



From Spatial Migration to Mental Exile: Trauma, Nostalgia, and Emotional Dislocation in Bhikhari Thakur's *Bidesiya*

Dr Suraj Jaiswal¹, Dr Krishna Kumar²

¹Department of English, Mahatma Gandhi Central University Bihar 845401, Suraj123jais@hotmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of Languages, Noida Institute of Engineering and Technology, Greater Noida, UP, 201310, krishna.kumar@niet.co.in

Cite This Paper as: Dr Suraj Jaiswal, Dr Krishna Kumar (2026) From Spatial Migration to Mental Exile: Trauma, Nostalgia, and Emotional Dislocation in Bhikhari Thakur's *Bidesiya* The Journal of African Development I, Vol.7, No.1, 292-301

KEYWORDS

Migration; Trauma; Nostalgia; Mental Exile; Emotional Dislocation; Folk Theatre; Belonging

ABSTRACT

This research paper will discuss the Bhikkharipuri husband, (migrant husband figure) Bhikhari Thakur, in his work *Bidesiya* in terms of the migration trauma with regards to the physical displacement to psychological exile. Although the play was based on the historical fact of labour migration between the areas with Bhojpuri speaking population, it prefigures the emotional effects of separation, namely nostalgia, abandonment, and fragmented subjectivity, that acculturation and immigration can impose especially upon those who remain. The theme of mental exile is used to examine the manner in which the characters exist in a state of permanent emotional detachment whereby home is a location of desire but not belonging. Using the theory of trauma and cultural memory, the research paper proposes that *Bidesiya* is an affective archive of migrant pain, whose mode of articulating loss is based on folk idioms, song, and performative lament. The dramaturgy by Bhikhari Thakur turns migration into a permanent psychic state and brings out the way social organization of movement creates silent emotional crises in the lives of subalterns

1. INTRODUCTION

Migration has been a significant part of the South Asian social history, particularly in the regions that have to send their citizens away in search of employment due to the unstable economy. The Bhojpuri speaking region of eastern India that includes modern-day Bihar and Jharkhand experienced an acute increase in migration in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century as a result of colonial economic systems and industrialisation that created new labour requirements in the urban centres and foreign plantations. According to the historians, thousands of the inhabitants of this region migrated to such cities as Calcutta and Bombay, and others worked in such colonies as Mauritius and Trinidad and Tobago as indentured servants (Jayaram 42; Lal 87). The folk theatrical tradition of the Bhojpuri region in this socio-historical context emerged as an effective means of communication of the emotional dimension of migration. These events are described by Bhikhari Thakur, a well-known writer and actor referred to as the 'Shakespeare of Bhojpuri,' in his most popular folk play *Bidesiya*. The play by Thakur does not depict just that the migration is one way of earning money, but it has also depicted that the movement can have a profound emotional impact on the families of rural areas (Pandey 113).

The central story of *Bidesiya* is that of a husband that runs out of town to work in the city leaving his wife and community. The novel does not only revolve around the process of parting ways but also the heart ache that accompanies that process. The woman who is left alone is lonely and anxious and socially insecure, and the husband who has left the home gradually becomes detached to the emotional attachments that connect him to the home. As Alidio stated about immigrant as exile in these lines:

The term diaspora relates to, but is distinct from, other words describing the circulation of people around the world: refuge, exile, immigrant, transnational, cosmopolitan, global, minoritarian, and post-colonial. This list of related terms generates a range of moods and modes: exilic suffering, immigrant nostalgia, migrant labouring, and what the scholar Stuart Hall has called "always-postponed 'arrival.'" Translated as "scattering," diaspora invites us, more so than the concepts of exile, immigration, and globalization, to make something of objects, ideas, and feelings that are scattered. (Alidio).



In *What Home Is Isn't That* Kimberly Alidio discusses the concept of diaspora. According to Alidio, the term diaspora is associated with other terms of describing the movement of people across the world, including exile, immigration, transnational identity, and globalisation. However, the other way in which diaspora is defined is based on the dispersion of people and cultures and not merely on movement. Exile is often used to refer to the forcible departure and suffering whereas immigration is used to refer to the process of travelling to a new country to establish oneself. Diaspora on the contrary implies residing in numerous locations and identities. Alidio explains that such specific words can dispose of people to experience various things, like exile sufferings, immigrant nostalgia and the challenge of migrant labour. She also describes what Stuart Hall said about the term diaspora, and that it refers to, always-postponed arrival, or that migrants do not always feel that they belong to a certain place. Their past and their current are in a constant compromise with each other, their motherland and their current land. Alidio renders the word diaspora into diaspora as a spreading and what this translation says is that the term assists us in understanding how memories, cultural practices, feelings, and thoughts are scattered to new locations. Diasporic identity is thus a result of these fragmented experiences that create new cultural forms, emotional and collective memories among those that have been exiled.

Migration therefore creates a disjointed emotional world in which relationships only remain through memory and longing. Migration sociologists argue that the phenomenon of labour mobility tends to cause psychological dislocation to immigrants and the individuals who remain (Castles and Miller 54). This dislocation is pointed out in *Bidesiya* by the grief songs of the wife and the moralizing of the community who depict how migration would destroy the closeness of the family and the gender demands (De Haan 23).

