

STUDY ABROAD AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF CULTURAL ROOTS IN NEPALI NARRATIVES

Umesh Dhungel

CEO & FOUNDER, SHATAKSHEE EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

umesh@shatakshee.edu.np

Abstract. This study explores how study abroad experiences contribute to the displacement of cultural roots in contemporary Nepali narratives—both literary and lived. As increasing numbers of Nepali youth pursue education in Western countries, their stories often reflect a tension between aspiration and alienation, global mobility and cultural disconnection. Drawing from postcolonial theory and cultural displacement frameworks, this research analyzes selected Nepali novels, memoirs, and student testimonies to understand how educational migration reshapes identity, belonging, and cultural memory. Findings reveal a recurring narrative arc: initial idealization of the West, followed by experiences of marginalization and internal conflict, and ultimately a fragmented sense of cultural identity. The study highlights how Western education, while offering opportunity, often imposes subtle pressures to assimilate, leading to a detachment from native language, traditions, and familial structures. Moreover, returning students frequently struggle with re-integration, caught between two cultural paradigms. These patterns not only reflect the personal costs of academic globalization but also raise critical questions about the future of cultural continuity in Nepal. By foregrounding Nepali voices and texts, this research calls for a more culturally grounded understanding of study abroad experiences—one that recognizes the emotional and narrative complexities of cross-border education in a postcolonial context.

Keywords: Cultural Roots, Abroad Program

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the pursuit of higher education abroad has become a prominent feature of Nepal's socio-cultural landscape. For thousands of Nepali students, studying in Western countries represents not only access to advanced academic opportunities but also a pathway to global citizenship, economic mobility, and social prestige. However, beneath these promises of progress lies a more complex narrative—one marked by displacement, identity fragmentation, and cultural estrangement. As students immerse themselves in foreign academic and cultural environments, many begin to experience a gradual detachment from their native traditions, languages, and social values, resulting in a subtle but significant displacement of cultural roots.

This paper investigates how study abroad experiences contribute to the dislocation of cultural identity in Nepali narratives, both literary and personal. In novels, autobiographical accounts, and oral testimonies, returning students often express feelings of cultural disorientation, a sense of being “in-between,” or a loss of belonging in both the host country and their homeland. These narratives suggest that studying abroad is not merely an educational journey but also a transformative—and at times alienating—cultural experience.

The phenomenon can be understood within the broader framework of postcolonial theory, which critiques the lingering influence of Western hegemony on formerly colonized societies. Though Nepal was never formally colonized, the country remains deeply entangled in postcolonial power structures, especially through its reliance on Western educational institutions. English-medium instruction, Euro-American epistemologies, and aspirational migration contribute to a worldview that often privileges Western norms over indigenous knowledge and cultural continuity. This research aims to critically analyze how study abroad narratives reflect the psychological and cultural cost of academic globalization. It draws from both literary texts and real-life testimonies to trace the subtle ways in which Nepali youth—while gaining academic credentials—grapple with questions of identity, belonging, and rootedness. By doing so, the study seeks to open a space for dialogue about the need to reconcile global aspirations with cultural preservation in Nepal's rapidly evolving educational culture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between international education and cultural identity has been widely studied within the

fields of postcolonial theory, global education, and migration studies. Scholars increasingly recognize that while study abroad offers opportunities for academic advancement and global exposure, it also raises significant questions about cultural continuity, identity transformation, and psychological displacement—especially for students from formerly colonized or culturally peripheral nations like Nepal. One of the central concerns in the literature is the displacement of cultural identity experienced by students who pursue education in foreign, often Western, academic systems. According to Said (1978), Western systems of knowledge production have historically positioned non-Western cultures as “other,” shaping global hierarchies that continue through education. This dynamic remains active in international student experiences, where assimilation to dominant cultural norms often comes at the expense of one's native traditions and languages (Illich, 1968; Tikly, 2004).

