

Diasporic Vision in Kiran Desai's Novel *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

Kiran Desai writes about Darjeeling in her Booker Prize award winning novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. The settings and characters of her novel are Indian but they are transmuted into a new diasporic world of multi-culturalism, globalisation and the cross-currents of a polyglot civilisation. The focus shifts to major cities in the West, the life-styles of world communities, the rich and the poor, the collective issues of globalisation, terrorism, economic debacle, social and political issues in diasporic situations. The present study highlights Kiran Desai's art of diasporic vision in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Keywords: Diaspora, Globalisation, Identity, Schizophrenia, GNLF

Kiran Desai (1971-), an Indian-born American author, won the 2006 *Man Booker Prize* for fiction and the *National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award* for her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. The novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) was unanimously acclaimed throughout the world. In 1998, she had won the *Betty Trask award* for the first novel. She grew up in India, a colony of British Empire for about two hundred years. She moved to England when she was fourteen, and then moved to America a year later and became a permanent resident of the United States. She was educated in India, England and the United States. These socio-cultural backgrounds helped her in shaping and developing the plots of her novels and the characters which appeared in these works of art. Therefore, it is justified to say that Kiran Desai emerged in the literary arena as a typical diasporic writer in her unique multi-cultural educational background. She is a permanent resident of the United States of America with deep and intimate roots in the rich cultural links with her native land,

India. Based on this experience, *The Inheritance of Loss* depicts a group of “lost” people and the state of their lives, and how they lost themselves in the course of pursuing their cultural identity in the process of globalization. This complex background is of great significance to the multitudinous diasporic writers who are still struggling hard to recognize their cultural identity. A sensitive response to the diasporic challenges characterize Kiran Desai’s fictional world. Moreover, she is an intelligent and erudite novelist embracing the cross currents of her multi-cultural milieu. She is dedicated to the art of fiction, the voices and visions of the new generation of world citizens experiencing a set of values in an age of globalisation and pursuing their ambitious aspirations in the midst of contemporary challenges of life.

At the outset it may be briefly stated here that the term ‘Diaspora’ is derived from the Greek composite verb ‘*dia*’ and, ‘*speirn*’ (infinitive), literally meaning, ‘to scatter’, ‘to spread’, or to ‘disperse’. It was originally used to refer to the dispersion of Jews after the Babylonian exile in 586 BC. In the modern and post-modern contexts, however, the term is applied to describe any group of people who are dispersed. It is significant that India has witnessed a long history of diasporic patterns of consciousness arising out of displacement of its people. We need to understand the migratory pattern in order to understand Diaspora as a theoretical, sociological, anthropological, historical, and cultural and geographical term. John Decker in his book, *The Politics of Diaspora* (1992) defines Diaspora:

By diaspora, minimally defined, I mean a sense of belonging to more than one history, to move more than one time and place, more than one past and future. Diaspora suggests belonging to both the omnipresent weight of pain of being an outsider in a new one. Diaspora suggests both lack and excess of loss and separation, yet also the possibility of new adventures of identity and the continued imagining of unconquerable countries of the mind. (Vii-viii)

Normally, Indian Diaspora means writers of Indian birth or ethnicity living abroad, who may be first generation expatriate whose India was home-of nourishment, values, love and affection though it may not be a universal case, with distinct dissonance. In the same way, the literature of the Indian Diaspora is that body of writing in English produced by persons who identify themselves as of Indian heritage who are living (or have lived for some time) outside mother India. For human beings migration and dispersion are natural phenomenon which

may be categorised as temporary, seasoned or permanent migration from their original habitat for various reasons. Migrants carry with them a socio-cultural baggage which among other things consists of a predefined social identity, a set of religious beliefs and practices, a framework of norms and values governing family, kinship food habits, and language. These migrants keep in touch with their homeland and share 'the myth of return'. Their identities are twofold-that of the homeland and that of the land of adoption.

Diasporic writing raises questions regarding the definitions of 'home' and 'nation'. Schizophrenia and/or nostalgia are often preoccupations of these writers as they seek to locate themselves "in new cultures". The notable writers of the Indian diasporic fiction are Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Kamala Markandaya, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, VikramSeth, Amitav Ghosh, and Rohinton Mistry etc. They have explored their identity crisis, racial and cultural conflicts, ethnicity, and the sense of belonging. The loneliness and alienation among the immigrants provide a new focus for their narrative perspective. Thus the history of migration is the history of alienation and its consequences. For every freedom won, a tradition is lost

The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is set against the backdrop of the agitation for Gorkhaland in the north-eastern hills of Darjeeling, close to the borderland with Nepal. There are stories within the stories depicted in numerous vignettes. Set in 1980s, the novel gives a graphic account of a cross section of Indian society in characters like Jemubhai Patel, a former judge, his teenaged granddaughter Sai and their cook who live in a house in the North-East Indian town Kalimpong, Biju, the cook's son, Gyan, Saeed, Haresh Harry and the two sisters, Lolita and Nonita. All these figures are the inheritors of loss, in terms of dislocation of place, wealth and progress. They are all transformed from their 'native' identity into something quite different. Rather, they are negotiating with a state of non-identity. Caught between two worlds - topography and cultures of East and West, the characters negotiate a new social space. Kiran Desai confidently negotiates a new literary space for the new generation of writers struggling for identity in the fast-changing global competitive space. They are all haunted by questions often asked by an immigrant: Who am I? Where do I belong? In fact, these responses of the fictional characters constitute the chief forte of her novel.

