Together (SAALT) etc.). Trump's whole campaign was predicated on xenophobic, misogynistic, homophobic and anti-immigrant slogans. Before the 2016 election, white supremacists and nationalists were forced to temper their frustration and hatred against refugees and immigrants, and they expressed their anger through microaggression. But now, this microaggression has started to openly manifest itself in the form of hate crimes and racial harassment. Bhagwati's experience in the novel is therefore not an 'impossible' (Aryal 2014) incident at all; rather, her experience demonstrates Parajuly's understanding of the nuances of 'the larger reality' (Le Guin 2014) in American society.

Despite being 'invisible subjects,' Bhutanese refugees are an important South Asian ethnic group in the United State. The experiences of Bhutanese refugees can offer us a new theoretical framework by which to broaden the geographical, thematic and historical scope of South Asian diaspora studies in the twenty-first century. Bhutanese refugees are a double diaspora, or what Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma call the 'diaspora(s) in motion' (2006: 3) as Bhutanese refugees did not come directly from Bhutan. Rather, they spent almost two decades in the refugee camps in Nepal. These Bhutanese of Nepali ancestry, who were more Nepali culturally than Bhutanese, developed strong Nepali sensibilities during these years in Nepal. In fact, a large number of children were born and raised in the refugee camps of Nepal, and they identify themselves as Nepali more than Bhutanese. Bhutanese refugees' subjectivities and experiences are, therefore, shaped by their 'double diaspora' positionality and transcultural experiences, which make their identity fluid and complex and connect them to multiple nations and cultures.

I conclude this chapter by asserting that Parajuly's exploration of identity politics points us towards the possibility, and also the necessity, of mapping and imagining the journeys of Nepali diasporas who are excluded, exploited or rendered invisible in South Asian literary studies. By focusing on the diverse and invisible minority class of the Nepali diaspora, like Bhutanese refugees, Parajuly deploys these characters to instigate a conversation with the world about transcultural identity and multiple allegiances and challenges us to trace a new direction for South Asian diasporic literature in the twenty-first century. Parajuly utilises stateless status as a vehicle for transcultural consciousness. The transcultural consciousness of Ram and Bhagwati, for example, is shaped by the legacies of forced displacement from Bhutan, an excluded and miserable life in the refugee camps of Nepal and the exploration of a new life with harsh and difficult experience in the United States. Such transcultural consciousness of Bhutanese refugees challenges the norms of national citizenship and produces

what Susan Koshy calls ‘exorbitant citizenship’ (Koshy 2011: 597). Koshy defines exorbitant citizens as ‘those whose citizenship is eccentric, erratic, or irregular because they fall outside hegemonic cultural narratives of membership or are denied the full rights of citizens’ (2011: 597). She further elaborates: ‘[M]inorities, indigenous people, queer, the Romani, the homeless, and diasporic groups are paradigmatic exorbitant citizens’ (2011: 597). Because of the transgressive characteristics of exorbitant citizens, these diverse groups are often viewed, Koshy claims, as ‘suspects by states,’ but they offer ‘a rich archive of recalcitrant imaginings of community, worldliness, and belonging’ (2011: 598). Seen from this perspective, Ram and Bhagwati, as well as refugees from other parts of the world in general, embody exorbitant citizens whose identities are unfixed by both their experiences of the traumatic past and their present, experiences that persist across national and cultural geographies. Their stories walk us through their painful experiences, both physical and psychological, and help us view them as human, beyond the norms of national, caste, cultural and geographical borders. As with Parajuly himself, the characters in the *Land Where I Flee* themselves are Indians and Bhutanese by citizenship but Nepalese by culture and language. Thus, as reflected in these characters’ embodiment of transculturality, one of the challenges for scholars of South Asian literary studies is to recognise the scope of the Nepali diaspora within the continuity and boundaries of this literature that seems to be moving beyond identity politics, binary thinking and rigid national and cultural boundaries.

Notes

- 1 Although I specifically use Epstein’s concept of transculturalism, my theoretical framework is also informed by the works of Arianna Dagnino, Arjun Appadurai and Homi Bhabha.
- 2 For further reading on the complication of caste system in India and South Asia, see Deepa Reddy, ‘The Ethnicity of Caste’; M. V. Nadkarni, ‘Is Caste System Intrinsic to Hinduism: Demolishing a Myth’; Surinder S. Jodhka and Ghanshyam Shah, ‘Comparative Contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia.’ Although the meaning of ‘untouchability’ and the forms of segregation and its sources vary across South Asia, the impacts of the caste system are similar in terms of economic deprivation, social exclusion and discrimination against the Dalits (the so called ‘untouchable’ caste).

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