

## Crossing Borders: Diasporic Themes in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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### Abstract

In the world in which we are living today, transnational travels have become very common. All over the world people are trying their fortune in other lands. Despite the affluence and material comforts which the migrants get in foreign lands, they are haunted by feelings of loneliness and identity crisis. They often border on exilic existence. They reconcile and adapt themselves to an entirely new culture. As it is said, 'while in Rome do as the Romans do'; the migrants imbibe their language, lifestyle, food habits, culture etc. In today's world, most of the diasporas are voluntary diasporas who migrate from their native countries in hope of green pastures in strange lands. The present paper explores the diasporic themes in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). The novel explores the multifaceted vistas of diaspora such as displacement, alienation, loss and nostalgia offering a poignant critique on the struggle of migrants to reconcile with one's past amidst the uncertain present.

**Key Words:** *Diaspora, Exilic, Transnational*

### Introduction

The diasporic themes in the world of literary studies incorporate loss of identity and alienation experienced by these diasporas. Writers like V.S Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahri and Kiran Desai represent the dilemmas of living in diaspora. Their texts reverberate with diasporic themes. They evoke ideas of homeland, their personal anguish towards their uprooted identities and the problems of adjustment.

Diaspora refers to the displaced communities of people who are dislocated from their homeland. The term diaspora is derived from a Greek word 'diaspeirein' meaning dispersion or scattering of seeds. It refers not only to geographical dispersal but also encompasses the issues of identity, memory and home. In the beginning, the term diaspora was used by ancient Greeks to refer to citizens of a grand city who migrated to the conquered land with the purpose of colonization. Today, the term diaspora incorporates various categories of people who migrate from their native countries and is a metaphor for expatriates, refugees, immigrants, displaced communities and ethnic minorities. The book *Indian English Poetry and Fiction: Critical Elucidations* (2007) uncovers the influence of Indian Diaspora in the realm of world literature: "Most of the writers who were born in India but living in the different corners of the world have been seen suffering from nostalgic feelings for their roots. In this respect their exiles play a significant role in shaping Indian English sensibility" (Prasad and Malik viii).

Another, and relatively recent, approach to 'diaspora' puts greater emphasis on describing a variety of experiences, a state of mind and a sense of identity. 'Diaspora consciousness' is a particular kind of awareness said to be generated among contemporary transnational communities. Diasporic consciousness encapsulates a sense of loss, consciousness of being an outsider, yearning for home, burden of exile, dispossession and deracination.

Kiran Desai focuses on the psychological crisis of her characters in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and also examines subjects like home, identity, dispossession, shrinking and fading borders, racism,

class disparities, injustice, inequality and aggression. The novel also unfolds the story of two different kinds of diaspora - the exploited immigrants in New York and an elitist cluster of Indians settled in a hill town after retirement. Characters belonging to both these worlds face the challenges of a globalised society. *The Inheritance of Loss* examines phases of Indian migration. Since India got independence, UK has been a prime destination for migrant Indians. The earliest of such communities constituted 'Anglophiles', whose purpose of migration has been to experience the pristine beauty of England and 'Anglophes' who migrated to take the postcolonial revenge. In England, both these communities are suppressed and marked as 'the other'. The U.S.A has also attracted Indians for economic prosperity. Kiran Desai has presented America as a land of aspirations and dreams. It is a place to accumulate wealth. In fact, Desai understands India in a way that she does not understand America. She feels that she is an Indian who has a life in both places. The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* unfolds the pain of being an illegal immigrant. Desai describes her novel as a book that "tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant" (Ghosh 13).

Desai's novel contains two interrelated narratives. One is set in New York and explores the contemporary effects of globalization on a group of diasporic migrant workers in a city while the alternating chapters, set in Kalimpong in West Bengal, analyze the persistent effects of colonialism on local ethnic communities with deep historical roots in India. The novel centres around a retired judge, his granddaughter Sai, the cook, the cook's son Biju and Gyan, who is Sai's tutor. All these characters experience loss and seek fulfillment as the tale unravels. The novel depicts the sad lives of those people who come to US for the first time and are desperate to make both ends meet.

Identity crisis is one of the much talked about issues in postcolonial and diasporic studies. Diasporic literature explores the theme of identity crisis with regard to multiple places, languages, religions and cultures of homeland and the other land. The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* traces the journey of Biju to America and his psychological turmoil resulting from loss of identity. Biju remembers the peace and comfort of his village: Here he was, on his way home, without name or knowledge of the American President, without the name of the river or whose bank he had lingered, without even hearing about any of the tourist sights – no statue of Liberty, Macy's Little Italy, Brooklyn village, Museum of Immigration; no bialy at Barney Greengrass, soupy dumpling at Jimmy's Shanghai, no gospel churches of Harlem tour. (Desai 286)

The characters portrayed in the novel experience alienation in their host countries. They are treated as 'others'. They distance themselves from their family, society and finally themselves. "Migrants", says Salman Rushdie, "... straddle two cultures...fall between two stools" and they suffer "a triple disruption" comprising the loss of roots, the linguistic and social dislocation (279). Being an expatriate Kiran Desai portrays how the poor and jobless who migrate to America for a better life suffer a lot due to racial prejudice, social and cultural oppression, displacement and alienation. Desai understands the kind of mental agony and physical sufferings one has to undergo in an alien land.