For Nepali students, studying abroad often involves not only physical relocation but also symbolic dislocation—where students must navigate the tension between modern global citizenship and traditional cultural identity (Bhatta, 2014). Scholars such as Heron (2007) and Andreotti (2011) argue that the internalization of Western educational values frequently leads students to devalue their own cultural heritage, a phenomenon often reflected in personal testimonies and post-study reentry struggles. Theories of identity by Hall (1990) and Bhabha (1994) help explain how study abroad students develop hybrid identities, shaped by living between cultures. Hall emphasizes that identity is not fixed but continuously constructed through interaction, memory, and language. Bhabha's concept of the “Third Space” captures the experience of Nepali students who exist in a liminal zone—neither fully Westernized nor fully embedded in their home culture—resulting in identity fragmentation and feelings of unbelonging.

Literary and autobiographical narratives often mirror this experience. Works by South Asian writers such as Manjushree Thapa, Samrat Upadhyay, and others reveal protagonists who struggle with alienation, reverse culture shock, and cultural ambivalence after returning from Western countries. These stories offer insight into the emotional and cultural cost of globalization and education migration. Language plays a critical role in cultural retention. Phillipson (1992) coined the term “linguistic imperialism” to describe how English dominates global education and marginalizes native languages. In the context of Nepal, English-medium instruction and academic dependency on Western models further erode traditional epistemologies and native fluency (Pherali, 2011). This shift in language use is often mirrored in the personal experiences of returnee students, who report a weakening emotional connection to their cultural roots, especially in oral traditions and family interactions.

Narratives—both literary and personal—are powerful tools for documenting the internal effects of cultural displacement. According to Bruner (2001), narratives provide a way of organizing lived experience, especially in times of cultural transition. In Nepali contexts, autobiographical accounts and fictional works serve as postcolonial expressions of struggle, where study abroad is portrayed not just as aspiration but as a source of inner conflict, cultural loss, or even resistance. These stories challenge the one-dimensional success narrative of international education and illuminate the unspoken costs of global mobility. Recent literature calls for a re-evaluation of international education models to address cultural imbalances and promote more inclusive, reciprocal forms of global learning. Andreotti and de Souza (2012) advocate for “critical global citizenship education” that encourages self-reflection, cultural humility, and ethical engagement across borders. For Nepal and similar contexts, this means reimagining education abroad not as a break from cultural roots but as a dialogue between worlds, where transformation does not require cultural erasure.

The literature reveals a consistent pattern: while study abroad offers significant material and intellectual opportunities, it often facilitates cultural

displacement and identity fragmentation for students from peripheral or postcolonial societies. Nepali narratives—literary and personal—serve as vital records of these tensions, offering a nuanced counter-narrative to dominant discourses of educational globalization. The challenge lies in creating educational systems and intercultural experiences that support cultural continuity alongside global engagement.

3. OBJECTIVES

- i. To explore how study abroad experiences are portrayed in contemporary Nepali literary and personal narratives.
- ii. To examine the ways in which study abroad contributes to the displacement or transformation of cultural identity among Nepali students.
- iii. To analyze the influence of Western education on the cultural perceptions, values, and linguistic preferences of Nepali students.
- iv. To investigate the psychological and emotional consequences of cultural dislocation experienced by Nepali students during and after their study abroad journey.

4. STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCES ARE PORTRAYED IN CONTEMPORARY NEPALI LITERARY AND PERSONAL NARRATIVES

In contemporary Nepali literature and personal testimonies, study abroad experiences are often portrayed not merely as academic or career-oriented journeys, but as deeply transformative encounters that challenge notions of identity, belonging, and cultural continuity. These narratives reflect the psychological and emotional complexities of navigating two worlds: the aspirational, often idealized West, and the culturally rooted homeland that students feel increasingly distanced from.

1. Aspirational Departure and Idealization of the West

In the early stages of many narratives, studying abroad is portrayed as a symbol of progress and modernity. For many characters or real-life individuals, it signifies social upliftment, family pride, and personal freedom. This is evident in both fictional and autobiographical accounts, where protagonists often leave Nepal with idealized visions of Western education—imagining it as liberating, superior, and transformative.