In the new migrationology, there is growing opinion that migration should not only be regarded as physical relocation, but also as psychological and emotional process that involves nostalgia, loss and fragmentation of identity (Boym 15; Said 173). These theoretical discoveries are preempted by Thakur through his dramaturgy about migration as a form of emotional exile. Exile, in this context, does not only mean being in another place; it also means a state of inner alienation where individuals feel that they are disconnected with their cultural and emotional context. Even the husband who has left the village still remembers it and the wife is living in an empty house. Therefore, home is turned into a hypothetical centre of desire and not a safe place of identity. This transformation according to cultural theorists is referred to as the unhomely state, indicating that places of familiarity get emotionally remote (Bhabha 141).

The emotional crises that are depicted in *Bidesiya* are deeply entrenched in the social economic reality of subaltern societies. Females in the rural setting whose identity has always been connected to the security of their places of residence and even being married are very susceptible psychologically when their husbands are off to work. The lamenting of the wife in the play expresses personal sorrow and the general fear of the frailty of family ties in the context of economic alienation. The folk theatre conducted by Thakur transforms the pain of the people into a shared cultural memory through the plays (songs and dialogues) performed. As Mandal mentioned about folklore arts in these lines:

Folklore arts, beliefs, rites, rituals, myths, rural handicrafts etc. are elements that enrich our folk-lifestyle. Each social shape has customs and practices in addition to systems of beliefs. Folk arts and ideals play an essential role in the timely reforms and setting up of these customs and practices. (Mandal)

In most traditional societies, folk culture is the basis of daily living particularly in rural societies. Folklores arts, beliefs, rites, rituals, myths, rural handicrafts are all elements that add value to the folklore lifestyle and keep cultural identity of a given people intact. Such practices are not simply entertainment and decorative, but rather they are significant social and cultural statements that involve expressions of values, past and worldview of the people. Collective memories and moral teachings of one generation to another are often passed on through folk arts like songs, dances, storytelling and local theatre. On the same note, rituals and myths influence the beliefs of the community concerning religion, nature, family relationships, and responsibilities of the society. Each society creates its own unique customs and traditions according to which the everyday life and social behaviour are controlled. In this context, the folk culture is a kind of a compass, which preserves the social peace and cohesiveness. The festivals, ceremonies and collective performances enable people to strengthen social bonds and reinforce collective values. Simultaneously, communities are also able to react to social change through the folk arts and ideals. They offer an area whereby in which traditions may be challenged, modified and reformulated in reaction to new conditions. In this regard, folklore is not only a source of cultural heritage, but it is also an active tool of negotiating identity and ethical sanity among societies.

Cultural historians have argued that folk performances are repositories of emotion, and that oral and performance traditions preserve the lived experiences of marginalised groups of people (Assmann 37; Taylor 28). Here, *Bidesiya* goes beyond theatrical storytelling, it becomes a cultural legacy of the emotional impact of migration.

This research paper will argue that *Bidesiya* portrays the issue of migration as an experience of mental exile in the sense that the characters are placed in a mental space that is characterized by pain, nostalgia, and emotional alienation. Based on the trauma theory and cultural memory studies, the exploration explains why the dramaturgy created by Thakur transforms migrant experiences into a sort of empathetic warehouse of misery. Traditional idioms, separation songs, and theatrics mourning in the play help individuals to cope with the emotional traumas accompanying the moving to work. *Bidesiya* portrays migration as a continuing psychological condition instead of a temporary journey and portrays how the



social organization of movement converts the emotional experiences of subaltern societies (Alexander et al. 12). The art of Thakur eventually illuminates the complex relationship between physical migration and psychological exile with its richness of its subject matter, desire and dislocation.

The historical background of labour migration

The Bhojpuri-speaking region provides a crucial framework for understanding the social and emotional realities depicted in *Bidesiya* by Bhikhari Thakur. During the colonial period, especially from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, large numbers of men from rural areas of eastern India migrated to urban industrial centres in search of employment. Regions such as Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh experienced intense economic hardship due to land fragmentation, agrarian distress, and limited employment opportunities. As a result, thousands of labourers moved to colonial cities like Calcutta, Bombay, and Rangoon to work in jute mills, railway construction, docks, and plantations. Scholars note that these migration patterns were closely tied to colonial economic policies that reorganized labour markets and created new circuits of mobility for rural workers (De Haan 77; Jayaram 51). Economic deprivation, combined with caste hierarchy and unequal land distribution, compelled many men to leave their villages for extended periods, sometimes for years at a time.

Importantly, this migration was predominantly male, resulting in the long-term separation of families and the emergence of new gendered vulnerabilities within rural households. Women were frequently left behind to manage domestic responsibilities, agricultural labour, and social obligations without the physical presence of their husbands. The absence of male family members produced a profound sense of emotional uncertainty and social insecurity, particularly for wives whose marital identity was culturally tied to their husband's presence. Sociologists have argued that such prolonged separations produced a deep emotional crisis within rural communities, generating feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and longing among those who remained in the village (Datta 123; De Haan 81). These experiences gradually became embedded within Bhojpuri cultural expression, especially in folk songs of separation (*Biraha*) and performative traditions that articulated the emotional suffering of migrant families.

