

## **Dialectics of Survival: Immigrant Psyche in Stephen Gill's Immigrant.**

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**Abstract:** *Today's world is more mobile and interconnected than ever before in the history of mankind. The process of globalisation has effected so many transformations in the world that can never be imagined by human mind. With the abolition of distances and compression of spaces, intermigratory and intramigratory movements across the globe have become the order of the day. This has, in turn, resulted in the creation of the global village characterised by the presence of people belonging to diverse races, cultures, religions and ethnicities. Following the dispersal or scattering of people across the globe, a diasporic community has also come into existence. Consequent upon the physical and psychological displacement and dislocation of the so-called diasporic people from their land of birth to a totally alien land, they are either forced to assimilate themselves to the host land or to preserve their roots by alienating themselves from the socio-cultural, ethnic practices of the new land. The present research paper titled **Dialectics of Survival: Immigrant Psyche in Stephen Gill's Immigrant** proposes to examine how Reghu Nath, the protagonist of Stephen Gill's **Immigrant** strives hard to overcome the sweetness of his home land and the bitterness of the host land in order to evolve as truly cosmopolitan citizen.*

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### **I. Introduction**

The narrative of the novel revolves round the trials and tribulations of the Indian protagonist Reghu Nath on his arrival in Canada. He finds himself in the midst of problems and conflicts arising out of the encounters and intersections between the two cultures. In the novel, we also find the protagonist trying to grapple with the tensions arising out of the feelings of displacement and the harrowing experiences of ethnic and racial discrimination, and her attempts to make sense of her identity in the multicultural hybrid Canadian society that it is. Nostalgia and longing for the homes left behind characterise the existence of an immigrant. Reghu Nath encounters several traumatic moments in "the suffocative island of tensions" (Shrine 82), and as Gill notes:

Within weeks, Reghu found himself surrounded with many difficult problems. financially, His position was not sound; educationally, he did not know where he was headed; psychologically he was not yet adjusted to his new environment. At the University, he found himself in a mess....As far as his social life was concerned, it was almost non-existent (I 15-16).

Reghu finds himself as an 'outcast' among the Canadian lot, and is thrown into confusion. The intellectually demanding atmosphere at the University also makes him apprehensive. In such a compelling and uncompromising socio-cultural milieu, he finds out to his disgust that the academic life at the University was purely mechanical, with no regard for one's emotional needs and aspirations. Caught in the "intolerable present" ("Fury 20"), Reghu Nath now fully comprehends the uncompromising hiatus in the social and cultural codes of conduct and economic and political modes of life between the two countries. The Indianness is so deeply embedded in Reghu Nath's mind that he experiences cultural conflict, and strongly desires to escape the claustrophobic ambience of Canada. Despite being an immigrant by choice, the Indian sensibility and spirit is still hot and fresh in Reghu Nath's mind. To immigrants like Reghu, Canada represents a land of greener pastures, but on arrival in Canada, they gain the understanding that an immigrant's position is always on the periphery. He is torn between his biological and socio-cultural and identities, and in this context, it is pertinent to note Bharati Munherjee's observation that in the present age of diasporic tendencies "One's biological identity may not be one's only identity. Erosions and accretions come with act of emigration" ("American Dreamer" 4).

The cultural shock that Reghu Nath experiences is further accentuated when he notices the differences between the two cultures. When Reghu Nath holds the hand of his friend, the latter refuses to be taken hold of. Such an act on the part of Reghu Nath meets with his friend's disapproval on the ground that he may be mistaken and misunderstood for a homosexual. Reghu Nath is obviously taken aback at the rude and impolite behaviour of his Indian friend in Canada, and indubitably his friend's behaviour and attitude are conditioned by the Canadian socio-cultural modes of existence. It is disheartening to note that the non-white immigrants like Reghu Nath occupy the peripheral position in the paradigms of Canadian multiculturalism. Reghu Nath's

morbid experiences of racial segregation in Canada leave him in a quandary for the physical displacement has affected him psychologically as he tries to negotiate between the two conflicting standpoints.

Though Canada follows the official policy of multiculturalism implemented in 1971 by the then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau with a view to promote cultural plurality, in reality it was not practised. The immigrants from Asian countries are not treated on equal footing as their white counterparts are; and as visible minorities," they are excluded from the Canadian mainstream society on account of their racial socio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds. As a corollary, immigrants like Reghu Nath are forced to redefine their native identities, thus compromising on their religious traditions, cultural beliefs and ethnic practices, As., Lois Tyson remarks;

Double consciousness and homeliness are the two features of postcolonial diasporas. 'Double consciousnesses' or unstable sense of the self is the result of forced migration colonialism frequently caused. In the diaspora this feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither, rather than to both of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological order, but from the trauma of the cultural displacement within which one lives is referred to by Homi Bhabha and others as 'unhomeliness.' To be 'unhomed' is not the same as being homeless. To be unhomed is to feel not at home at even in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak (421).

