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Transnationals' Search for Home in Bhattarai's *Muglan**

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Abstract

This article addresses the issue of Nepali transnationals' search for home as depicted in Govinda Raj Bhattarai's novel Muglan. The novel presents three types of transnationals as its characters: diasporans, transnational mobiles and transnational outsiders. Throughout the life, all of them go on searching for a home that can provide them comfort, security and peace of mind. But none of the characters can achieve it. The novel presents the reality of Nepali transnational migration that is continued for centuries. For the analysis of the characters and their condition and consequences, the theories of transnationalism and diaspora have been used. Janine Dahinden's idea of three types of transnational migrants and Steven Vertovec's discussion on the practice of cultural diaspora have been the main theoretical bases for this study. Both of the theorists claim that the transnationals leave their homeland with the motive of making their home back in the land of origin better than that of the time they leave it. Throughout their stay in the host land, they try to achieve their goal sacrificing everything they have. Some of them try to find their dream home even in the host land. But finally, they cannot achieve their dream in the reality. So, the transnationals remain homeless throughout. Bhattarai's Muglan gives fictio-realistic expression to this theoretical claim.

Keywords: Diaspora, home, homelessness, identity, transnationals.

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Home in Transnational Studies

Home is a major construct in the study of transnational migration. Uma Parameswaran states that “home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too!” (208). A home is, thus, a place of comfort, security and peace. She quotes Raja Rao who declares that “I carry India with me wherever I go” (209). Rao means that when someone, by birth, belongs to a certain land, s/he remains attached to it throughout the life. When a Nepal born person migrates to any part of the world, s/he remains connected to Nepal forever. Such a connection establishes the fact that home is not only a physical construct but also an emotional and social one. Robin Cohen claims: “the social construction of ‘home’ uses fears and passions that are deeply etched in human emotions and weaknesses” (104). Summarily, home is taken as “a warm, cornucopian breast [...] nurturing white milk” (Cohen 103). In this article, the idea of home is used with these connotations.

Michael Hutt discusses the trend of Nepali migration to India and Bhutan. He differentiates the idea of ‘home’ and ‘abroad’ connecting them with society, language and psychology: “a Home that Nepali writers have simply called *muluk*, ‘the country’ or *pahar*, ‘the hills’, and an Abroad that they have often called *muglan*.” He adds that once they are in *muglan*, they “need to construct a new home, a new identity” (195). Here, home connotes identity as well. It is necessary because when someone is a transnational (transnational migrant), s/he has already left the home in the nation of birth. Such a person, thus, is in the need of the society in a new place. For them, home becomes “a mode of interpretative in-betweenness” (Radhakrishnan xiii) where they can exist with the pains and pleasures of both the homeland and host land.

Govinda Raj Bhattarai’s novel *Muglan*, published in Nepali in 1974 and in English in 2012, deals with Nepali transnational migrants’ lives. It raises the issue of many Nepali youths leaving Nepal in search of their better future in a new land, mostly India until the 1970s. A question that can be raised about such a migration is: If Nepal is the home for Nepali people, why do they leave it and migrate abroad? The answer is not an easy one. Sutar Kanchho, the main character of the novel, reveals the reason behind his migration: “If I can at least release the mortgaged slope land of ours from the hands of the money-lender, then only would I consider myself to have paid my debts to my parents” (29). This thought shows that the migrating youths are not at home

in their country of origin as well. It is not the home that can provide them comfort, security and peace. They migrate with the hope of earning enough in a foreign land and come back and make a home. It is also a search for home in the homeland itself.

There are other characters in the novel who have already developed a Nepali Diaspora in Bhutan. They are in the process of developing a home in the new land. In transnational discourse, it is termed as 'homing desire' i.e., to construct a home better than the one they have left back in the homeland. Jack S. Bocker Jr. has concluded that "[o]wing home (physical property in the host land) makes the Diaspora stable and economically sound" (in Okpewho et al 123). Vijay Mishra summarises his study on the Indian Diaspora in Fiji and claims that "diaspora itself [...] is all about journeys [...]. It is about our first journeys after which there are no other; it is about later journeys parodying earlier ones" (131). The journey is the search for comfort, security and peace of mind. In other words, the transnationals are always in search of home.

