

## Thematic and Stylistic Nuances of Kiran Desai's Novels

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### Abstract

In recent years diasporic fiction in English has not only been exciting and abundant, but also has undergone some fundamental transformation of theme and technique. The Indian writers of this period have internalized the qualities of versatility, variety and multiplicity of a globalised society. In addition to this, the diasporic novelists of the period reflect and refract the multi-cultural ethos of India in their search for national and cultural identity. In this context, it is significant that Kiran Desai's literary creations are endowed with multicultural themes in which the hopes and aspirations of men and women in a globalised society are presented to comprehend the contemporary reality. Desai's novels reveal the subtleties and nuances of fictional art that contribute to her growth and development as a major influence on the literature of Indian Diaspora. Her command of English language springs out of her cosmopolitan outlook, training and disciplined study of creative literature. The present paper highlights the technique of magic realism, existential anguish, loss of identity, inter-cultural communication and socio-political realism.

**Key Words:** magic realism, socio-political realism, existential experience, loss of identity

Desai uses a variety of linguistic and literary techniques to define the characters which contribute to the major focus of the novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* in the perspectives of magic realism. Her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) made her very popular at her young age of twenty-seven. She emerged as the voice of the younger generation of Indian writers in English, many of whom live abroad in self-exile. India is the home to many religious groups, including the Hindus, the Muslims and the Buddhists. It has a history of political strife among those groups, exacerbated by the emergence of modern globalisation. Desai combines the elements of India's traditions and history with a secular emphasis on storytelling. This novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*

is based on the life-style in a small North Indian town of Shahkot alongside the simplicity and freedom of life at the top of a guava tree. In this process of exploration of fantasy and magic realism Desai highlights the framework of social classes, Indian traditions, and the effects of urbanization. In this context, a detailed study of the novel yields fruitful insight into the subtleties and nuances of magic realism.

It is pertinent to note that the theme of existentialism plays a vital part in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. It attempts to explore the existential crisis of the protagonist. It also analyses his crisis on the basis of freedom as well as his will that reflects the basic notion of existentialism. The novel identifies Sampath as an existentialist because of his alienated behaviour, as an outsider, an exile from the hullabaloo of the family and society. Moreover, the meaninglessness and absurdity of his life, consciousness about nothingness of materialistic life, his subjectivity and personal choice, as well as his rejection of the traditional values reflect his complex life.

Kiran Desai's command of the craft of fiction is commendable. The use of English language for figurative and metaphorical purposes makes her an accomplished artist. The most notable literary quality that Desai employs is hyperbole. She makes each event that occurs in the novel very lively by adding a magical description. Some of the instances are given below:

Shahkot boasted some of the highest temperatures in the country and here there were dozens of monsoon inducing proposals (HGO 1).

A few days after their first encounter with alcohol, they discovered a case of beer in a delivery van. A week later, a bottle of whisky in a rickshaw. Then more beer. Then more rum (HGO 124).

'I am sorry to have bitten your ear. But it was done only out of affection. Please understand, the sight of you filled my heart with so much emotion, but it unfortunately came out in the wrong way. Here's wishing you a speedy recovery' (HGO 145).

The plot of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is based on real life stories familiar in Indian life and culture. In fact, Desai clearly depicts the staple of common beliefs on hermits and saints. And the characters in the vast canvas of Indian life attract her. Consequently, she builds her plot around these characters. Thereby, she has done a remarkable job of presenting the Indian culture in an appealing way. The mundane background and characters are transformed into something unique having their own identity and significance. Desai's rich imaginative colouring and perceptive humour make the story of the plot lively and attractive.

Throughout the novel, she makes effective use of figurative language to intensify the dynamics of the conflicts. For example, in (HGO 55) the novelist writes, "Like a vast

movement of the spheres.” Here the use of simile stresses on the mother’s sudden and complete change of stand point. Another example of simile occurs in (HGO 54). The novelist describes, “Like a hand runs over an animal’s dark fur to expose a silvery underside”. Here the simile compares wind running over the foliage to hands running over animal’s fur. This depicts the beauty of nature and the sense of comfort and belongingness of Sampath. Desai uses another simile “stomach extending improbably before her like a huge growth upon a slender tree (HGO 4).” In addition to this, Kiran uses an interesting metaphor “the dark heart of the monsoon”. This is used to create new imagery so that we can visualize the connection between two dissimilar and unlike objects. She uses imagery and onomatopoeia as in “A clap of thunder” which creates a visual and auditory effect that impresses the reader.