The magnificent novel *The Inheritance of Loss* of centres round our busy, grasping times and illuminates the consequences of colonialism and global conflicts of religion, race, and nationalism. It manages to explore, with intimacy and insight, just about every contemporary international issue: globalisation, economic inequality, fundamentalism, and terrorist violence. Despite being set in the mid-1980s, it presents the best kind of post-9/11 novel.

All the characters in the novel share a sense of ambivalence that eventually leads each one of them to the abyss of a deep sense of loss. Jemubhai Patel, the former judge, is an embittered person and he often lives in the past. In flashback, we learn that when he was a young man, he was sent to Cambridge by his family to study law. But in England, he was ridiculed for his English accent. Young English girls held their nose as he passed insisting he reeked of curry-this rejection fuelled in his soul, a shame and a dislike for his heritage, his culture and the colour of his skin. "He retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow (IL, 39)." The judge becomes a victim of "double consciousness"- A term coined by W. E. B. Dubois and used quite often in postcolonial literatures [Dubois used this to describe an individual whose identity is divided into several facets]. "He envied the English... He loathed Indians (119)." The Judge looks at the English as someone superior and this attitude puts him in a post-colonial dilemma that aggravates his ambivalent nature.

In the case of Gyan, it is dislocation from Nepal that makes him ambivalent. He also faces the problem of identity as he loves Gorkhaland but does not fight for it. His love for Sai is also ambivalent and uncertain. Sai is a victim of circumstances. She lost her parents in an accident in Russia. Her father was a space scientist, living in Russia, while she herself was living in Darjeeling in a convent. So, from the outset she has tasted bitter feelings of separation and displacement. Romantically she decided that love must surely reside in the gap between desires 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).

She arrives at the house of her grandfather, the retired judge, whom she has never met before. Her displacement from the comforts of a convent school in Darjeeling to the lush, misty Himalayan region of Kalimpong in North Eastern India, where a growing Nepalese insurgency is about to unravel her life further, brings a lot of havoc in her life. The love

between Sai and Gyan, her Mathematics tutor, flowers in the beginning, but it dies when Gyan joins the insurgents and stops coming to see her. Sai eventually goes to confront him, but the meeting ends in disappointment. Consequently, both of them get alienated from each other.

Sai's desire to achieve a kind of emotional bond with her grandfather, the retired Judge fails. Moreover, the judge is displaced emotionally and physically- the tension between wanting to belong to his own native land and a foreign culture, the usual post-colonial dilemma. The first evening when Sai was at Cho Oyu at her grandfather's home "she had a fearful feeling of having entered a space so big it reached both backward and forward (IL 34)." Desai often uses such binary opposites like arrivals and departures which move in and move out, hope and hopelessness - all these are parts of the postcolonial dilemma.

The story of the novel revolves around the lives of two central characters - Jemubhai Patel, a retired Cambridge-educated judge, who lives in Kalimpong, in a kind of self-exile and loves only his dog-Mutt and his grand-daughter Sai, a sixteen year old orphan, who comes from St. Augustine's convent in Darjeeling to live with her only relative-her maternal grandfather.

In addition to these central characters there are important characters like Biju, Cook (Biju's Father), Gyan, Lola, Noni whose predicament is powerfully presented in the novel. The situations in Kalimpong are highly tense and explosive due to the political violence and turmoil created by the GNLFF. The insurgents are deadly against all the outsiders and especially the Bengalis who according to them they are the root of their distress and hardships. Though the Indian Nepalese youth have been indulging in political violence and pressure tactics they have not succeeded in getting a separate homeland for themselves.

Kiran Desai brings the new idea for her novel by exposing the socio-political conflict in Kalimpong. She narrates the insurgency activities in Kalimpong where the Indian Nepalese demanded a separate state for themselves during the 1980s. The Gorkha National Liberation Front has been formed mainly by the Indian Nepalese youth who are fed up with their minority status in a place where they are in the majority. They want their own country or at least their own state in which to manage their own affairs. Their main grievance is that though they and their forefathers have sacrificed a lot for India they have been treated in the country as slaves. The Gorkhas consider it their birthright to fight for a separate homeland.