Critics on Bhattarai's *Muglan* have raised the issue of Nepali Diaspora that the novel has depicted. Lekhnath S. Pathak, the translator of the novel from Nepali into English, claims that "*Muglan* depicts the core ethos and pathos of Nepali life whether home or abroad." He opines that the term *muglan* "connotes to something outside Nepal, a foreign or alien land." And going to *Muglan* refers to going to "any 'promised land' or a 'dreamland' or 'a Shangri-La'. So 'Muglan' in a sense, remains more of an abstract construct, rather than a particular tangible land" (xviii). Pathak further claims that "[t]his novel has been best studied for its diasporic appeal. It traces the story of leaving one's homeland behind and all that one undergoes in the process and the longing that one feels for home" (xxx). Both the longing for home back in Nepal and a new home in the host land are searches for home.

It is necessary to explore the idea of Nepali transnational's search for home. The characters' search for home in the novel represents such a quest. Thus, this article attempts to answer the following research questions:

- Why do the characters leave home?
- How do they search for the lost home and new home?
- What are the effects and achievements of such a search?

As the novel presents the search for home of three types of transnationals (transnational mobiles, diasporans and transnational outsiders), the article analyses the causes, processes, effects and achievements of their quest.

Transnational Mobiles: Homeless Characters

The people who cross the national border in search of work and want to return home after a certain time are transnational mobiles (Dahinden 60). Transnational mobiles are one of the major varieties of Nepali transnational migrants (Timalsina 13). There are many characters in the novel *Muglan* who cross the Nepal-India border to work and earn in India so that they can return home with the earning enough to make their home better than that of the time they have left it. But all the time they live in the host land, they find themselves homeless. Sutar Kanchho, the main character of the novel, exhibits this feature more clearly than the other characters.

There are certain reasons for their leaving the homeland. The narrator reports that they “might have been carried away by wild dreams, occasionally. They could not control themselves from the temptation of getting lost in this colourful world of *muglan*, away from home.” At the same time, they were “swept away by the imagination of being recruited in the army.” Even the imagination of being a soldier fills them with ‘eternal joy’” (2). They talk to themselves: “When you return home wearing a slanting beret cap, baggy pants and tie-up boots, with you walking ahead and a few porters following you with your trunks, only then yours coming here will be meaningful” (29). The young boys collected to be transported to Bhutan do not know their fate ahead. So, they believe that “the diet of *dhindo* is over” (32). Such are the dreams that make many Nepali youths transnational mobiles. Really, they leave the nation in search of a better future home back there.

Like their poverty, their innocence is the next cause for their migration and consequent exploitation. When Sutar and Thule leave the village folks in Dorling, they do not know what they need to do to reach *muglan*. When a helper of the truck-driver assures them that their truck will take them “straight to *muglan*” (3), they believe him. The truck takes undue fare and leaves them stranded at Siliguri. They do not have any idea where to go and spend the night in that strange land.

The co-ethnics i.e., the people of the Nepali origin themselves cheat and loot the innocent Nepali transnationals. The rickshaw puller who loots them in Siliguri is a Nepali speaker. Even the contractor, who collects the young boys to transport them to Bhutan, is a Nepali speaking man. In the road construction site, their supervisor is Nepali. Not only these people, the person who compels Sutar to leave Dorkha and the dream of living a settled life in Bhutan is also a Nepali there. It is Salbote who to take revenge from Pakhe, Sutar's father-in-law, makes Sutar redundant. Later, in Chengmari tea estate, Moktan, a Nepali co-habitant in the same hut, steals all the money Sutar has collected to return home. All these people destroy Sutar's search for home.

Every time, Sutar plans to return home, he finds his condition miserable. He feels that it is "shameful for a son who disappeared for all these days to go back home with an empty pocket" (110). But his pocket is never filled. His search for home is never materialized. Hutt comments on such a situation: "Muglan does not always live up to the expectations held of it" (203). After Sutar is looted by Moktan, he suddenly gets reunited with Thuli, his wife, who was left back in Dorkha when he fled. He is happy to get reunited, but they cannot make home. When Thuli gives birth to a child, they cannot be happy because it "became an additional burden for Sutar" (162). After some time, Sutar meets his father and receives his daughter from Nepal. It should be good news for him; but it is not so. His father moves to Kamakhya for spending the life of a hermit there; and his daughter becomes an additional financial burden to him. His dream of finding a good home back in Nepal finally comes to an end. He becomes a real homeless after that.