It is within this socio-historical context that Thakur composed *Bidesiya* in the early twentieth century. As a playwright emerging from a marginalized barber community, Thakur possessed intimate knowledge of the hardships associated with labour migration and social inequality. His theatre functioned not merely as popular entertainment but also as a powerful form of social commentary that gave voice to the experiences of subaltern communities (Datta 125). By dramatizing the story of a migrant husband and the wife he leaves behind, *Bidesiya* transforms historical reality into a cultural narrative that exposes the hidden psychological costs of migration. The play reveals how economic survival often demands emotional sacrifice, producing fractured relationships and enduring feelings of absence. Through its poignant songs and dialogues, Thakur's drama illuminates the complex intersection of labour mobility, gendered vulnerability, and emotional dislocation in the Bhojpuri region.

Migration and the Emergence of Mental Exile

One of the most striking features of *Bidesiya* is its powerful portrayal of migration as a condition of psychological exile rather than merely a physical journey. The migrant husband leaves the village with the hope of economic success in distant urban centres, yet his departure initiates a process of emotional estrangement that affects both himself and the family he leaves behind. In the socio-historical context of the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, male migration became a common strategy for economic survival during the colonial period. However, as scholars of migration studies argue, such mobility often generated profound emotional consequences that extended far beyond economic improvement (Castles and Miller 56). *Bidesiya* dramatizes this reality by presenting migration as a deeply destabilizing experience that transforms intimate relationships and emotional attachments.

The abandoned wife in the play becomes the central voice through which this emotional suffering is articulated. Through songs of lamentation and expressive dialogue, she gives voice to feelings of loneliness, betrayal, and social vulnerability. Her repeated remembrance of the absent husband transforms memory into a mechanism of emotional survival. The act of remembering becomes a way of preserving intimacy despite physical separation. Nostalgia therefore becomes one of the dominant emotional structures of the narrative. Cultural theorist Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as a longing for a lost home that may never fully be recovered, emphasizing its role in shaping emotional responses to displacement (Boym 15). In *Bidesiya*, the wife's songs recreate an imagined emotional connection with the absent husband, demonstrating how memory becomes a substitute for presence. These performative expressions reflect the wider Bhojpuri folk tradition in which songs of separation (*biraha*) articulate the emotional realities of migration within rural communities (Datta 128).

Psychological studies of migration further support this interpretation by emphasizing that migration frequently produces feelings of alienation, identity disruption, and emotional fragmentation. Psychiatrist Dinesh Bhugra argues that migration often forces individuals to negotiate between multiple cultural and emotional worlds, generating psychological stress and feelings of loss (Bhugra 247).

The phenomenon of exile is of particular interest as it has specific peculiarities, which distinguish it from other types of



migration. The term originated in ancient Greece where certain citizens were banished from Athens for political reasons. What distinguishes it from other experiences of migration is that exiles are forced by ideological,

political or religious circumstances to leave their countries of birth and that it is impossible for them to return. (Marchetti Mercer and Roos)

The above lines express regarding the migration, as exile. Exile is a different process compared to other types of migration in that it entails a forced migration as opposed to a voluntary migration. The word goes back to the ancient Greek society where some of the citizens were cast out of Athens or banished mostly due to political reasons. This was called ostracism and people had to abandon their country either to punish or avoid the dangers of the political circumstances. With time, the meaning of exile was broadened so that it is used to indicate cases whereby a person is forced to move out of his or her home country under the influence of either ideological, political, or even religious factors. What makes the difference between exile and normal migration is the feature of coercion and permanence. Whereas a migrant can always gravitate elsewhere due to economic reasons, education, or personal interest and always has a chance of going back home, an exile is usually deprived of the latter. They have no choice but to leave their home country since staying behind may expose them to danger, loss of freedom or even their lives. Such displacement is often witnessed among the political dissidents, persecuted minorities and intellectuals within oppressive regimes. Exile also has a heavy psychological and cultural implication. The feeling of loss, alienation, and nostalgia are often the results of being disconnected with their homeland, language and community. This state of alienation creates an identity of the exile between the past and the present of a new world. Therefore, exile is not only the geographical displacement, but it is a highly emotional and existential experience.

In *Bidesiya*, this negotiation becomes visible in the character of the migrant husband. Although he leaves the village in pursuit of prosperity, his prolonged absence gradually weakens his emotional ties with home. The migrant becomes caught between two worlds: the economic opportunities of the city and the emotional obligations of the village. As a result, his identity becomes fragmented, reflecting the psychological tensions associated with displacement.

This emotional condition can be understood as a form of mental exile. Unlike physical exile, which involves geographic displacement, mental exile refers to a state of psychological detachment in which individuals feel disconnected from both their past and present environments. Literary critic Edward W. Said famously described exile as an experience marked by an "unhealable rift" between a person and their home (Said 173). Thakur's dramaturgy reflects a similar insight by portraying both the migrant husband and the abandoned wife as emotionally displaced. While the husband becomes estranged from the village due to prolonged absence, the wife remains physically present in the home but experiences profound psychological abandonment. In this sense, both characters occupy different forms of exile.