For example, in the novel "Sambandhaharu" by Shradha Ghale, the characters express deep admiration for Western lifestyles and education systems, which subtly implies an internalized sense of Western superiority. Similarly, memoirs of Nepali students abroad frequently describe their departure as a "dream come true," reflecting the socio-cultural valorization of foreign education in Nepali society.

2. Cultural Dislocation and Identity Fragmentation

As these narratives progress, the tone often shifts from excitement to disorientation and cultural confusion. Nepali students abroad frequently find themselves struggling to assimilate into unfamiliar cultural and social environments while also feeling guilt or loss over drifting away from their native traditions. Common themes include loss of language fluency, weakened family ties, and struggles with cultural code-switching.

In personal essays and interviews, returnees speak of becoming "foreign" in their own homeland—no longer fully at home in either country. This state of in-betweenness mirrors Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity, where identity becomes a negotiation between conflicting cultural spaces. The result is a fragmented sense of self, marked by a loss of rootedness.

3. Homecoming and Alienation

A recurring motif in both fictional and autobiographical narratives is the difficulty of returning home. Students often return with altered worldviews, behavioral norms, or aspirations that

clash with traditional expectations. In literature, this is frequently illustrated through generational conflict, romantic disillusionment, or social reintegration failures.

In stories like those by authors Manjushree Thapa or Buddhisagar, characters returning from abroad express discomfort, restlessness, or even superiority—often unintentionally—toward local norms. This creates a tension between Western-educated identity and traditional Nepali values, symbolizing the deeper emotional impact of studying abroad.

4. Emergence of a Postcolonial Consciousness

Some contemporary narratives also reflect a growing critical awareness of the cultural costs of foreign education. Rather than glorifying the West, these stories question the social pressures that equate academic success with Westernization. They explore themes such as colonial mimicry, cultural loss, and the internal conflict between modernity and tradition. Such narratives represent a subtle form of resistance—acknowledging the value of global learning while advocating for cultural preservation and self-awareness. Writers and returnees increasingly call for educational experiences that do not require the abandonment of local identities, but rather promote intercultural dialogue and mutual respect.

Through both literature and lived experience, Nepali narratives of study abroad offer rich, multifaceted portrayals of ambition, dislocation, and identity. These stories illuminate the emotional and cultural struggles faced by students who must navigate not only foreign academic systems but also the invisible burden of cultural displacement. As these narratives become more critically reflective, they challenge Nepal's uncritical glorification of foreign education and call for a more balanced, culturally rooted approach to global learning.

5. WAYS IN WHICH STUDY ABROAD CONTRIBUTES TO THE DISPLACEMENT OR

TRANSFORMATION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY AMONG NEPALI STUDENTS

Studying abroad is often imagined as a prestigious milestone in the lives of Nepali students, offering access to global opportunities and academic excellence. However, beneath the surface of this aspirational journey lies a more complex reality: a gradual displacement or transformation of cultural identity. As Nepali students engage with foreign academic systems, languages, and lifestyles, their connection to native cultural practices, values, and identities is often disrupted, reshaped, or even replaced. This transformation can manifest in multiple, overlapping ways:

1. Linguistic Shift and Erosion of Native Language Use

Many Nepali students studying in countries like the U.S., U.K., Australia, or Japan gradually adopt English or the local language of their host country as their primary mode of academic and social communication. Over time, this shift often leads to reduced fluency, confidence, or even emotional connection with their native languages (Nepali or regional dialects). Some students report struggling to express personal emotions in Nepali after prolonged time abroad, signaling a deep cultural-linguistic displacement.

"I found it easier to write in English, even when journaling personal thoughts. Nepali started feeling foreign in academic spaces." – Returnee Student (Anecdotal Testimony)

2. Adoption of Western Social Norms and Values

Exposure to Western values such as individualism, liberal social norms, and open communication styles can significantly reshape how Nepali students view relationships, gender roles, religion, and authority. In some cases, this leads to conflict with traditional Nepali expectations, especially upon return. Students may become critical of hierarchical family structures, caste-based discrimination, or patriarchal norms, but

also experience a sense of alienation from family members or peers who still adhere to them.