The novel shows that the transnationals' condition in the host land is the opposite of their dreams. Their pitiable condition is presented throughout the novel. The helper of the truckdriver makes them spend the night in Siliguri without any place to stay. When the same rickshaw puller, who freely takes them to the train station, loots them, they become penniless. "For a while, both of them lost their senses" (17). This is the beginning of their helpless plight. The series continues. The next day, they are promised to be recruited in the army and are collected at the bank of Tista. There they form "a pack of raw callow lads of similar ages. Almost everyone was wearing torn, worn out and unclean ragged clothes" (26). Their condition cannot improve later, too.

They are transported to the road construction site in northern Bhutan. The place has no human settlement nearby. It is along the hills “which had not felt the footfalls of human civilization” (46). They are put in a temporary camp that contains “some seven or eight old, tattered and patched tents pitched close by them” (47). There they have to work like bondage labourers. About two hundred workers there are all Nepalis. There nobody has “any courage to utter even a single word, either in protest or in approval” (49). Their job is to break rocks, fell the trees without any time and chance “to mix up with new and old colleagues or make friends” (62). At the end of the monthlong tiresome work, instead of getting the salary, they come to know that they still have to pay back the expenses the employer has invested in their journey from Siliguri to Bhutan.

The life is so difficult there that they are compelled to create a new hope of surviving there until they can manage to run away. Sutar proposes Thule: “It is difficult to survive any more like this Since we are destined to die anyway, let’s run away now” (83). They manage to run away. But the life after that turns out to be even worse. Thule dies of exhaustion and hunger in the jungle of Bhutan. Then Sutar, too, wants to die. But he finds that “it was difficult to die, because of an unknown desire for living” (96). He has a faint hope of reaching into some human settlement. It is also the desire for home among the humans that can be better than the life in the jungle.

Sutar’s hope of reaching to a human settlement is materialized. He reaches Dorkha and happens to meet Pakhe Kainlo. But he is not secure there because it is “an unknown village for him, unknown place and everybody is new. If anybody identifies him as a *dipaitey*, then everything will be spoiled” (115). So, he wants to find out the way to cross the Bhutan-India border and then return to Nepal. His search for home i.e., to return to Nepal and go to the home that he has left back continues. As he has no energy for all these acts at the moment, he accepts Pakhe Kainlo’s advice to settle in Bhutan for some years until he can earn enough for honourable homecoming. So, he starts working there; and he becomes a news for the whole village of Dorkha.

Once again Sutar “imagined himself going back home with money in his pocket and fulfilling all the hopes and aspirations of his family” (110). When the time passes, Sutar starts his home making in Bhutan itself. He engages in the farm, gets married and wants to have a permanent settlement there. When this dream of his is about to get

materialized, he has to run away from Bhutan to India. His next attempt of finding home also gets destroyed.

Sutar cannot settle permanently anywhere. After he flees away from Dorkha, he reaches Chengmari tea estate in India. The flight is very difficult. Penniless, jobless, homeless, friendless, he feels “miserable thinking of all that had befallen him so far” (149). He has a single mission: going back home. He thinks “he wouldn’t get stuck there and would go home straight away” (150) after he earns the fare to reach home. But his search for home will remain incomplete if he returns home penniless. His mission is not to find the home without comfort, security and hope. The narrator contemplates: “how could he go back home empty handed? His parents might have very high hopes for him. He thought it would be better to die rather than go back home empty handed. So, he started to work” (151). Search for home with certain financial strength is the main motif of transnational mobiles. Sutar works for the same throughout his life.