Kiran Desai’s second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* lucidly demonstrates the socio-political situation in Kalimpong. It is a brilliant study of Indian socio-cultural scenario in its transitional phase. In fact, significant social changes have occurred in India due to the people’s craze for western values, manners, life-style; modernization, consumerism and globalization. As a diasporic writer Desai presents the characters who fail to assimilate new culture and give up their original culture in totality. Her use of Indian vocabulary, metaphors and imagery etc. are quite effective in the context of her narrative skill. This is a new trend in which she confidently borrows popular Hindi vocabulary and salacious words from Bengali to invigorate English language with strangeness and novelty. Moreover, in the global multi-cultural community these new words are acceptable in living speech and writing.

One of the major concerns in postcolonial literature is the problem of displacement and its consequence resulting in the loss of home. Uprooting from one’s own culture and land, and the agonies of re-routing in an alien land are depicted in many postcolonial works. The characters in *The Inheritance of Loss* often face the problem of identity and alienation, and become frustrated at the end. Even when they come back to their own country, like the Judge in the novel, they develop a sense of distrust and anger. They remain in a state of confusion from which they find it difficult to come out.

In the case of Gyan, it is the dislocation from Nepal that makes his attitudes to life ambivalent. He also faces the problem of identity as he loves Gorkhland but does not fight for it. His love for Sai is also ambivalent and uncertain. Sai is also a victim of circumstances. She lost her parents in an accident in Russia. Her father was a space scientist, living in Russia, while she was in a convent in Darjeeling. So, from the outset she has tasted bitter feelings of separation and displacement. Desai narrates: “Romantically she decided that love must surely reside in the gap between desire and fulfilment, in the lack, not the contentment. Love was the ache, the anticipation, the retreat, everything around it, but the emotion itself (IL 2-3).”

The displacement of Biju, the son of the cook is more poignant than any other character in the novel. On the contrary, his friend Saeed has a carefree life. He has not been affected by the agonies of an immigrant. While Biju is a lost man in the new world, Saeed is very adaptable and can lead a life of ease without any qualms. Biju's longing for home is continuous while Saeed never thinks of leaving America. Desai compares Biju and Saeed to show how they handle the dilemmas faced by the immigrants. Saeed seems to be more pragmatic while Biju is an idealist who resists the Western culture in which he is trapped for a long time. The writer suggests that Biju faces a lot of problems of misfortune in America. Though Saeed faces the similar problem in America but confronts it with patience. Both the characters try to survive in an alien culture, at any cost.

Kiran Desai's use of language in both her novels *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss* illuminates the rich and powerful nuances of English language in the twenty-first century. Alongside this, she uses words from the Indian languages to describe and refer to typically Indian food items, as well as certain specific terms used in India to address people who are older, as well as terms of endearment used for one's offspring or for those who are younger. The words and phrases from the Indian languages that she uses are culture specific and go a long way in conveying certain aspects of the Indian culture to the readers. These 'loan words' from Indian languages add novelty and strangeness to the dialogues and enrich their use in the diasporic contexts.

Her use of Hindi language and songs and mention of Indian actors give a touch of authenticity to the characters. She uses both gentle (*Namaste, Dhanyawad, Shukria* etc) and sometimes vulgar (*behenchoots*) colloquial, vernacular expressions in Hindi. Postcolonial writers often take this liberty to have the flexibility of using English language along with borrowed words according to the socio-cultural situations where their characters are presented.

Kiran Desai is deeply interested in the portrayal of contemporary India. She honestly represents the mixed image of India. Politically, India was hit by insurgency. It composed a big threat to law and order. The novel is set in the backdrop of insurgency rising in the North-East, i.e. GNLFF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) movement which disrupted the normal life, tourism, business and peace. Out of fifty- three chapters of the novel more than eighteen chapters are exclusively devoted to describe insurgency to highlight the dismal picture of the region. Poverty, unemployment, socio-economic backwardness, discriminatory policies and the government's apathy to seek remedies are deeply rooted in the separatist movements rampant in India. No part is spared: " Separatist movements here, Separatist movements there, terrorists, guerrillas, insurgents, rebels, agitators, instigators, and they all learn from one another, of course- the Nepalis have been encouraged by the Sikhs and their Khalistan, by ULFA, NEFA, PLA; Jharkhand, Bodoland, Gorkhaland; Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Kashmir, Punjab, Assam... (128-129)." The close nexus among these makes the political

problem more grim and intractable. Moreover, she highlights the poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, cultural conflicts, loss of traditional values and customs. Above all, she is frank and forthright in her presentation of the Indian situation in an authentic manner.

