

A FRESH CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF KIRAN DESAI AS A NOVELIST

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to bring forth the way in which Kiran Desai, a Man Booker prize winner novelist explores the dilemma of name and immigrants' sense of identity and belongingness in the novel the Inheritance of Loss. The paper discusses the term 'diaspora', and their role in the present day world, the major issues of multiculturalism, struggle for name, identity and belongingness suffered by the characters in the novel.

Key Words: Diaspora, Globalization, Immigrants, Inheritance of Loss, Multiculturalism.

INTRODUCTION

Kiran Desai who shot into fame with her novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, is the youngest woman to win the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award in Fiction. She is the daughter of well-known Indian novelist Anita Desai to whom *The Inheritance of Loss* is dedicated. In the year 1998, her first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* was published and received critical acclaims. *The Inheritance of Loss* is her second novel, drawn on her experience of leaving India. It is set in the north-eastern Himalayas and New York. It captures the emotion and the sentiments of an immigrant coming to the West from the East.

Kiran Desai grew up in an India where books were precious, and because they brought the works, were read intensely. She was born in September 1971 and raised in a New Delhi apartment with her mother, the noted writer Anita Desai, her businessman father, Ashvin, and three older siblings. Her mother's mother was German and her maternal grandfather was an exile from what is now Bangladesh. Her father's family was from the northwest Indian state of Gujarat; in one of many echoes between Desai's book and life, her paternal grandfather left for an education in England and returned as a civil service judge.

DIASPORIC WRITING

Etymologically, the term Diaspora coined from Greek work *Diaspeirein* – “to scatter about, disperse”, from Dia means “about, across” and peirein means “to scatter”. It was used by the ancient Greeks to refer to citizens of a dominant city-state who immigrated to a conquered land with the purpose of colonization, to assimilate the territory into the empire. During the ancient times a large number of Indians migrated to Far East and South East Asia to spread Buddhism. During the colonial period, the migration was a history of misery, deprivation and sorrow. The third wave of migration from the nineteenth century was mainly to the industrialized, developed economics. The Indian diaspora is a generic term to describe the people who migrated from territories of the republic of India.

Diasporic writing, a post-colonial scenario, elaborates issues such as marginalization, cultural insularity, social disparity, racism, ethnicity, etc. Oscillating between the attractions of home and those from the new, the migrants wage a constant psychic battle: the old world is replete with myth and tradition; the new world order is proliferate with thirst for freedom and independence. They are in a dilemma as to whether they should remain in a ghetto of old values with least interaction with the majority, or break the barriers and get assimilated with the overwhelming new culture.

The writers of the Indian Diaspora like V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, M. G. VasANJI, Bapsi Sidhwa, Kiran Desai, and Jhumpa Lahiri have explored the identity crisis, racial and cultural conflicts, ethnicity and sense of belongingness, loneliness and alienation among the immigrants. The history of immigration is the history of alienation and its consequences. For every freedom won, a tradition is lost. For every second generation assimilated, a first generation in one way or another spurned. For the gains of goods and services, an identity gets lost, and uncertainty found.

THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS – PORTRAIT OF POST COLONIAL DILEMMAS

Ever since Post-Colonial literatures have come into existence, the writers were trying to create a new form of fiction within the English language by incorporating new images and above all new rhythms. One of the major features of postcolonial texts is the concern with place and displacement, shifting of location and resulting in “the crisis of identity into being” (Ashcroft et al., 2008). Often, the protagonist of a post-colonial work will find himself/herself in a struggle to establish an identity; feeling conflicted between two cultures – one his own native culture and the other an alien culture. Therefore, a central theme in post-colonial writing is the transformation of the native into something other than himself – a Westernized native, or at least one who is in a

crisis regarding his/her own cultural identity. Here, there is always a tension between wanting to belong to the new society yet wanting to retain the culture of the old one. The characters in Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* are in such dilemmas. The novel addresses these issues in a direct and poignant way. It is not merely a matter of adapting to a new environment, or adjusting to new customs, or learning, or learning a new language. It is much more profound, a displacement for reaching. It is an agonizing process of alienation and displacement which may create an imbalance that can profoundly affect a person's feelings, thoughts and ideas.

The Inheritance of Loss tells the story of two different kinds of diasporas—one of undocumented, and thereby exploited, blue-collar immigrant in New York City and the other is an aging, elitist cluster of Indian professionals settled in a remote Gurkha hill station. One thing is common in both Diasporas is that the majority of immigrants feel themselves as unimportant and insignificant in the migrated land, however they are related to the different levels of the society. These Diasporas face the challenges of a nominally globalized society that is ironically loaded with increasingly exclusivist, separatist, and nationalistic agendas.

BACKGROUND OF THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

The novel 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, Panna Lal who live in a house in the north East Indian town Kalimpong, Biju, the cook's son, Gyan, Saeed, Hareesh-Harvy 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, a "Westernized native". Rather, they are negotiating with a state of non-identity. Caught between two worlds, the characters negotiate a new social space; caught between two cultures and often languages the writer also negotiates a new literary space. They are all haunted by questions often asked by an immigrant: Who am I? Where do I belong?

