

A DIASPORIC READING OF KIRAN DESAI'S *HE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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ABSTRACT

In the postmodern age, under the effect of rapid means of communication and transportation, migration occurs and it has given rise to mutations in diasporic self. Ultimately, diasporic conflicting identity is at stake and diaspora often become an irreversible historical entity that leads migrants towards home and homing desire. This paper explores the split identities of Indian- American diaspora in Desai's prestigious novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. It also underpins how troubled relationship between the first and second generation of immigrants has impacted their dispersed identity.

Keywords: Diaspora, Diasporic self, Split identity, Home, Homing desire, Migration.

INTRODUCTION

Diaspora refers to the dispersion of migration of people or community from its place of origin to other places. Though the people do not show a compulsive desire to return home, they have a conscious or subconscious attachment to traditions, customs, values, religions and language of ancestral home. They are an imagined community. They live in an imaginative geography and history which lies at the centre of their cultural identity and give meaning to it.

Diasporic literature is mainly an output generated from a unique feeling emanating in the minds of people who go through an avalanche of anguishes and emotions while taking efforts to acclimatize to new cultural environment. Diasporic fiction in English in the post colonial period has not only been exciting and abundant, but also has undergone some fundamental transformation of theme and technique.

Indeed, the Indian writers of this period have internalized the qualities of versatility, variety and multiplicity of a globalized society.

This research article entitled “A Diasporic Reading of Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*” aims to present the livelihood struggles of migrants. It unearths the lives of immigrants in the foreign land bringing out their pungent diasporic experience with split identity and its fragmentations and their inevitable survival in the migrated locations. As an accomplished writer, Kiran Desai portrays the postcolonial situations both in India and America objectively and comprehensively. She handles the material with artistic perception and as one who is aware of various factors which affect the modern contemporary society. She seems to advocate a new world order which should be devoid of unnecessary tensions and conflicts.

Diasporic literature, to a great extent, explores not just the physical impact of the journey but it also delves into a higher level of metaphysical journey that transports into the inner consciousness or reality. Pramod K Nayar states: “A diaspora is a scattered population whose origin lies within a smaller geographic locale. Diaspora can also refer to the movement of the population from its original homeland. (189)”, therefore, diasporic communities are created out of the merging of narratives about journeys from the old country to the new one. People from the first generation of migrants tend to recall the old country more than the children born to the migrants. Through an intensive study of diasporic literature, one is able to rediscover the commonalities when looked at from a distance. It works as a channel to strengthen the ties by serving as an outlet to the pent up emotions and feelings. Diasporic writers have tried to re-invent their birth place by casting the rhythms of ancient legends and exposing the cadences of mythology along with cultural assimilation and nostalgia.

Kiran Desai born on September 3, 1971 at New Delhi, India is an Indian-born American author. She is the daughter of the renowned novelist Anita Desai. She lived in India until age fifteen, after which her family moved to England and then to the United States. She graduated from Bennington College in 1993 and later received two M. F. A., one from Hollins University, in Roanoke, Virginia, and the other from Columbia University, in New York City. Desai left Columbia for several years to write her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* published in 1998 is about a young

man in provincial India who abandons an easy post office job and begins living in a guava tree, where he makes oracular pronouncements to locals. Unaware that he knows of their lives from having read their mail, they hail him as a prophet. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* drew wide critical praise and received the Betty Trask Prize from the British Society of Authors.

While working on what would become her second novel, Desai lived a peripatetic life that took her from New York to Mexico and India. After more than seven years of work, she published *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006. Set in India in the mid-1980s, the novel has at its centre a Cambridge-educated Indian judge living out his retirement in Kalimpong, near the Himalayas, with his granddaughter until their lives are disrupted by Nepalese insurgents. The novel also interweaves the story of the judge's cook's son as he struggles to survive as an illegal immigrant in the United States. *The Inheritance of Loss* was hailed by critics as a keen, richly descriptive analysis of globalization, terrorism, and immigration. When she received the Booker Prize for the novel in 2007, Desai became the youngest female writer to win the award.

The Inheritance of Loss can be viewed as a diasporic novel. The theme of diaspora in the world of literature describes loss of identity and isolation witnessed by the Indian writers who are settled abroad. The Diasporic style used in this novel is an exemplary notification to her, among the Indian novelists. The location of the novel is well known to the author as her roots are in Kalimpong where she had spent her childhood. She attended a school in Kalimpong which is delineated through the character Sai in the novel.