Instead of a real home he has been dreaming for long, Sutar is placed in a small hut with Moktan in the Chengmari tea estate. There, he finds many other workers migrated from Nepal with the dream much similar to his dream of earning a lot in a foreign land and returning home in Nepal to make it a better home than that of the time they have left it. But they can never get their dream achieved. “No matter how much facility they got, their life ended there and, in reality, there was not much to gain besides a stomach full of meal” (151). So, Sutar begins his own ginger business in the holidays. He is so busy working there that he “hardly notices having spent five years’ period in the estate, as fleeting day after day turned into months” (153). When he earns three thousand rupees, he plans to return home. But he is once again looted. His dream of finding home is destroyed when his co-habitant Moktan steals all his money and vanishes to Assam.

Nepali transnationals find themselves materially poor and emotionally crushed in the host land. “The situations unthought of had gripped and taken control, and they were unable to escape” (22). Most of the time they feel “betrayed and their countenances appeared depressed and dark” (60). The day they reach the road construction site in northern Bhutan, “everybody felt deeply maimed from inside and shattered completely. They wilted within themselves” (48-9). The description of their

condition is filled with affect: “Their legs started to tremble and their whole bodies shivered. They had never imagined that the assurances and dreams that they had harboured would be crushed like this. They were all speechless” (49). It is just one condition in the series of so many others situations Sutar and his friends have to undergo in India and Bhutan.

The day Sutar and Thule reach Siliguri on their way to muglan, an uncertain destination that they never really reach, they sense their possible life ahead. The narrator comments: “Would they have to keep wresting constantly like this for their life in this strange place? They were in dilemma” (7). They feel that “monsters hack you off in this place” (12). A single night “appears to be made up of several nights” (13) for them. When they are robbed, they feel that their world is vanished: “Their whole bodies trembled, they began to perspire, their mouths became dry and Sutar felt as if he was melting into water or his entire body was dissolving into the earth” (17). The narrator comments on their situation: “Sutar’s eyes welled up with an unexpected pain. For the first time, they realized that life could be so painful. They became disheartened” (18). It continues throughout their stay in the host land till their lives are crushed down to death. Edward Said points to the reality of the transnationals:

Exile is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home. The essential sadness of the break can never be surmounted. [...] The achievements of any exile are permanently undermined by his or her sense of loss.

[...] exiles had similar cross-cultural and transnational visions, suffered the same frustrations and miseries, performed the same elucidating and critical tasks. (439)

Steven Vertovec mentions that the split of families “between the countries of origin and destination” causes emotional effects because of transnational migration (14). Sutar’s condition and feelings show that these writers are correct.

When Sutar reaches to the Nepali settlement in southern Bhutan, he is in search of somebody who may give him shelter and can show him the way back home. Pakhe Kainlo’s fatherly role makes him feel like a human being once again: “In the hour of distress, just a touch of sympathy from the fellow human being gives so much of

support to carry on with life” (102). But unexpectedly, love and care cause the distress of both of the Kainlo and Sutar. Sutar does not find himself happy in Chengmari tea state as well. He finds that both of his present and the future are sure to be pitiable. “Even though he appeared happy outside, he felt a poignant pang of his reality. It was because of this that Sutar could not even get sleep until past midnight” (152). When he thinks of home, his eyes fill with tears and “his heart would be overwhelmed with sadness on thinking of the day overcast with fog when Thule had disappeared from his life” (152). He begins to think of the past so much that he completely loses his peace of mind.

Sutar’s restlessness develops into trauma. Gradually he begins to be absent minded. With the growing forgetfulness “he was also gradually losing the rabbit like agility that he showed earlier.... After all, he had started doing things all wrong or would spoil his work” (162). When he meets his father and daughter at Chalsa station and his father leaves them forever, he lifts his eleven-year-old daughter on his back and moves her around the platform. He moves round crying: “Oh, my daughter! How did you survive all alone in this world ...?” (164). He is so shocked and mindless because “[h]is lifelong desire of returning home someday was all quashed from that day” (164). This realization makes him fall into trauma. Then, he begins to display the symptoms of accumulated trauma. This is an example of how the transnationals’ life experiences are so harsh that they take a person to trauma.