Thus, *Bidesiya* reveals the paradoxical emotional consequences of migration. Economic mobility promises improvement, yet it simultaneously produces emotional fragmentation and relational instability. By dramatizing the psychological exile experienced by both migrants and those who remain behind, Thakur's play exposes the hidden emotional costs of labour migration. The narrative ultimately demonstrates that migration is not simply a matter of geographic movement but a complex process that reshapes memory, identity, and emotional belonging within subaltern communities.

Trauma and Emotional Dislocation

Trauma theory provides a significant interpretive framework for understanding the emotional intensity and psychological depth of *Bidesiya*. Rather than portraying migration merely as an economic necessity, the play reveals how prolonged separation produces emotional wounds that resemble the psychological patterns associated with trauma. Trauma theorists argue that traumatic experiences are rarely expressed in direct narrative form; instead, they often appear through repetition, fragmented memory, and recurring emotional expressions (Caruth 5). In *Bidesiya*, this structure becomes evident in the repeated laments of the abandoned wife, whose songs and dialogues continually return to the themes of separation and longing. These repeated expressions function as signs of unresolved emotional trauma. The wife's lamentation does not simply narrate the absence of the husband; it continually revisits the pain of abandonment, suggesting that the emotional wound remains open and unresolved.

A particularly important aspect of this traumatic experience in the play is the theme of waiting. The wife's emotional life becomes organized around the act of waiting for the migrant husband's return. Waiting functions as a form of psychological suspension in which time appears to slow down or even stand still. The husband's absence creates an emotional void that cannot easily be filled by social interaction or daily activity. Instead, the wife's memory repeatedly reconstructs the presence of the absent husband through recollection and imagination. Scholars of trauma have emphasized that traumatic experiences often distort an individual's perception of time, producing a sense of prolonged uncertainty and anticipation (Herman 39). In *Bidesiya*, the wife's songs frequently revolve around the hope that the husband will return, yet this hope is continually accompanied by despair and doubt. Her voice thus embodies both personal sorrow and the collective emotional experience of countless rural women who faced similar separations due to labour migration.

Another important dimension of trauma represented in the play is the breakdown of communication between the migrant and the family left behind. The migrant husband rarely sends letters or messages, and his prolonged silence intensifies the wife's sense of abandonment. This absence of communication creates a psychological distance that mirrors the physical

distance between the village and the city. As trauma scholar Judith Lewis Herman argues, traumatic experiences frequently disrupt narrative coherence, making it difficult for individuals to articulate their suffering in a clear or linear manner (Herman 37). In *Bidesiya*, this disruption becomes evident in the fragmented emotional expressions of the wife, whose lamentation often shifts between hope, anger, sorrow, and memory. Her emotional voice does not follow a stable narrative structure; instead, it reflects the instability produced by prolonged absence and uncertainty.

Significantly, Thakur addresses this difficulty of articulation through the performative and musical elements of folk theatre. In the Bhojpuri cultural tradition, songs of separation (*biraha*) have long served as powerful vehicles for expressing emotional pain associated with migration and separation. Within the structure of *Bidesiya*, music and performance become alternative languages through which trauma can be communicated. The songs allow characters to express feelings that cannot be conveyed through ordinary speech. Performance therefore functions as a collective therapeutic space in which personal suffering becomes part of a shared emotional experience. As cultural theorist Cathy Caruth suggests, trauma narratives often rely on indirect forms of expression that allow suppressed experiences to emerge through repetition and symbolic representation (Caruth 7). Thakur's dramaturgy reflects this insight by transforming individual grief into communal performance.

Thus, *Bidesiya* demonstrates how folk theatre can articulate the psychological consequences of migration through the language of trauma. The wife's repeated laments, the temporal suspension of waiting, and the breakdown of communication together reveal how migration produces deep emotional wounds within subaltern communities. By incorporating music, memory, and performance, Thakur's play creates a space in which these otherwise silent emotional crises can be acknowledged and shared.

Nostalgia and the Construction of Memory

Nostalgia plays a crucial role in shaping the emotional and psychological landscape of *Bidesiya*. Within the narrative structure of the play, nostalgia emerges as a powerful emotional response to the prolonged separation caused by labour migration. The abandoned wife repeatedly recalls moments of intimacy and companionship that she once shared with her husband before his departure. These memories become an emotional refuge that helps her endure the loneliness and uncertainty of the present. Through songs of lamentation and recollection, she reconstructs the emotional presence of the absent husband. In this way, memory functions not merely as recollection but as a psychological strategy for survival. The past becomes a symbolic space of comfort that temporarily alleviates the emotional void created by separation.

Cultural theorists have emphasized that nostalgia is deeply connected with experiences of displacement and loss. According to Svetlana Boym, nostalgia represents a longing for a lost or imagined home that offers emotional comfort during moments of instability and uncertainty (Boym 7). In *Bidesiya*, this longing is vividly expressed through the wife's recollections of earlier moments of marital harmony. Her memories create an imagined continuity between the past and the present, allowing her to sustain hope that the absent husband may eventually return. However, nostalgia in the play is not purely comforting. While memories provide temporary solace, they simultaneously intensify the emotional pain of separation. Each recollection reminds the wife of the intimacy and security that she has lost. Nostalgia therefore operates as a double edged emotion: it sustains hope while also deepening the awareness of absence.