Desai with her own immigrant experience portrays the helpless Indians who wish to have the great America dream come true, but not all Indians succeed. Like the character Biju from the novel, many end up as wrecks and they are pushed down in the ladder of life. Finally they accept their fate and decide to pull on with no bright future and property. The major part of the plot therefore unfolds around the development of these characters. In many retrospectives and flashbacks about judge's unhappy experiences with western society, one could find negativity overshadowing the lives of the immigrants. The life of Sai is in search of her identity between western upbringing and life in eastern society. Biju realizes his identity

when confronted with unfamiliar western society in New York. The lives of other characters are interconnected with the history of the region. The sisters Lola and Noni lose their privileged status. Father Booty is forced out of the country due to his expired visas.

Desai uses many details from her childhood to capture the life of the area. She admits that the “Gobbo”, the town thief, the two cobras living in Jhora Ravine, a Swiss priest who ran a cheese making enterprise are all true characters that she remembers from her childhood. This is where the real life memory ends. Desai’s aim was to show the impact of what happens when a western element is introduced into a country that is not of the west as it happened in the colonial period and the result is well seen in many of her characters.

Kiran Desai wanted to communicate to the world what it means to be an immigrant as well as what happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in the wealthy one. These events occurred not only in her book, but also in Desai’s own life. Desai left Kalimpong at the age of thirteen when the Nepali unrests started and moved with her mother to Delhi. They moved to London when she was fourteen and a year later to the U.S. where she currently lives.

Desai explores a parallel between the immigration of Indians to the U.S. and the Nepali workers who immigrated to India as a cheap labour during the colonial period. In both cases, she believes that both these groups have to deal with the questions of rights and identity. The theme of the connection between place, language and culture as the idea of relationship between one’s identity and place often appears in *The Inheritance of Loss*. Nigamananda Das in the book *Dynamics of Culture and Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri* states: “The search for home amidst cultural displacement also implies that there would always be an attempt on the Diasporas’ part to consciously or unknowingly re-create a semblance of the home which they left behind (37)”. This recreation would involve the conscious abrogation of the influence of the dominant culture.

Desai’s belief in these theories stems from her personal experience and is mirrored in her writing where she successfully shows the feeling of a person in a foreign country.

The Inheritance of Loss focuses not only on an individual’s story but also on

how several people make sense of themselves, view the world around them and deal with difficulties that they have with contradictions. Desai uses the term contradiction frequently in the novel and it helps one understand how she presents the conflicts of identity faced by her characters. As Salman Rushdie states in an interview: “Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest levels of human existence, in the human spirit, where I hope to find out absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination, and of the heart”, one could rightly understand the intricacies of the human existence through Desai’s novel.

Desai draws her characters from people belonging to all cultures and they make huge sacrifices for their children, behave cruelly towards people they love, reject traditional ways of life and old values, rediscover what is important to them, suffer at the hands of faceless government officials, and learn and grow, and make decisions, sometimes ill-considered about their lives. Dealing with all levels of society and different cultures, Desai shows life’s humour and brutality, its whimsy, its harshness and its delicate emotions and passionate commitments in a novel that is both beautiful and wise. The book’s language, scenarios and juxtapositions are funny, threatening, vivid and tender all the same time. The comic element always intertwined with irony as characters struggle with a world bigger than themselves, a world that only ever seems to accept them partially, and rarely on their own terms.

Kiran Desai usage of dark and pessimistic way of writing in her novel, though rich details and presenting a picturesque mosaic of life, at times makes her fall a prey to pain and loss. The darkness and the inner conflicts sometimes weigh too much upon the mind and soul. But that’s what a good writer should be capable of and Kiran Desai has been successful in touching and describing the depths of human emotion and thought. The picture drawn of India is intricate and fascinating. The characters are complex and the writing is flawless. However, the whole picture painted in the narrative leaves no room for hope, no room for joy, no room for even a tiny bit of beauty.

