

Varied Themes in Diasporic Studies: An Exploration of Kiran Desai's Novel *Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract - With time Diaspora literature has also undergone thematic shift which is comprehensible through the works of second generation Indian Diaspora writers. Diasporic writers try to recreate their roots through their work of fiction. This recreation represents the search for an identity with respect to the culture of their homeland and the new place of migration. Kiran Desai has also focused on the same recreation in her remarkable work *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). She discusses the hardships faced by the migrants at the home and abroad. Her novel also addresses issues related to acculturation, amalgamation, assimilation or disintegration of cultures. It reflects the immigrant experience that comes out of the immigrant settlement. The present paper deals with the exploration of various diasporic themes of post-colonialism, dislocation and sense of loss, cultural conflicts and a quest for identity, trans-culturalism and multi-culturalism and the traits of the globalization in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Index Terms - Acculturation, Dislocation, Cultural conflict, Sense of loss, Quest for identity.

Diasporic Indian writing has made an impactful mark and carved a niche for itself on the contemporary literary scene. Writers of the Indian origin with their diasporic writings have attained international recognition. Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Kiran Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Divakaruni, Rohinton Mistry and Anita Badami have produced powerful literature and received many prestigious awards for their work. The present paper deals with one such major Indian-American writer Kiran Desai. The study explores the varied themes of diaspora and the issues that she raises through her novel *Inheritance of Loss*.

The second generation diasporic Indian writers such as Hari Kunzru, Sunetra Gupta, Jhumpa Lahiri, Meera Syal and Kiran Desai have authentically demonstrated the lives of both first and second generation immigrants in the US. Kiran Desai's personal

experience of moving and living in between several worlds and histories is evident in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. The objective of this paper is to analyze *The Inheritance of Loss* as a novel dealing primarily in diaspora and its varied themes with its background in India. As a diasporic writer, Kiran Desai explores all the diasporic elements like marginalization, cultural insularity, nostalgia, alienation, displacement and sense of loss, quest for identity and assimilation, trans-culturalism, multi-culturalism and acculturation in her work.

The story is set in a small Indian Kalimpong where Kiran Desai was born. The novel not only focuses upon the main character, it also depicts the social unrest of Nepali nationalists who are living in diaspora in India. The novel begins with introducing Jemubhai Patel and his granddaughter Sai. It is a story within a story, as Jemubhai uses flashbacks of his London life. He went to London in 1939, when India was a colony of Britishers. They never accepted Indians as equals and considered them their servants, in the same way Jemubhai Patel was treated in England. The post-colonial experiences of the retired judge while he was in England has been quite painful.

The Inheritance of Loss revolves around the western culture to which Jemubhai, the protagonist exposes his passive acceptance; while Biju, another major character, resists it actively. It portrays the struggle of finding one's identity in the modern world. The novel has been a rich case study for researchers to be analyzed through the Post-colonial, Multicultural and Transcultural perspective. Chandramani and Reddy (2013) review Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* as a work about the life of immigrants in America. The effect of globalization has brought people to work or study abroad. The immigrant life that Kiran Desai presents in her story appears to be closely related to hybridization as it involves the crossing of two different cultures. Andersson (2014) suggests that

hybridization takes place when cultural boundaries are crossed. Hybridization can lead to trans-culturalism as cultural contact occurs. Trans-culturalism consists of the integration of different cultures due to the breaking down of cultural boundaries (Grosu, 2012). The *Inheritance of Loss* illustrates hybridization as the character's experience living in a transcultural environment. It also deals with contemporary international issues such as globalization, poverty, terrorism, racial discrimination and decolonization.

The theme of conflict emerges from interaction amongst colonization, globalization, and local culture with India's Kalimpong state as her case study. The pressure to conform to western culture without compromising local culture creates a state of conflict and vacillation for the characters in the book, thus forming the main theme in Desai's story. There is a connection between Desai's story and her experience as an immigrant. Biju represents the disillusionment that some immigrants experience in their quest to find and experience the American dream. He travels to the United States from India with the hope of a better life than that which he leaves behind in India; however, his dreams fail to materialize. His failure forces him to relocate back to India and withstand the disappointed faces of the community around him. However, he somehow manages to move on with his life and has been able to get a clear perspective of his life.

Jemubhai however refuses to integrate cultures because he desires to establish an English identity. His experience of being an immigrant has changed him to be a westernized person. Jemubhai tries to mimic the English people by trying to look like them (p. 174), dress like them (p. 185), and speaks English every day. Desai usually italicizes Indian words, but the author never italicizes the words Jemubhai speaks. Mimicry appears to be a post-colonial dilemma which Jemubhai experiences to establish an English identity as evident in the following citation: He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English, and Indians, both" (p. 126). The western value 'separateness' can also be seen in Jemubhai's family gathering. His father suggests that Jemubhai has separated himself from the family. Saying that his own son is a stranger implies that Jemubhai has changed his way of life different from his family. In response to his father's statement, Desai narrates Jemubhai's thought of being a stranger to his own

country: "The judge could live here, in this shell, this skull, with the solace of being a foreigner in his own country (p. 36)".

Biju's case is quite contrary to that of Jemubhai. Biju too encounters a sense of humiliation and alienation in America. But this realization helps him to construct a new and strong feeling for India. Before leaving India his mind was occupied with American dream. He took India as a sinking ship from where he had to escape. Surprisingly his diasporic experience assists him to reinvent the Indian-ness in his mind. Throughout the novel, the experiences of characters in exile always welcome multi levelled losses in life.

The characters in Desai's story struggle with the decision between the adoption of foreign culture and continued practice of local culture. This dilemma can be explained through the concept of acculturation. Acculturation is a process of cultural contact and exchange through which a person or group comes to adopt certain values and practices of a culture that is not originally their own, to a greater or lesser extent. The result is that the original culture of the person or group remains, but it is changed by this process.