Multiculturalism is another characteristic feature of Indian society. Most of Desai's characters belong to different cultural backgrounds. She maintains convivial attitude to all cultures and mildly exposes the vanity and hypocrisy embedded in their attitude to life. Moreover, immigration is one of their most striking problems. Most of the Indians and Third World Citizens face such situations in Europe and America. Biju, Saeed, Harish Harry, Saran, Jeev, Rishi, Mr.Lalkaka, and thousands of Africans, Latin Americans and Asians working in American and Europe experience the bitter struggle of the immigrants. In fact, Kiran Desai has a passion for reforming the system to dispel the hardships of the migrant people.

It is significant that the description of nature and landscape occupies a large chunk of the novel. It extends from Manhattan to the Himalayas; it is central to Piphit, Kalimpong, Cho Oyu, and the beauty of Darjeeling. Topography of different places, scenic spots, variety of vegetation, changing colours of the sky, patches of clouds, rain, mist, mountain tops, Teesta river, thick forests, cluster of houses, ice, zigzag roads and seasonal changes, fill in the abundance of nature's panoramic beauty in the novel. Kiran Desai has extraordinary powers of imagination. She is endowed with a fine aesthetic sensibility that makes her a lover of Nature-its beauties and bounties. Above all, Kanchenjunga's majestic peaks symbolically present the pinnacle of her vision.

Desai's observation is very keen, acute and specific; even the different parts of a tree embody sensuous beauty as well as represent the psychic conditions of the inhabitants: "Kanchenjunga glowed macabre, trees stretched away on either side, trunks pale, leaves black, and beyond, between the pillars of the trees, a path led to the house (IL19)." Sometimes, she juxtaposes and blends various objects and presents an elaborate picture. Kiran's narrative captures the abundance and variety of the rich topography.

The vicinity of Cho Oyu is marked by it:

...a wetter climate, a rusty green landscape, creaking and bobbing in the wind. They drove past tea stalls on stilts, chicken being sold in round cane baskets, and Durga Puja goddesses being constructed in shacks ...paddy fields and warehouses ...to the right, the Teesta river came leaping at them between white blanks of sand. Space and sun crashed through the window...By the riverbank, wild water racing by, the late evening sun in polka dots through trees, they parted company. To the east was Kalimpong barely managing to stay on the saddle between the Deolo and the Ringkingpong hills. To the west was Darjeeling, skidding down the Singalila mountains... not a streetlight anywhere in Kalimpong, and the lamps

in the houses were so dim you saw them only you passed;... forest making ssss  
tseu ts ts seuuu sounds (IL30-31).

Kiran Desai's love of landscapes of India speaks of her fine aesthetic sensibility.

It is interesting to study the wide range of words and expressions which Kiran Desai uses to enrich the communicative context of a multicultural society. The use of popular slangs, abuses of various regions, and frequently used Indian expressions are: *nakhara, pakora, huzoor, chhang, mia-bibi, mithai, pitaji, Angrezi Khana, salwars, kamalahai, Baapre! ladoos, dhotis, jhora, pallu, Budhoo, choksee, Neps, Namaste, aiyiye, baethiye, khaiye, dhanayawad, shukuria, chapattis, jalebi, haveli, tika, chokra, murga-murgi, bania, dhobi, hubshi, haat, atta, srikhand, kundani, peepal, chholah, rasta rook, phata phat, Bilkul Bekar, Jai Gorkha, Saag, bhai, Goras, ghas phoos, goondas, sukhtara, susu fucking oil, ber, chooran, jamun, tatti, roti-namak, gadhas, murdabad, parathas, tamasha, chappals, desi, etc.*