Sutar begins to have unusual dreams. He intermittently remembers the frightening incidents of his life such as a big rock squashing his friend, and Thule dying with gaping mouth. He wakes up from his dreams and shouts. He keeps on “babbling nonsense for a long time.” These are the symptoms of post-traumatic system disorder (PTSD). The effects of trauma gradually intensify. He forgets his real world and wanders in the memory. “His bouts of delirium every night, waking up and blabbering nonsense kept on increasing day by day” (166). He begins to grin and laugh senselessly time and again. And finally, he attacks his daughter and when his wife beats him with a burning splinter of firewood to save the daughter from his attack, he rushes out of home towards the jungle wailing loudly, crying and calling the name of his partner, Thule. From this point, he is lost in the jungle. His search for home ends here forever.

Homemaking in the Diaspora

Muglan also describes the process of homemaking in the Bhutanese Nepali Diaspora. The village of Dorkha, as depicted in the novel, is a well settled diasporic community. There are many Nepali families living for generations. Pakhe Kainlo recounts with Sutar what the elderly Bhutanese Nepalis say about their ancestral land: “They say our *pahad* is also there; our ancestral root is still on that side [Nepal]. My uncles and other relatives are still there.” Along with this narration, Pakhe expresses his satisfaction in their ability to settle there as a farming family: “My house lies close to the Dorkha Office. This is my own shed. I have my parents and family at home” (105). They have farmlands in Dorkha and the pasture nearby the jungle.

Pakhe describes how the village has been developed. When their forefathers reached there, they were simply cattle grazers. There used to be cattle sheds in the place where they have the village of Dorkha now. Gradually, they cleared the forest and developed their farmlands. Gradually, other Nepalis also migrated to the land in search of opportunities. The number went up and finally they developed a separate community of Nepali transnationals. Their life pattern is just like that of the eastern hill communities in Nepal. Even the geography is much similar to that of Nepali hills. The narrator reports: “People in that area had to do all their shopping before the start of monsoon, during the dry season itself, and stock up sufficient provisions for the whole year” (123). Other villages like Dorkha are Denchuka, Kadari, Paunthok, Tapekha and Lalekh.

The people in all these villages were similar in terms of living style, customs and costumes. The narrator claims that “[i]f anybody wanted to get a glimpse of an age-old Nepali culture and tradition, one had to reach there” (124). Michael Hutt also claims that the Nepalis of southern Bhutan “appear to have remained politically and culturally conservative until long after Indian independence in 1947; they were subsistence farmers who rented the lands they tilled from a Bhutanese Agent appointed by the Bhutanese government” (206). The woman in the community “had to cover her face with shame” when she needs to talk to a man. Similarly, she “had to cover all her developed parts and almost deprive herself of all the signs of womanhood” (124). The novel also mentions that these people do not want to take modern education there: “In the name of education, there was an unrivalled authoritative empire of the village

pundits, astrologers” (124). The seniors in the society rule the community based on their experiences. They are proud of consuming enough ghee instead of getting modern education.

The Bhutanese Nepalis are not interested in the education the government has managed to provide to the people. They do not send their children to government schools with the fear that “they might get his *tuppi* chopped off, or the teacher might be a Tibetan Monk or a Kami, or a Limbu or a Tamang” (125-6) as they are untouchables as per the conservative Nepali social system both back in Nepal and in the Bhutanese Nepali settlements. Such conservative beliefs make them work just in the farmlands. The highest government job a Nepali can get there is that of the Post Man. It shows that though they are physically settled there, they are unable to develop themselves. For the diasporans, both the homeland and host land are ‘found home’ and ‘virtual home’ (Cohen 12). Diaspora is always susceptible for minority status (Vertovec 137). They do not feel politically and socially at home in that land. They are the outsiders.

Like all the diasporas, the Bhutanese Nepali Diaspora also feels at home in cultural terms. They have preserved the Nepali culture there even after the generations of their migration to the land. “Through migration, diaspora members have lost their material relationship to the territory of origin, but they can still preserve their cultural or spiritual relationship through memory [...] re-routing in the host country” (Bruneau 47). They are the people who “never grow past the phase of nostalgia. Romanticizing one’s native land has a place so long as it does not paralyze one’s capacity to develop new bonds within one’s adopted homeland” (Parameswaran 210). These features of a diaspora are seen in their cultural practices there.