The migrant husband also experiences nostalgia, although his emotional condition is portrayed in a more complex and conflicted manner. Having migrated from the rural Bhojpuri region of Bihar to distant urban centres such as Calcutta or Bombay, he confronts the alienation of unfamiliar environments and demanding labour conditions. Migration scholars note that such displacement often produces a persistent sense of cultural dislocation among migrant workers, who must negotiate between the economic opportunities of the city and their emotional attachment to the village (Castles and Miller 58). In the case of *Bidesiya*, the husband gradually becomes aware of the emotional distance separating him from his family and community. Yet the pressures of economic survival and the expectations associated with migration prevent him from easily returning home. This tension between longing and obligation reveals the psychological burden that migration imposes upon individuals who must balance material necessity with emotional attachment.

Through the interplay of memory, absence, and longing, *Bidesiya* demonstrates how nostalgia reshapes the meaning of home. Home is no longer represented simply as a geographical location but as a symbolic space constructed through emotional attachment and memory. Literary critic Edward W. Said has observed that displacement often transforms the idea of home into an unattainable ideal, something remembered more vividly in absence than in presence (Said 177). Thakur's play reflects this insight by depicting characters who remain emotionally bound to a home that is increasingly distant from their lived reality. The wife imagines home as a space of reunion and stability, while the migrant husband remembers it as a site of belonging those contrasts sharply with the anonymity of urban life.

Ultimately, nostalgia in *Bidesiya* reveals the profound emotional consequences of migration within subaltern communities. By transforming personal memory into performative expression through songs and dialogue, Thakur's dramaturgy demonstrates how longing for the past becomes a central mechanism through which characters cope with emotional displacement. The play thus illustrates how migration not only separates bodies across geographical distances but also



reshapes memory, identity, and the emotional meaning of home.

Folk Performance as an Affective Archive

One of the most powerful aspects of *Bidesiya* is its use of folk performance as a medium for articulating the emotional suffering associated with migration. Unlike conventional literary drama, *Bidesiya* integrates songs, dance, narrative dialogue, and improvisational performance to create an immersive theatrical experience that engages audiences both emotionally and socially. These performative elements are central to the structure of the play because they allow the emotional consequences of migration such as separation, longing, and despair to be expressed through culturally familiar artistic forms. The dramatic lamentations of the characters, particularly the abandoned wife, are often delivered through musical sequences that intensify the emotional impact of the narrative. In this way, the theatrical form itself becomes a vehicle for communicating migrant suffering to the audience. Sahoo, and Ramakrishnan in their research paper mentioned about the Richard Schechner who talk about the performance that belongs to two broader categories in these lines:

Richard Schechner, performance belongs to two broader categories: artistic performance and cultural performance, and among the two categories, the former refers to solo or group performances of art, performance of literature, theatrical storytelling, plays, and performance poetry and the latter category accommodates events of everyday life such as rituals, ceremonies, festivals, social performances, individual performances etc. Any performance makes the division between performer and audience, and also it defines the role of audience at beginning itself. (Kumar, Sahoo, and Ramakrishnan 95)

The above portrays one of the most influential researchers of the field of performance studies, Richard Schechner, proposes two general divisions of the concept of performance, including artistic performance and cultural performance. Artistic performance is a structured performance of art that is composed in front of a crowd. These involve theatre, storytelling, performance poetry, dance, and literary enactments which are either performed by individuals or groups. These performances place emphasis on the aesthetic expression, creativity as well as interpretation of artistic texts or ideas. Such events normally happen in official acts in which performers are aware to put their show in front of the audience. Cultural performance on the other hand entails activities that come out of the daily social life. These performances do not exist in artistic domains, but they take place in communities in the form of rituals, ceremonies, festivals and social practices. Some of the performances that can be considered include weddings, religious practices, communal festivities, and even some social practices since they have patterns and carry common cultural messages. The cultural performances ensure cultural continuity among communities, strengthening of social values, and collective identity expression. Another theme that is highlighted by Schechner is that any performance establishes a definite connection between the performer and the audience. This division outlines the roles of participants even as it starts. The responsibility of introducing or delivering the event falls upon the performer and the audience merely views, decodes, and occasionally joins in the action. Performance therefore becomes an interactive process where meaning is generated in the association between the performers and the audience.

The significance of performance in *Bidesiya* can be better understood within the broader tradition of Bhojpuri folk theatre, which historically served as an important medium for articulating social realities in rural communities. Folk performance traditions in the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh have long been used to address everyday concerns such as poverty, caste hierarchy, gender relations, and migration. Theatre scholar Farley P. Richmond notes that folk theatre in South Asia functions not merely as entertainment but as a dynamic cultural space where communities negotiate social tensions and collective experiences (Richmond 214). Bhikhari Thakur effectively utilized this tradition to present complex social issues through accessible and emotionally resonant performances. As a playwright emerging from a marginalized community himself, Thakur used theatre as a form of social commentary that gave voice to the lived experiences of subaltern populations.