The isolation that Biju, the cook's son feels as an illegal immigrant is coupled with his father's alienating sorrow and joy about his son. Biju's father has sent his only son to America. Desai makes the reader experience the pain of Biju, his struggle to find work in the alien land and the hardships he goes through. Biju sleeps in a basement with rats nibbling on his hair and finally longs for returning to his homeland. Desai's characters struggle for identity throughout their lives. The characters like Father Booty and Jemubhai Patel struggle to establish their identity as migrants. The Judge crosses the border to return to his native country. He banishes his wife who becomes the victim of the loss of identity. The Judge's wife lived her life as good for nothing and died within the four walls of her house. She struggled to come out of alienation but her identity remained

purposeless till the end of her life. Their granddaughter Sai who has no parents, no home, no roots, no plans and no memories suffers from alienation in an alien land. The cook is a nameless character in the novel. The cook having lived half of his life in Kalimpong, feels displaced and realizes, “where he had existed in what seemed a sweetness of crabbiness- was showing him now that he had been wrong. He was not wanted in Kalimpong and he did not belong” (Desai 278). Desai, with her own immigrant experience, portrays the helpless Indians who wish to have the great American dream come true. Biju aspires for the wish to come true but becomes a victim of identity crisis. He finds it difficult to adapt himself to the American culture. The novel records: “This way of leaving your family for work had condemned them over several generations to have their hearts always in other places, their minds thinking about people elsewhere, they could never be in a single existence at one time” (Desai 311).

It is pertinent to note that *The Inheritance of Loss* is a saga of loss that a human being has to face due to unavoidable circumstances. The characters have to face losses in life due to their diasporic existence. Sai, who has lost her parents at an early age is bereft of love and affection. The novel is about the loss of identity, nationality and loyalty. Kiran Desai depicts the loss in the context of society. Loss appears in her description of the immigrant experience, the Gorkha demand for a homeland and also in the growing love between Gyan and Sai. The Judge is at a loss to provide the love and warmth to his granddaughter. Gyan, the Nepali Maths tutor whom Sai loves, is lost to her when he is absorbed into the 1986 insurgency. Poverty is depicted as a great loss of life. The cook is badly treated by the Judge because he is poor. The novel abounds in the glimpses of loss. Lola mourns the loss of her husband. Loss is not only faced by one generation but also by the three generations. The characters long for home, love and acceptance. Carole Boyce Davies writes: “Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Home sickness or homelessness, the rejection of home or longing for home become motivating factors in this rewriting. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it” (113).

The novel presents a realistic and touching picture of the palpable life of the diasporas. Kiran Desai describes how insurgency at Kalimpong leads to displacement of several people. The novel highlights the insurgency in Kalimpong where the Indian Nepalese demanded a separate state for themselves during the 1980s. The Gorkha National Liberation Front has been formed to fight for a separate homeland for the Gorkhas. The Gorkhas sacrifice a lot for India but they are treated merely as slaves. Like other characters of the novel, they too are the inheritors of loss. They wanted their own country. The emergence of GNLF is due to the decades of exploitation, deprivation and marginalization of the people. The political turmoil of the 1980s in Kalimpong penetrates the peaceful world of Mon Ami. In the novel Biju’s return from New York culminates in the scene where he is robbed by the rebels of the Gorkhaland insurgency demanding separate state or nation. He runs off through the local forest to meet his father. The traumatic ambivalence separates him from everything. Father Booty is forced to leave Kalimpong. The novel shows how insurgency is a threat to cross cultural harmony of the people of Bengal. Vandana Sharma in her essay *Longing and Belonging: Search for Homeland in Kiran Desai’s The Inheritance of Loss* rightly observes that, “by presenting the deplorable living conditions and semi-servitude of these migrants, Desai has revealed their pains, loss of dignity and displacement and their desire for a homeland” (Sharma 212). Sai and Gyan are helplessly drawn like many thousand ordinary people, into the vortex of larger politics. The insurgency threatens their love and their lives are in chaos.

Kiran Desai shows how discrimination due to race and ethnicity is related to the question of individual personality. People react differently when they are discriminated. The whites gain power and want to be treated with respect and dignity. It leads to discrimination and humiliation of people from colonized countries. The

turning point in Jemubhai's life comes when he moves to Cambridge, England. It is during this period that he learns what racism and hate are. This feeling transforms him into a cruel man and he becomes a victim of colonialism. Furthermore, Jemubhai's discrimination of Nimi is based on gender and race.

The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* highlights the agony and torment one goes through after being uprooted from one's own culture in an alien land. Desai's portrayal of diasporic themes helps us in understanding the human condition amidst despair, grief and pain. Lee rightly summed up the salience of Kiran Desai's novel in these words, "a distinctive original voice, an audacious imagination that takes readers to undiscovered countries of the mind, a strong power of storytelling and a historical truthfulness" (<https://frontline.thehindu.com/other/article30211401.ece>). What binds the stories together and brings them into a pleasing coherence is aftermath of postcolonial churning and globalization. Sai's brief love affair with a Nepali youth, Gyan, ends in mutual recrimination as he joins the group of Nepalese insurgents. The Judge turns out to be a part of veritable anachronism with his colonial mindset in postcolonial India. Desai's artistic representation presents an irresistible desire of expatriation, search for home and identity. The desire for home and homeland is deep in every expatriate. The novel ends in a dramatic denouement where the sweet darkness of home brings its trauma, shock and deprivation.

The present paper has examined some of the problems faced by the diasporic community in *The Inheritance of Loss*. The characters in the novel are like plants that are plucked from their soil and planted in a new place. Kiran Desai uncovers a migrant's struggle between desires and opportunities. Desai's realistic portrayal of life in two continents exhibits a deep concern from human perspective.

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