The Inheritance of Loss is an inward-looking novel, with a lot of internal monologues and passages of description than exchange of dialogue, which, despite the rough patches, plays to Desai’s strengths. As in much immigrant writing, Kiran Desai is an outsider to all the worlds that form a part of landscape. She is merely the

observer passing through. But, her knowledge of alienation makes the protagonists' search for a sense of belonging, more real. *The Inheritance of Loss* depicts in its many details the tragedies of a third world country just free from colonialism.

The main theme of the novel also appears to be the influence of the West on India and how Indians are wounded by the policies of the West. Watson says: ““multiculturalism” compels us to think through the social and collective dimensions of diversity (107)” but, failure to assimilate into the concept of multiculturalism has oppressed the migrants from India and has resulted in making them question their identity in the foreign land. Against the gigantic backdrop of the Himalayas so savage with beauty and the stillness of its towering ranges, Desai depicts the boring and mundane life of her characters with tumultuous inner sides and shades. The novel gives us delectable details of the beauties of the natural world. The sound of the wind, the pattering of the rain, the gurgling of the pipes, the creaking and clattering of the old Cho Oyu mansion, the happy snoring of the faithful dog Mutt, sometimes, makes reading so refreshing that one can breathe the crisp Himalayan air and feel surrounded by the looming dark forest.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* presents several interrelated stories exploring Indian characters' relationship with the West. The Nepalis struggle to get their own rights and land slowly creeps into the lives of the characters, the cook, the judge, Sai, Lola, Noni, and gnaws and questions their very being. Likewise, Patrick Williams in the book *Contemporary Critical Theories* states, “Said is at pains to demonstrate two important things in relation to Western representation of the Orient (272)”. The novel takes place in postcolonial India, an India still tied to the western world. *The Inheritance of Loss* focuses on two Indian character's in 1986: Biju, an illegal immigrant in America, and Sai, a formally educated teenage girl in India. Then, the movement does not even spare Biju, the cook's son in America, who comes back only to be robbed of all his money and belongings. Yet, the reader finds a quaint satisfaction in the union of father and son in the backdrop of a disturbed land in Kalimpong.

Though Desai presents the problems of the socially oppressed sect of the Gorkhas with genuine compassion, she does not fail to admonish severely political violence and loss of human lives. While portraying characters like the cook and the

wandering beggars she reveals her profound concern for the poor and the downtrodden. She competently explores these crises and the disorientation in the formation of cultural, national and linguistic identity. Both western and eastern immigrants go through the constant psychological endeavour to construct a new identity in dislocated place whether in America or in India. They are always in a quest to overcome the vacuum resulted from diasporic dislocation. This struggle has also been brought to the limelight in the novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, through the characters in exile.

Desai wants to say that, life, in spite of all its sufferings and problems, is worth living and one should always learn from mistakes. One is often attracted by the material prosperity and comforts that the west seems to offer. But, in spite of the backwardness, poverty, and illiteracy in one's own land, one can probably derive a sense of belonging and identity in one's own land only. Uprooting from one's own land and re-rooting in an alien land is a painful process and Desai had successfully delineated the dilemmas faced by her characters in their longing to find a green pasture in a foreign land.

Desai finds an opportunity to go through the concepts of globalization, multiculturalism, modernization, terrorism, and insurgency. She proves that whatever one goes, he carries the value of his/her culture and tradition. *The Inheritance of Loss* is set partly in India and partly in the USA. The regional settings in the novel are much relevant if we judge it from the cultural perspective. Desai describes it as a book that tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant.

Conclusion

It is observed that the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is a literary masterpiece with a perfect blend of Indian culture and values. Almost all the characters Sai, Gyan, the retired judge, the cook, the tutor, and the cook's son living in abroad all get the compassionate feelings of the author. Desai contributes to debates about the American dream, globalization and identity in *The Inheritance of Loss* by advocating neither the preservation of cultural distinctiveness nor assimilation, but rather ambivalence and flexibility. She shows that the real issue facing post-colonial and immigrant people are not whether they should assimilate but how clinging to cultural

certitude leads to disaster. *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with three worlds Europe, India and America- simultaneously at the same time. Of these three worlds, Desai finds an opportunity to go through the concepts of globalization, multiculturalism, modernization, terrorism and insurgency. Kiran Desai had proved that wherever one goes, he carries the value of his/her culture and tradition. Desai describes it as a book that tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant. The narrative captures the political milieu in which identities are negotiated through a continual collision of institutionalized national narrative with minority narratives as its discontents.

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