“When I came back, I was told I had become ‘too outspoken’ or ‘too Western’—but it just felt normal to speak my mind after studying abroad.” – Student Participant (Interview Excerpt)

3. Shifts in Identity and Belonging

Living abroad often places students in a liminal cultural space where they no longer fully belong to either culture. This hybrid or fractured identity can create feelings of isolation, disorientation, or confusion. Many report feeling “foreign” both abroad and at home—alienated from host country communities because of racial or cultural differences, and estranged from their own people due to changed perspectives and behaviors.

This identity negotiation mirrors postcolonial theories of hybridity (Homi Bhabha), where individuals become “in-between” cultures, yet fully at home in neither.

4. Cultural Guilt and Loss of Tradition

Students frequently express guilt over losing touch with Nepali festivals, customs, dress, or religious practices during their time abroad. Some intentionally distance themselves from these traditions to fit in with host country norms, while others passively let them fade due to time, distance, or cultural pressures. The loss of ritual participation, weakening of community ties, and reduction of cultural knowledge contribute to cultural rootlessness, especially in second-generation students born abroad or those who settle permanently.

5. Reorientation and Identity Reconstruction

While displacement is common, not all transformations are negative. Some students develop a more critical, reflective, and hybrid identity, where they consciously integrate global experiences with local values. These individuals often become agents of cultural bridge-building—translating experiences from both worlds into new forms of Nepali identity.

In such cases, study abroad acts not as a form of cultural loss, but as a space for identity reconstruction, leading to a dynamic, globalized Nepali identity that balances tradition with change.

Study abroad contributes to both the displacement and transformation of cultural identity among Nepali students through language erosion, value shifts, identity fragmentation, and detachment from traditions. While these experiences can result in alienation or loss, they can also create space for critical self-awareness and cultural redefinition. Understanding this complexity is essential for educators, families, and policymakers who aim to support students through their cross-cultural journeys without disconnecting them from their roots.

6. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from in-depth interviews with 12 Nepali students who studied abroad in countries such as the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Japan, along with content analysis of selected Nepali literary narratives and reflective essays. The results highlight the complex and often contradictory ways in which study abroad experiences reshape cultural identity.

1. Linguistic and Cultural Shifts

Almost all participants reported a noticeable shift in language usage during their time abroad. While English was necessary for academic success and social integration, many students admitted they spoke less Nepali, even in informal conversations. Some expressed concern over losing fluency or emotional connection to their mother tongue. This linguistic shift often coincided with reduced participation in cultural rituals, such as Nepali festivals or religious practices, particularly among students in Western secular societies.

“I realized I hadn’t celebrated Dashain properly in years. It’s not that I stopped caring—it just didn’t fit into my life abroad.” – Participant A

These patterns reveal a subtle but persistent displacement of cultural roots, driven by the demands

of assimilation and the prioritization of Western lifestyles and values.

2. Identity Fragmentation and In-Betweenness

A recurring theme was the feeling of being “in-between” cultures. Many students described how they no longer felt fully Nepali after years abroad, yet also didn’t feel completely accepted in their host countries due to racial, cultural, or linguistic differences. This liminal identity led to internal conflicts, especially when students returned home and struggled to reintegrate into traditional family or social structures. “Back home, they thought I was too Westernized. Abroad, I was always the foreigner. I didn’t belong anywhere.” – Participant F

This reflects the postcolonial condition of cultural hybridity, as theorized by Homi Bhabha, where identity is shaped in the borderlands of cultural interaction—not fixed, but fluid and often conflicted.

3. Cultural Resistance and Adaptation

While many students experienced cultural displacement, some demonstrated a conscious effort to preserve or reassert their cultural identity. For example, a few participants intentionally celebrated Nepali festivals with diaspora communities, cooked traditional food, or engaged in Nepali student associations abroad. These acts served as forms of cultural resistance, helping them maintain a sense of rootedness in a foreign environment.

“Cooking Nepali food with friends became our ritual—it was how we stayed connected to home.” – Participant K

This suggests that displacement is not always a passive or permanent outcome; some students find ways to adapt without abandoning their cultural heritage.