It is important to note here that in *The Inheritance of Loss* succeeds in bringing out the emotional lows and highs of her characters placed on the foot of the mighty Himalayas by using stylistic devices like metaphors, similes, dry humour and freshly created linguistic devices covering new phrases and colourful new idioms. These phrases and idioms include "her froggy expression" (IL 58), "failing construct" (IL 113), "hot with shame" (IL 113), "tightrope tension" (IL 114), "an orgy of imagination" (IL 113), "with a thud of joy" (IL 115), "peppery feeling" (IL 116), "being traced by another's finger" (IL 116), "trembling delicacy" (IL 116), "an odiferous yeasty mix of spore and fungi" (IL 117), "tears sheeted his cheeks" (IL 117), "shifted the burden of hope from this day to the next" (IL 120), "beyond the boundaries of propriety" (IL 120), "heart like a cake" (IL 121), "ancient sand-weathered words" (IL 136), "to pass crabwise" (IL 251), "an elegant amour" (IL 251); "her laugh was only another confectionary concocted for his sake" (IL 250), "chloroformed atmosphere" (IL 254), "botanical profusion" (IL 254), "a capillary web of paths" (IL 254), "refrigerated voice" (IL 257) to give a few. Besides these newly created phrases, Desai uses metaphors like "India is a sinking ship", "a perturbed harem of sulphurous hens being chased by a randy rooster" and "a messy map".

The figures of speech that the writer employs carry not only novelty in them but also they unmistakably express the culture of the characters that the novel projects. We have heard that artists boldly express what goes on around them and also in their minds. They do not mince words, whether they paint with brush or with words; they are true to their feelings. Kiran Desai is no exception to this. In the novel she lays bare Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. Listen to her candid account of Jinnah. Taking a clever opportunity, she also digs at the way the Muslims offer pray to Allah:

"More Muslims in India than in Pakistan. They prefer to multiply over here. You know, that Jinnah, he ate falcon and eggs for breakfast every morning and drank



whiskey every evening. What sort of Muslim nation they have?. And five times a day bums up to God. Mind you,”...“With that Koran, who can be surprised? They have no option but to be two-faced.”... so strict was the Koran that its teachings were beyond human capability. Therefore Muslims were forced to pretend one thing, do another; they drank, smoked, ate pork, visited prostitutes, and then denied it. (IL 130)

One of the linguistic features that catches the attention of any reader of Kiran Desai’s novel is sarcasm. From the first page to last page the novel is replete with sarcastic comments. This, we believe, is one of the hallmarks of modern fictional narratology. The typical Indian attitude towards the overseas-return is very beautifully phrased out by the novelist in a few places. For Instance, when Biju buys a ticket to India from Mr. Kakkar, the latter advises him in the typical Indian fashion:

“Going back?” he continued, “don’t be completely crazy - all those relatives asking for money! Even strangers are asking for money - may be they just try, you know, maybe you shit and dollars come out. I’m telling you, my friend, they will get you; if they won’t, the robbers will; if the robbers won’t, some disease will; if not some disease, the heat will; if not the heat, those mad Sardarji’s will bring down your plane before you even arrive”. (IL 269)

Kiran Desai employs irony mostly as a provocative technique to drive home her point of criticism. Sai’s mother had hailed from Gujarat. Gujaratis are proverbially famous for their conviviality, partying and noisy fellowships. But, even though Sai had plenty of relatives in Gujarat, quite ironically, she became lonely. Look at the phrase used by the novelist to refer to Sai’s condition: “In a country full of relatives, Sai suffered a dearth” (28). And again, the novelist presents the plight of the western educated justice Jamubhai Popatlal Patel who after his retirement, moved into Cho Oyu (a Bungalow built by a Scottish man in Kalimpong): “The judge could live here, in this shell, this skull, with the solace of being a foreigner in his own country, for this time he would not learn the language” (29). Having gained thorough information as to how the typical Indian policeman act and react, Kiran Desai speaks through one of the poor urchins referring to a minor crime. “The police won’t touch rich people, only people like us (IL 240).”