Thus Reghu Nath who is the process of negotiating between the home land and the host land experiences an identity crisis. As Reghu Nath's acceptance of his life in Canada despite its inconsistencies is a pointer to the accommodative tendencies of an immigrant towards the practical realities offered by life in a given situation. His decision to assimilate himself with the hegemonic host culture can be seen as an act of survival tactics. Further, it is pertinent to note that his transformation is rooted in the knowledge that "I don't see any difference. Men and women all over the world are the same basically These so-called cultures are man-made and cause confusion and anarchy" (I 66). He tides over this personal crisis of identities on the realisation that "The whole world is my country. I am a world citizen" (I 142). As part of his attempts to become a cosmopolitan citizen, Reghu Nath creates a new old devoid of agonising thoughts related to the problem of displacement from his homeland. Ghettoisation only leads to misconceptions and prejudices regarding the host culture, and Gill points out the role played by "associations where all could meet"(I 134) where differences of opinion among people hailing from diverse ethno-religious, social and cultural backgrounds can be meted out. He feels alienated in the social circles of Canada, as he finds that Indian like him are forcibly pushed on the margins. But instead of showing resistance to the cultural practices and social customs of the new country, Reghu Nath decides to act in conformity with the exigencies offered by the new context. Therefore, the question of the ethical implications of the policy of multiculturalism arise for in Immigrant, Reghu Nath's racial and ethnic affiliations are a clear marker of his identity, and is so denied of opportunities.

In the present day globalised world, the severing of people from their homeland, culture and language causes them to reassess and re think about their original identities. In the contact zones where people of disparate socio-cultural background are brought into contact with each other, we find them being faced with the pressures of coercion, inequality and conflicts. In this context, it is relevant to note Louis Pratt who has put forth the concept of contact zone as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination -- like colonialism slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today"(4). Reghu Nath is put in a hierarchical relationship, and comes to experience a sense of frustration vitiated by a deeper feeling of homelessness.

When left alone in the socio-cultural space of the Eurocentric Canada, Reghu Nath starts realising what it is to be an outsider. The differences between the two cultures are based on certain criteria such as colour, racial affiliations, linguistic items, clothes and food, and, if we keep aside these external differences, human beings are one and the same across the world. Reghu Nath's confusion is complicated by ethnicity and cultural moorings as he finds it difficult to reject his obligation to the home land in favour of the new alien culture with its privileges. Having been territorially displaced from their land of birth diasporics like Reghu Nath are put in a fix, and so display their resistance to adapt and adopt themselves to the cultural ethos of the host land along with an inherent desire to go back to the roots. The very idea of 'home' is reconstructed out of one's memories, and the stronger the memories, the greater the desire to return to home. Home, therefore, stakes as a problematic concept in diasporic consciousness, and to make adjustments in the new surroundings, these diasporic individuals are forced to reinvent themselves.

The school considered to be a social space turns itself into a site of conflicting attitudes and ideologies. When Reghu Nath is denied a private high school job by the Principal on the grounds that they have found a more suitable 'Canadian' teacher – "one who was born here" (I 88), it strikes the readers as an obvious case of the practice of unabashed and virulent form of racism inherent in the Canadian discourse of multiculturalism which seeks to marginalise the less significant religio-ethnic groups. Though tolerance is considered to be the backbone of Canadian multiculturalism, discrimination in its ugliest form is seen at work. Reghu Nath meets

with rebuff as he is denied opportunities again and again on the basis of race and colour. In his present state, Reghu Nath understands that despite his transplantation in a new social space, his moorings in the values and ethos of his homeland contributes towards accentuating the schism between the intimate homeland and the alienating host land.

A diasporic individual's mind becomes a site of conflicting ideologies. Even while looking back at the past he left behind, it also necessitates a looking forward to the future. The past is a source of comfort and satisfaction to the diasporic individual, but the future involves uncertainties and doubts. In his neither here nor there situation, Reghu Nath is under compulsion to move between the two spaces -- between the familiar and the strange and the old and the new. Reghu Nath is compelled to discard nostalgia in favour of assimilation in to the adopted culture, which for him is his chief survival strategy.

It is psychologically significant to note how Reghu Nath responds to the process of acculturation. He decides to become a cosmopolitan citizen unmoored from the walled confines of the customs and cultural codes of the land. Having become a victims of racial bias, verbal abuse and ethnic segregation, Reghu Nath decides to overcome the racial-cultural barriers and Gill wants us to understand the need to promote a sense of tolerance among human beings irrespective of being hosts or immigrants. Reghu Nath's transformation is now complete He accepts and acknowledge the American Dream, and decides to overcome the pangs of displacement from his homeland . As Avtar Brah rightly states.

Where is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the vivid experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey series in the middle of day.... all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations (192).

His progression from nostalgic memories of India to the present demands of Canada, in fact, reminds us of the observation made by Uma Parameswaran that "Home is where the feet are, and we had better place our heart where the feet are" (39).

Reghu Nath's transformation into a cosmopolitan citizen calls attention to the changes that characterise a diasporic individual's identity politics. The interaction between the 'host' and 'immigrant' cultures problematise an immigrant's identity, for as Stuart Hall, rightly asserts in his "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" that a diasporic individual's identity is not "an accomplished fact," but a "production"(222) which is an ongoing one, and so his identity "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'" (225). He develops a cosmopolitan outlook on the contextual realisation that the policy of Canadian multiculturalism strikes an ambiguous note for as a nation with ethnic prejudices, it does not seem to approve of the imported cultural groups and its members into its white ethnic fold.

In the contemporary globalised world, immigrants like Reghu Nath are a common feature, and caught between the socio-cultural spaces of India and Canada, he cultivates a cosmopolitan outlook and global attitude in order to promote a peaceful relationship within the host country. Therefore, instead of offering resistance to the ethos of the hegemonic host society and creating socio cultural turmoil, Reghu Nath converts himself into a true humanist. Through Reghu Nath, Gill evidently looks forward to a society governed by peace:

The plant of democracy blossoms into the fruits of abundance and its branches dance to the tune of a song which brews a wine for peace (Shrine 65)

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