They still remember how the British Army and later the Indian Army had used the brave Gorkha soldiers for their selfish ends. Therefore, the GNLF has taken a vow to get their demands fulfilled unconditionally. Desai has highlighted this complex picture of terrorism and political self-derivation with considerable clarity and vision:

They wanted their own country, or at least their own state, in which to manage their own affairs. Here, where India blurred into Bhutan Sikkim, and the army did pull-ups and push-ups, maintaining their tanks with Khaki paint in case the Chinese grew hungry for more territory than Tibet, it had always been a messy map. The papers sounded resigned. A great amount of warring, betraying, bartering had occurred; between Nepal, England, Tibet, India, Sikkim, Bhutan; Darjeeling stolen from here, Kalimpong plucked from there-despite, ah, despite the mist charging down like a dragon, dissolving, undoing, making ridiculous the drawing of borders. (IL 9)

Another immigrant is Biju, the Cook's son. Like the Judge's father, the cook also sends his son Biju to New York with the hope of enjoying a higher social status, after he comes back with the wealth. But in the long run Biju is disillusioned with his American dream and decides to come back. He realizes that even in highly developed countries there is poverty, when he locates rat-infested dingy basements in New York. He meets several immigrants from Asian and African countries who all share his American dream. Kiran Desai very aptly calls this class as 'shadow class' (IL 102).

The Inheritance of Loss sheds light on the fact that the "shadow class" cannot remain in the shadows forever-eventually, those reaping the benefits of globalisation will have to face the destruction and violence that globalisation, imperialism and colonization impose. It is expected that the west would come face to face with these "shadows" sooner rather than later, for shadows are always, in some sense, reflections of the self.

Kiran Desai's vision of immigrant experience has a comprehensive canvas including the socio-cultural perspective, socio-economic arguments and the awareness of the matrix of home and homelessness. Thus the feeling of oppression is rooted in the psyche of immigrants. The romantic quest marked by nostalgia, glorification of native tradition,

lingering shadows of lost relationship and an urge for native food, language and habits, are not the ultimate periphery of the immigrant experience reconstructed in *The Inheritance of Loss*. There is also a reassessment of East in the context of West and expansion of the horizon of Western thought that can accommodate the best of the Orient without a reciprocal interaction of the two currents of human thought, the comprehensive, humanistic and pluralistic vision of the world remains a utopia. The prosperity of humanity at large beyond the national cultural codes, can ensure a more stable and progressive community pacing fast in search of global society. Edward Said suggests: “Nativism is not the only alternative. There is the possibility of a more generous and pluralistic vision of the World (52).”

It is significant to note that the English culture has influenced the Indians in various ways such as in dress, food, habits and manners. People like Jemubhai Patel, Sai, Noni, Lola, Mrs. Thondup, and uncle Potty live English lives in India yet they vaguely believe that Indian culture is mundane and barbarian. The aforesaid background of the plot of the novel and a look at the dilemma of the characters enable us to pursue detailed evaluation of plot, characters, setting, incidents, artistic nuances, language and technique in the chapters that follow the introduction.

The narratives in *The Inheritance of Loss* contribute to the vivid portrayal of events and characters of different backgrounds and cultures. She does not fail in uniting the events and arguments to a coherent and absorbing work of art. She succeeds in permeating human sentiments throughout the novel with her animating ideas of men and women living in the minds of stress and strain.

In this novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, the young people lose their sense of inheritance, belonging, their culture and their original home. In fact, the loss is not only faced by one generation but by the three generations which have been depicted in the novel. Longing is perhaps the emotion that the characters cherish in this novel. They long for home, they long for love, and they long for acceptance- yet rarely are they skilled at locating any of the above.

What Desai ultimately highlights is not just individual experiences, but rather the relations of recognition among immigrants, exiles, and foreigners who grapple with the weight of history. *The Inheritance of Loss* tells the story of two different kinds of diasporas- that of the exploited, immigrants in New York City and an aging, elitist cluster of Indians settled after

retirement in a hill town, wonderfully presented in Sai's grandfather among others. Characters belonging to both these worlds face the challenges of a globalised society that is fraught with increasingly separatist and nationalistic agendas. Desai's novel describes human migration and shows that it has always been part of the human experience. Her realistic portrayal of life in two continents, diasporic on multiple levels, demonstrates a deeper understanding of the human condition.

The Inheritance of Loss is truly a powerful post-colonial novel, in which Desai neatly presents the experiences of cultural identity, race, and ethnicity; focusing mainly on Indian culture and how it has been both integrated with and influenced western cultures. Being an expatriate Desai can very well understand the kind of mental agony and physical sufferings one has to undergo when one settles down in an alien land. She is quite certain that people should not be discriminated against one another based on their race, skin-colour and culture. With great futuristic vision Desai strongly suggests in the novel that tolerance and mutual respect for one another will lead to the abolition of racial prejudice and discrimination. In addition to this, the novel highlights basic human values such as love, compassion, tolerance and respect for one another which surpass all social, political, cultural, and religious barriers and limitations.

CONCLUSION

In the twenty-first century the progress and development of Diasporic Indian English fiction has been immensely significant and exciting. The accolade given to these novelists in the form of awards have enhanced their reputation. In her novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai captures the spirit of western globalised society and invests it with the elements of Indian culture which illuminate the roots of her deeper identities. She has a firm grasp of the socio-cultural situations both in the West and the East. Indeed, the insightful portrayal of her characters reflects the close-knit structure of her novel. Indeed, it is a major achievement of Kiran Desai.

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