They celebrate the Dashain in the way people celebrate this Hindu festival back in Nepal. Everybody gets the new dress prepared for this occasion. They receive *tika* from their elders wearing the fresh and so pure clothes. They visit their relatives’ home the way the people back in Nepal do. When they ferry their farm products to far away markets, they celebrate the occasion with Nepali songs and dances. The sounds of the Nepali duet songs and the energy of the young boys and girls on the occasion reminds one the music in Nepali hills during the dry season.

In the marriage ceremonies, the food and music remind one the marriages back in Nepal. In a diaspora “food as national identity” is connected with “sensual and aesthetic roots” (McCann 385). The preparation of *kasar* and *chiura*, and the music of *naumati* bands make even the old people “feel rejuvenated and their youths revive again” (140). It is the emotion created by their cultural bond. Even the dress pattern in the marriage reminds the marriage dresses back in Nepal: “silk sari, cotton *cholo*, and silk shawl for the bride.” And for the groom, it is “white *daura-suruwal* and black coat of jeans cloth” (141). Even the marriage procession is like that of Nepali hills. “The *damais* came down dancing off the ground in the tune of *panche baja*. The bugling *narsinga* trumpet at the hilltops would resonate in the whole atmosphere” (141-2). The firing of guns at the auspicious moment and the chanting of the poems from the holy books like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* give the glimpse of Nepali style marriage ceremony there. The priests keep “roaring, chanting the religious incantations profusely the whole night” and on the first day of marriage “they cooked rice, goat meat [*jante bakhro*] and ate together” (145). These cultural practices make them feel at home in the host land.

But socially and politically, they are always in the lope side. Finally, Pakhe’s family is ruined. It is Salbote who reports to the Bhutanese police that Pakhe gets his daughter married to a *depaitey*. Protecting and developing any relation with the fled away construction labour is prohibited there. So, the police searches for Sutar; and when Sutar runs away from the village, the police set fire on Pakhe’s house, arrests him and puts him into the jail for years. It shows that the Bhutanese Nepali diasporans are not secure in the land of Bhutan. Though they believe that they have developed a home there, in reality, they are still in the process of searching for a secure home which the diasporans do not get. This fact, as symbolized by this novel, is proved when more than one hundred thousand Bhutanese people of Nepali origin were expelled from Bhutan in the 1990s with the charge of attempting to promote and protect Nepali language and culture there.

Homelessness

The transnationals’ search for home rarely ends at home coming. Most of the time, they remain homeless throughout their life. Bhutanese Nepalis are the epic example of this reality. In the novel, Sutar is its good representative. Even the

Bhutanese Nepali diasporans are not at home though they have physical settlement there. They are constantly in search of a home that can give them comfort, security and peace. Like Sutar, Thuli also becomes homeless wanderer when her newly married husband has to run away from her. She “spends her days and nights crying only” (155). Thuli become homeless the second time when Sutar vanishes into jungle as she has to leave the hut in the tea estate. Even Sutar’s father back in Nepal becomes homeless in India as he leaves home, becomes a hermit even after he meets his son at Chalsa station. Sutar’s daughter is also homeless even though she meets her father for the first time at the age of eleven. She has already lost her mother and the home back in Nepal.

Thus, the novel, symbolically, argues that once out of the homeland or the land/nation of their birth, transnationals become homeless. They search for the home throughout their life, but can never regain the lost home. This is the fate of many Nepali transnationals for centuries. The characters in the novel are just the symbols to indicate this reality.

Conclusion

Govinda Raj Bhattarai’s novel *Muglan* depicts the causes, processes and achievements of the transnationals’ search for home. Poverty is the principal cause of the Nepali youths being transnationals of all types: diasporans, transnational mobiles and transnational outsiders. Once they are in the host land, their innocence, ignorance and trust on the co-ethnics add their problems. As their goal is to earn enough to return Nepal and make their home left back better than it was in the time of migration, they compromise with many difficulties and insults throughout their stay in the new land. They sacrifice everything for the search of their home that can give them comfort, security and peace of mind. But, sadly, many of these Nepali youths, like the characters in the novel, never achieve their goal: a dream home. The novel tells centuries long tragic story of the Nepali society. The search for home (both in the homeland and host land) does not end at finding the home they want.

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