Within the structure of *Bidesiya*, songs occupy a particularly significant role. The play includes numerous musical interludes that convey the emotional states of the characters more powerfully than ordinary dialogue could. The lament songs of the abandoned wife, often rooted in the Bhojpuri tradition of Biraha (songs of separation), articulate the deep emotional pain caused by the husband's migration. Through rhythm, repetition, and poetic imagery, these songs transform personal sorrow into a shared emotional language that audiences can easily recognize. Cultural historians have observed that oral and performative traditions often preserve the emotional histories of marginalized communities in ways that written archives cannot (Taylor 28). In this sense, the songs of *Bidesiya* function as emotional testimonies that document the psychological impact of labour migration.

Moreover, the performative nature of the play allows individual suffering to be transformed into collective experience. When performed before rural audiences, the songs and dialogues evoke shared memories of migration and separation that many spectators themselves have experienced. This communal recognition creates a powerful emotional bond between performers and audience members. Performance theorist Diana Taylor argues that cultural performances often function as repositories of memory, preserving collective experiences through embodied expression rather than written documentation (Taylor 30). *Bidesiya* exemplifies this process by transforming the emotional struggles of migrant families into a shared theatrical narrative.



In this sense, the play can be understood as an affective archive of migrant suffering. Rather than recording migration through official documents or historical records, Thakur's dramaturgy preserves the emotional consequences of migration through songs, performance, and communal storytelling. The play therefore serves as a cultural record that captures the lived experiences of displacement, nostalgia, and emotional loss within Bhojpuri society. By embedding these themes within the popular idiom of folk theatre, Thakur ensured that the emotional realities of migration would remain visible and memorable within the cultural consciousness of the community.

Gender, Abandonment, and Social Vulnerability

The theme of abandonment in Bhikhari Thakur powerfully highlights the gendered dimensions of migration within rural society. While the male characters in the play migrate to distant cities in search of economic opportunities, women are left behind to bear the emotional and social consequences of separation. This imbalance exposes the unequal burdens created by migration, particularly for wives who must endure prolonged loneliness, uncertainty, and social scrutiny. In the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, labour migration historically involved men travelling to urban centres such as Calcutta and Bombay for employment in mills, railways, and plantations. Although this mobility promised economic improvement, it also produced a domestic crisis in which women were compelled to manage households in the absence of their husbands (De Haan 82). *Bidesiya* captures this social reality by placing the emotional experience of the abandoned wife at the centre of the narrative.

The wife's suffering in the play is not limited to personal loneliness; it is also shaped by the social expectations imposed upon women in traditional rural communities. In patriarchal societies, a woman's social identity is often closely tied to her marital status and her relationship with her husband. When the husband migrates for long periods of time, the wife's position within the community becomes uncertain and vulnerable. She must maintain loyalty to an absent spouse while simultaneously facing gossip, suspicion, and emotional isolation. Sociologists have noted that such conditions frequently expose women to psychological stress because they are expected to uphold familial honour despite the absence of emotional support (Datta 131). In *Bidesiya*, the wife's lamentation reflects not only her longing for companionship but also her anxiety about social stability and personal dignity.

Feminist scholars have argued that migration often intensifies existing gender inequalities by placing disproportionate responsibilities upon women who remain in rural households. According to sociologist Rhacel Salazar Parrenas, migration systems frequently rely on the invisible emotional and domestic labour of women who sustain families in the absence of migrant workers (Parreñas 89). Although Parrenas primarily discusses transnational migration, her insight is equally applicable to the internal migration depicted in *Bidesiya*. The abandoned wife must maintain the household, manage social relationships, and preserve the emotional continuity of the family while enduring the psychological pain of separation. Her labour remains largely unrecognized, yet it is essential to the survival of the household.

Bhikhari Thakur's dramaturgy foregrounds this gendered suffering by giving the abandoned wife a powerful expressive voice through songs and performative lamentation. Unlike the migrant husband, whose experience is largely defined by economic ambition, the wife embodies the emotional consequences of migration. Her songs articulate the pain of waiting, the fear of abandonment, and the longing for reunion. Through these expressions, the play exposes the silent emotional crises experienced by countless women whose lives were shaped by male migration. Literary critics have observed that Thakur's theatre often amplifies marginalized voices by presenting the perspectives of women, lower-caste communities, and rural labourers within popular performance traditions (Richmond 219).

Ultimately, *Bidesiya* reveals that migration is not simply an economic process but also a deeply gendered social phenomenon. While men pursue opportunities beyond the village, women remain confined within domestic spaces where they must negotiate emotional isolation and social vulnerability. By centring the narrative around the abandoned wife, Thakur transforms the play into a poignant critique of the gender inequalities embedded within migration systems. The emotional intensity of her voice ensures that the psychological costs of migration particularly for women are not forgotten within the broader narrative of economic mobility.