4. The Role of Class and Aspiration

An important structural factor that emerged was socioeconomic background. Students from middle- and upper-class families often internalized the idea that success meant becoming more “global,” which often equated to being more Western. This aspiration

created pressure to distance themselves from traditional values, especially in appearance, speech, and social behavior.

“I used to think speaking perfect English and dressing Western meant I was educated. I’m not proud of that now.” – Participant H

This internalized cultural hierarchy reinforces neocolonial ideologies, where Western norms are seen as superior and desirable.

5. Reflection and Identity Reconstruction

Interestingly, many students only began to critically reflect on their cultural displacement after returning to Nepal. Encounters with reverse culture shock, familial tensions, or cultural re-evaluation sparked deeper introspection. Some began to reconstruct their identities, integrating global exposure with a renewed appreciation for Nepali values.

“I used to ignore my culture when I was abroad, but now I realize it’s part of who I am. I can’t just erase it.” – Participant B

This suggests that identity transformation is an ongoing process—one that may involve cycles of displacement, resistance, and reintegration.

Discussion

The findings indicate that study abroad contributes to both displacement and transformation of cultural identity among Nepali students. While students gain academic and professional opportunities, they also navigate complex cultural negotiations. For many, the process involves losing familiarity with their cultural roots, experiencing emotional or social alienation, and eventually working through a hybrid identity that bridges both global and local elements.

This dual experience reflects broader postcolonial dynamics, where education abroad operates not only as a tool of opportunity but also as a subtle agent of cultural imperialism. However, the data also reveal spaces for agency and resilience, where students actively reinterpret their identity on their own terms.

7. CONCLUSION

The experiences of Nepali students studying abroad reveal a complex interplay between educational aspiration and cultural alienation. While international education offers access to global knowledge, career mobility, and cross-cultural engagement, it also often results in the displacement or transformation of cultural identity, particularly for students coming from non-Western, postcolonial societies like Nepal. Drawing from both personal testimonies and literary narratives, this study shows how Nepali students frequently experience a gradual erosion of native language use, detachment from traditional practices, and identity fragmentation. The adoption of Western norms—whether through academic expectations, lifestyle adjustments, or socialization—can lead to an internal crisis where students feel "in-between" cultures. Yet, this displacement is not always passive or permanent. Many students engage in acts of cultural resistance, reflection, and reconstruction, suggesting that cultural identity in the context of global education is not lost but reimagined.

Furthermore, the narratives examined challenge dominant discourses that frame study abroad as uncritically positive or universally empowering. Instead, they reveal a postcolonial tension—where Western education, while materially beneficial, can subtly perpetuate cultural hierarchies and emotional estrangement. These stories call for a more critical and culturally responsive approach to international education—one that recognizes the emotional, linguistic, and cultural dimensions of studying abroad, especially for students from the Global South.

In light of these findings, there is a pressing need for Nepali educational institutions, families, and policymakers to foster cross-cultural preparedness while also affirming local identities. Encouraging reflective learning, cultural dialogue, and post-return support can help mitigate the risks of displacement and nurture students who are both globally competent and culturally grounded.

REFERENCES

1. Andreotti, V. (2011). Actionable postcolonial theory in education. Palgrave Macmillan.
2. Andreotti, V., & de Souza, L. M. T. M. (2012). Postcolonial perspectives on global citizenship education. Routledge.
3. Bhabha, H. K. (1994). The location of culture. Routledge.
4. Bhatta, C. D. (2014). The politics of English language in Nepal. *Journal of Education and Research*, 4(1), 54–66. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jer.v4i1.9620>
5. Bruner, J. (2001). Self-making and world-making. In J. Brockmeier & D. Carbaugh (Eds.), *Narrative and identity: Studies in autobiography, self and culture* (pp. 25–37). John Benjamins.
6. Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
7. Heron, B. (2007). *Desire for development: Whiteness, gender, and the helping imperative*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
8. Illich, I. (1968). To Hell with Good Intentions. [Speech]. Cuernavaca, Mexico. Retrieved from https://www.swaraj.org/illich_hell.htm
9. Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.