THE PROBLEM OF DISPLACEMENT

Almost all of Desai's characters have been stunted by their encounters with the West but mainly two characters, the judge and Biju have tasted the bitter experience of marginalization. The judge, Jemubhai is a brooding old man who worked in the British-run Indian Civil Service throughout his life. He is one of those people who are so uncomfortable in their own skin and mired in self-hatred, their Indian heritage often making them feel unnecessarily inferior, thus they are forced to live in a country where the English threat them as

minority. The Judge went to Britain to study during the colonial times, felt lost and scorned just because of his skin colour but when he returns to his own country, his condition is like a fish out of the water. He spent most of his time in Britain, anxious about being a brown in a white world, but he came back to India with pretension to make India like Britain, with full of self-hate as well as hate for his family, community, and anyone for not being British. The Judge settles in Kalimpong in a crumbling old relic of a mansion from the colonial era. He spent most of his year in the West learning their ways and disassociating himself from being an Indian, yet in England he fails to be an Englishman and in India he fails to be an Indian.

One of the major concerns of postcolonial literature is the problem of displacement and its consequences, Uprooting from one's own culture and land and the agonies of re-rooting in an alien land are depicted in many postcolonial works. The postcolonial dilemmas faced by the characters have been nicely depicted in Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. They 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 are in a state of confusion from which they will find it difficult to come out. The postcolonial experiences of Jemubhai Patel, the Judge and Biju, the son of the Judge's cook who eventually supposed to have found out happiness in the reunion with his father, though he has lost all that he earned from his brief time in America, make us to think about the aspects of the problem of displacement and its consequences.

The displacement of Biju, the son of the cook is more poignant than any other characters in the novel. He manages to get a tourist visa. Biju, joining a crowd of Indians scrambling to reach the visa counter at the U.S Embassy is one of the most harrowing scenes in the novel. However, in the end, Biju becomes an illegal immigrant in New York, does odd jobs to survive: "Biju changed jobs like a fugitive on the run". The irony is that his father, the cook in the Judge's house thinks that he is doing well and is proud of the fact that his son is in America. "He works for the Americans; the cook had reported the content of the letter to everyone in the market". But, for Biju America is a world of frustration and hopelessness. He was taken to America as a mechanic; but he ends up as a waiter in a restaurant.

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, Sayeed is very adaptable and can lead a life of ease without any qualms. Biju's longing for home is continuous while Sayeed never thinks of leaving America:

Desai compares Biju and Saeed to show how they handle the dilemmas faced by an immigrant. Sayeed seems to be more pragmatic while Biju is a sort of idealist as he resists the Western culture in which he is trapped

in and longs for his homeland India. The writer seems to suggest that people like Biju faces repeated miseries and misfortunes and those like Saeed do not bother and they survive in an alien culture at any cost.

Even the minor characters like Noni, Lola, Uncle Potty, Princess Mrs. San and Munmun are all inheritors of loss. They are all affected by a sort of imbalance by leading a dual life which profoundly affects their thoughts and feelings. All are postcolonial characters forced into contact with cultures in conflict. They are all trapped by their peculiar ambivalent environment that they are forced into.

PLAYING WITH THE LANGUAGE

Language is one of the central concerns of postcolonial literatures. Like other postcolonial writers, Desai also plays with the language, using local Hindi dialects and the so-called (Hi) English. The writer uses the multi levelled meanings of metaphors to capture the essentials of her characters in new thoughts and feelings. She often uses clichés and Indian stereotypes that have also been promoted by the Hindi cinema. 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 (*bhenchoots*) colloquial, vernacular expressions in Hindi. Postcolonial writers often take this liberty to have the flexibility of using the English language according to the situations where their characters are put in.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The novelist successfully describes the dark side of globalization and the encounter of east and the west with the help of two characters. Both, the Judge and Biju have been immigrated to west in the hope of their better life. The judge after a career in the Indian Civil Services that followed his education in Cambridge in the 1930s, settles in Kalimpong. His own feeling of hatred for his skin colour, family, community and traditions makes him an insignificant character. Another is Biju, the cook's son, struggles as an illegal immigrant in America, and the only character in the book who is unwanted in the country he lives in. In the whole journey for success, this exploited, poor, homeless character struggles for his identity which makes him able to save himself from being an inconsequential character. Thus the feeling of being marginalized compels them to come back to India. Kiran Desai weaves a story full of juxtaposition that is both heart-breaking and full of hope. Desai narrates the story of real experiences and presents the unfamiliar part of the society and she strongly indicates the problems part of the society and she strongly indicates the problems related to Diaspora and globalization and one can find an oblique suggestion that escapism is not the solution.

We may opine that Desai wants to say that life, in spite of all its sufferings and problems are 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.

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