Migration as Permanent Psychic Condition

Perhaps the most profound insight offered by Bhikhari Thakur is that migration does not simply conclude when the migrant physically returns home. Rather, the experience of migration leaves lasting psychological consequences that continue to shape personal relationships, emotional identities, and social dynamics within the community. In the narrative of the play, the migrant husband eventually returns to the village after a prolonged period of absence. However, the years of separation have already transformed the emotional fabric of his relationship with his wife. The reunion does not automatically restore the intimacy that once existed between them. Instead, the characters must confront the emotional distance that has accumulated over time. This depiction suggests that migration produces long-term psychological effects that cannot easily be undone by physical reunion. Rawat in his research paper *Migration* describe migration as the movement in these lines:

Migration is the movement of people from one geographical area to another, involving permanent or temporary residence or settlement. Rural-urban migration that carries the rural folk to the growing urban centres is more pronounced in the less



developed countries. It is caused by both push and pull factors. In the less developed world, which has high rural densities and where rapid urban industrial development is taking place, both push of the rural areas and pull of the urban areas generate migratory tendencies among the people. (Rawat)

Migration is described as the movement of the people of one geographical area to another area with an objective of either temporary or permanent residence. Migration has been especially evident in rural-urban migration in most less developed nations where people abandoning the villages move to the growing cities in search of better opportunities (Rawat). Two significant forces influence this process and are referred to as push and pull factors. The causes of push factors can be traced to rural regions and force people to migrate to different regions as a result of poor living conditions, which may be in form of unemployment, poverty, unavailability of educational institutions, low agricultural output, and poor infrastructure. These challenges render it hard to the people to maintain their lives in the villages. Conversely, the pull factors draw migrants in the cities. Cities provide jobs in the industries, higher level of wages, higher education, healthcare, and increased social and economic opportunities. Quick industrialization and urbanization of the less developed regions generate high demand in labour, and so, migration in the rural regions is further stimulated. Consequently, individuals relocate to urban areas hoping of better livelihood and prosperity. Nevertheless, complex social and psychological effects are also brought by migration. Although it can have positive economic impact, it can cause most of the times cultural dislocation, family separation and emotional stress. Migration is therefore not merely a movement in space, but it is a social change that touches on the individuals, families and communities.

Migration scholars have increasingly emphasized that the emotional consequences of displacement often persist long after migrants return to their places of origin. Sociologist Stephen Castles argues that migration reshapes social relationships and identities in ways that extend beyond the immediate period of mobility (Castles and Miller 60). When individuals leave their homes for extended periods, they inevitably undergo cultural and psychological changes that alter their sense of belonging. In *Bidesiya*, the migrant husband becomes a figure caught between two worlds: the village that represents his past and the city that has shaped his recent experiences. His return therefore does not signify a simple restoration of the past but rather the beginning of a new negotiation between memory, identity, and emotional connection.

For the abandoned wife, the psychological impact of migration is equally profound. Years of waiting, uncertainty, and emotional isolation leave deep emotional scars that cannot be instantly healed. Trauma theorists suggest that prolonged experiences of absence and insecurity can produce lasting emotional effects that persist even after the original cause of distress has disappeared. According to Cathy Caruth, traumatic experiences often leave enduring marks on memory and identity because they disrupt the continuity of personal experience (Caruth 8). In the context of *Bidesiya*, the wife's prolonged separation from her husband creates an emotional rupture that shapes her perception of intimacy and trust. Although the husband's return promises reconciliation, the psychological wounds created by years of abandonment remain embedded in her memory.

This dynamic suggests that migration becomes a permanent psychic condition rather than a temporary event. The experiences of absence, longing, and estrangement do not disappear once the migrant returns; instead, they continue to influence how individuals perceive themselves and their relationships. Cultural theorist Edward W. Said similarly observes that displacement often produces a lasting sense of estrangement, even when individuals attempt to reconnect with their place of origin (Said 177). Thakur's dramaturgy reflects this insight by portraying migration as a transformative experience that permanently alters the emotional structure of family life.

Significantly, *Bidesiya* emphasizes emotional consequences rather than economic outcomes. While migration may bring financial benefits or improved material conditions, the play foregrounds the emotional wounds that accompany such mobility. Official narratives of economic progress often celebrate migration as a path toward prosperity and modernization, yet they rarely acknowledge the psychological costs borne by migrant families. By focusing on the experiences of separation, longing, and fractured intimacy, Bhikhari Thakur exposes the hidden emotional dimensions of migration that remain absent from dominant historical narratives.

Ultimately, *Bidesiya* presents migration as a complex social phenomenon that reshapes both individual identities and communal relationships. The play suggests that the emotional legacy of migration persists long after the physical journey has ended. Through its poignant portrayal of reunion and estrangement, Thakur's folk dramaturgy reveals that migration leaves enduring psychological traces within the lives of those who depart as well as those who remain behind.