Kiran Desai’s similes express her creative acumen. Her similes are not merely decorative but functional also; though her indulgence in similes is not profuse, but it does not highlight her nonchalance for it, because whenever she makes use of them, it does give the impression of being an intrinsic part. I would like to present a few such similes from the text. In New York a large number of eastern illegal migrant workers found Saeed who ran a restaurant in New York. These migrants would love to “cling to him like a plank during a shipwreck” (IL 76), “soul tremble like a candle” (IL68), “the judge sitting poised like a heron over his chessboard” (IL88)”. Life is given to inanimate things and improper and inhuman treatment

is left for the animate beings. Death is given its dignity where “spiders lay scattered like dead blossoms on the attic floor” (IL12). The post office on 125th street in Harlem in New York looked to the novelist, “barricaded like an Israeli army outpost in Gaza” (IL 95). To the all-absorbing novelist’s eyes, the enveloping mist in the North Eastern States seems to be “charging down like a dragon, dissolving, undoing, making ridiculous the drawing of borders” (IL 9). The judge took a dose of calmpose and went to sleep. It caused him to dream a nightmare and “he lay there until the cows began to boom like foghorns through the mist” (IL 40). The cooks in rich men’s houses in Kalimpong tell plenty of lies to one another in order to arouse the jealousy of the other. A couple of cooks even went to the extent of saying that their employers pleaded with them not to work but to eat cream and ghee, “to look after their chilblains and sun themselves like monitor lizards on winter afternoons (IL 55).” When Jemubhai was a school kid at the Bishop Cotton School, his mother took an enormous care of her ward. She would rub a good quantity of oil on his hair and scrub the boy’s hair viciously. As result of it, “he reemerged like a whale from the sea, heaving for breath (IL 58).” The portrait of Queen Victoria decked the entrance to Bishop Cotton School; she appeared in a flamboyant dress, “a dress like a flouncy curtain” (IL 58). Soon after his assuming office as a judge with his ICS attachment after his name, Jemubhai Patel enjoyed every moment of his service by wielding authority over his subordinates, especially the Brahmins who trampled down the Patel’s of Gujarat and others for many centuries. See how Kiran Desai constructs a beautiful simile to mark this:

How he relished his power over the classes that had kept his family pinned under their heels for centuries . . . like the stenographer, for Example, who was a Brahmin. There he was, crawling into a tiny tent to the side, and there was Jemubhai reclining like a king in the bed carved out of teak, hung with mosquito netting (IL 61).

In sum, it may be argued that the wealth of Kiran Desai’s techniques-magic realism, comic-satire, humour, narrative ease, and socio-political scenario stand firmly in the tradition of Indian English Fiction, reflecting the tenor of our contemporary society. Moreover, Desai’s pessimism is redeemed by humour, fun and colloquialism of expression. Different facets such as surrealism and postcolonialism are discernible in her novels. Thus, Kiran Desai has put the traditional Indian novel in the matrix of the contemporary scenario. Some critics point out that in the colonial period fictional techniques are slick and superficial and the substance is a thin caricature of the tradition. But a perceptive study of Desai’s fiction shows that her techniques are the innovative nuances which revitalize old forms and create a unique place for her in the history of Diasporic Indian English fiction.

Putting all the threads of narrative together, Kiran Desai attempts to weave a gossamer of reality with a distinct touch of an artist that impresses the reader. Her stylistic craftsmanship is widely acknowledged in literary circles. She has presented political, social, cultural, natural



and religious aspects of life in a comprehensive manner which is not only entertaining but also highly informative. Despite historical and cultural differences, both works *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss* offer an imaginative and witty portrayal of the world and present the importance of new perspectives of life in a complex multi-cultural society.

Desai's narrative technique is marked by limpid style and powerful imagery. She believes in the vision of an ideal world of happy men and women. This noble thought not only places her in high esteem but also makes her extraordinary creative talent relevant to the world of her characters. The scholars of the fictional mode in twenty-first century will certainly be able to exploit the resources of new canons of criticism to unravel Desai's deep insight into human condition that will appear in a more focused and meaningful context.

### Conclusion

In its long journey through the twentieth century, and the first decade of the twenty-first Indian fiction in English has reached a stage where it can now be placed in its proper historical and cultural context. With the burst of activity in this literature and the global proliferation of interest for it, Indian English literature has come of age. It now successfully meets the challenges of *Bhasa* literatures at home and Post-Colonial literature and Anglo-American literatures abroad. Amidst these Kiran Desai stands as a class of her own. She shows India to the world in a way no other writer does. Her genius lies in her capacity to show the extraordinary representation of most human experiences, and to convince readers that the lives and characters of her fictional writings reflect the quintessence of human nature. With its range and depth her fictional writings will undoubtedly stand the test of time.

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