CONCLUSION

Bidesiya by Bhikhari Thakur offers a profound exploration of migration as a deeply emotional and psychological experience rather than merely a socio-economic phenomenon. Emerging from the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh during the early twentieth century, the play reflects the historical reality of large-scale labour migration to urban centres such as Calcutta and Bombay. While the dominant narratives of migration often emphasize economic opportunity and social mobility, *Bidesiya* reveals the hidden emotional consequences of this movement. By focusing on the suffering of the abandoned wife and the estrangement of the migrant husband, the play illustrates how physical displacement can gradually evolve into a condition of mental exile. The separation caused by migration disrupts

familial relationships and generates emotional fractures that reshape the lives of both those who leave and those who remain behind. One of the most distinctive features of Thakur's dramaturgy is his use of folk performance to represent migrant suffering.

The play incorporates songs, dramatic dialogue, humour, and lamentation to construct a theatrical form that is both emotionally engaging and socially reflective. These performative elements transform the experiences of migration into a shared cultural narrative that audiences can collectively recognize. Theatre scholars have noted that folk performance traditions in South Asia often function as powerful mediums for expressing community experiences and social tensions (Richmond 214). In *Bidesiya*, the emotional songs of separation, particularly those sung by the abandoned wife, transform individual grief into communal memory. The repeated expressions of longing and sorrow not only convey the psychological pain of separation but also preserve the collective memory of migrant suffering within Bhojpuri cultural traditions.

Interpreting *Bidesiya* through the frameworks of trauma theory and cultural memory further illuminates the psychological depth of the play. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth argues that traumatic experiences often manifest through repetition, fragmented memory, and emotional expression rather than through straightforward narration (Caruth 5). This pattern is clearly visible in the repeated laments and songs that structure the narrative of the play. The abandoned wife's voice repeatedly returns to the themes of absence, longing, and betrayal, reflecting the unresolved emotional trauma caused by prolonged separation. At the same time, cultural memory scholars emphasize that collective experiences of suffering are often preserved through oral and performative traditions rather than written records (Taylor 28). Thakur's theatre therefore functions as a form of cultural archive that preserves the emotional histories of subaltern communities affected by migration.

By presenting migration as a condition of emotional dislocation, *Bidesiya* challenges the dominant understanding of mobility as purely economic progress. Migration in the play produces a sense of psychological detachment in which characters feel estranged from both their past and their present environments. The migrant husband gradually becomes disconnected from his home and family, while the wife remains physically present in the village yet experiences profound emotional abandonment. Cultural critic Edward W. Said observes that displacement often produces a persistent feeling of estrangement that reshapes an individual's sense of belonging (Said 177). Thakur's dramatic narrative reflects this insight by portraying migration as a process that destabilizes emotional relationships and communal bonds.

More than a century after its creation, *Bidesiya* continues to resonate with contemporary audiences because the experiences it depicts remain relevant in a world shaped by global migration and labour mobility. The emotional struggles portrayed in the play—longing, separation, nostalgia, and fractured intimacy—are still central to the lives of migrant families across many societies. In this sense, Thakur's folk theatre transcends its immediate historical context and becomes a universal commentary on the human cost of migration. Ultimately, *Bidesiya* reminds us that behind every journey undertaken for economic survival lies a deeply personal story of longing, loss, and the enduring search for emotional belonging and home.

References

- [1] Alexander, Jeffrey C., et al. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. University of California Press, 2004.
- [2] Alidio, Kimberly. "What Home Is Isn't That." Poetry Foundation, 24 July 2023.
- [3] Assmann, Jan. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*. Cambridge UP, 2011.
- [4] Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- [5] Bhugra, Dinesh. "Migration and Mental Health." *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, vol. 109, no. 4, 2004, pp. 243–258.
- [6] Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001.
- [7] Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- [8] Castles, Stephen, and Mark J. Miller. *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- [9] Datta, Amaresh, editor. *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*. Sahitya Akademi, 2006.
- [10] De Haan, Arjan. *Migration and Livelihoods in Historical Perspective*. Routledge, 2002.
- [11] Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1992.
- [12] Jayaram, N. *The Indian Diaspora: Dynamics of Migration*. Sage Publications, 2004.
- [13] Kumar, Niraj, Subhashree Sahoo, and M. Ramakrishnan. "A Glance at Folk Performance and Non-Native Audience." *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, vol. 2, no. 2, July–Dec. 2021, pp. 93–114. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v2.i2.2021.42>.
- [14] Lal, Brij V. *Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji*. Australian National University Press, 2000.
- [15] Mandal, Madhusudan. "Folk Culture of India." Academia.edu.

-
- [16] Marchetti-Mercer, Maria C., and Johannes L. Roos. "Migration and Exile: Some Implications for Mental Health in Post-Apartheid South Africa." *South African Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2006, p. 9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajpsychiatry.v12i3.67>.
- [17] Pandey, Manager. *Bhikhari Thakur and Bhojpuri Folk Theatre*. Rajkamal Prakashan, 2005.
- [18] Parrenas, Rhacel Salazar. *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*. Stanford University Press, 2001.
- [19] Rawat, Sunny. "Migration." *Academia.edu*, <https://www.academia.edu/8021523/migration>.
- [20] Richmond, Farley P., Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarrilli. *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*. University of Hawaii Press, 1993.
- [21] Said, Edward W. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press, 2000.
- [22] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- [23] Thakur, Bhikhari. *Bidesiya*. Bhojpuri Lok Natak Prakashan, 1917.
-