Acculturation is one of several forms of culture contact, and has a couple of closely related terms, including assimilation and amalgamation. At the individual level, the process of acculturation refers to the socialization process by which foreign-born individuals blend the values, customs, norms, cultural attitudes, and behaviors of the overarching host culture. This process has been linked to changes in daily behaviour, as well as numerous changes in psychological and physical well-being (Kramer 2009). Jemubhai Patel, a retired judge, adopts western culture and changes his entire perspective of his native Indian culture. He changes his behavior and completely assimilates 'western behavior'. He eats his chapatti using a fork and knife instead of his hands.

Kramer (2009) refers to changes in each culture due to acculturation as *co-evolution*. Kramer also addresses what he calls the *qualities of out vectors* which address the nature in which the former and new cultures make contact. Kramer uses the phrase "interaction potential" to refer to differences in individual or group acculturative processes. For example, the process of acculturation is markedly different if one is entering the host as an immigrant or as a refugee. Moreover, this idea encapsulates the importance of how receptive a host culture is to the newcomer, how easy is it for the

newcomer to interact with and get to know the host, and how this interaction affects both the newcomer *and* the host.

Jemubhai's adoption of 'new culture' is at the cost of rejecting his own roots and forces him to hate everything about his old culture, his parents, and even his wife. Although the assumption of the authors bears some truth, Desai's story describes a society's loss of cultural identity more than it does about conflict between cultures (Desai 52). Through the character of Jemubhai Patel Kiran Desai displays racial discrimination, postcolonial attitudes, a sense of displacement and a loss of identity resulting into disastrous acculturative tendency. In 2013, scholars found that *acculturation* is negatively associated with depression, anxiety, psychological distress, and sadness (Arthur C. Brooks).

Jemubhai Patel right from his school days sees the portrait of Queen Victoria and developed respect for the queen. But his affection for English people fades afterwards. During his stay in England he meets many hardships and racial discrimination. His dark complexion and sense of cultural backwardness makes him unacceptable in England. Jemubhai is alienated in the host country. No one talks to him properly and gradually he retreats into solitude. "...he failed to make a courageous gesture outward at a crucial moment and found, instead, that his pusillanimity and his loneliness had found fertile soil. 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 shadow. (Desai 45)

His sense of inferiority because of his skin colour and his strange accent instill the spirit of oddness in him. It turned grim with every single day in hostile environment of the host country exposing the racial discrimination he was subjected to. "... he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar....He began to wash obsessively, concerned he would be accused of smelling, and each morning he scrubbed off the thick milky scent of sleep, the barnyard smell that wreathed him when he woke and impregnated the fabric in his pajamas." (p. 45)

The Inheritance of Loss is an authentic study of human relationship in conflict due to the sense of exile and cultural encounters. Those human beings who are not enjoying their life seem to adhere to their cultural instinct and they are detached from their real nature.

This made a negative impact in their whole life and leads to cultural deformity when these people happened to live in a new world; they have to construct their own world based on their acquired culture and civilization. We are living amidst the fragmented world and have to play different roles in each day. Badal Sircar rightly observes, "I am fragmented man living in a fragmented world full of contradictions" (qtd in Pushpa, 485).

The concept of multiculturalism addresses the dilemma of cultural diversity brought about by the movement of people within and without the nation state. Jemubhai, Biju and Gyan undergo the post-colonial experience and of globalization when they move out of their homeland to the foreign country where they face the otherness and marginalized status. Desai illustrates postcolonial experiences by presenting four characters:

[. . .] a retired gujarati judge whose flashback to his Cambridge education in the 1930s reveal the roots of his self-loathing, his orphaned, teenage granddaughter, Sai; her tutor, Gyan, a member of the erupting Nepalese insurgency; and the judge's elderly cook, who pines for his son living miserably as an illegal immigrant in NYC. (Schwartz 85)

Each and everyone have embedded in a particular social, cultural, social, institutional or ideological context. Many conflicts are arising day-by-day and different cultural formations and social relations are developing within and outside. A pride in one culture gives the migrants a sense of historical and social rootedness whereas a weak and fractured sense of identity is isolated and confused. Jemubhai and Gyan both are afflicted with the sense of loneliness and the process of finding their identities becomes a matter of intense struggle with the self, with tradition, with the wonders and horrors of new culture. While Jemubhai completely adopts the new culture, Gyan completely abhors it. The alienation and pessimism due to dislocation in life and morbidity of temperament affects their life and all whom they surround.

Kiran Desai puts forward the issue that, discrimination can be insentient and how it can prove life-threatening through the character Jemubhai Patel. His mind was colonized by the whites and when he came back to India, he dominates his wife like a colonizer who uses their power on weak and timid people. He treats his wife Nimi on the scale of westernized culture and heaves his misery on her. From England he got mental

trauma, anxiety, humiliation, and loneliness. His depressive and painful time in England leads to his acculturative tendency. "He was proud of his ability to influence and corrupt the path of justice, exchange right for wrong or wrong for right; he felt no guilt."(Desai 65)

Biju in the novel portrays the picture of an immigrant living in America and struggling with fear while doing illegal jobs. How he is humiliated socially and economically in America. As he belongs to the poor class who are illegally doing ill-paid jobs in America. As a poor he worked very hard in America, but always under fear of being caught and kicked out to India back. He was humiliated and treated like inhuman by his owner because he was undocumented citizen there and serving there for earning money and come out of poverty. Foreign people never accepted the people of the Third World in their country and their anger is prominent in their behavior. Discrimination on the term of race, class, economy, colonization is prevalent in the novel from beginning till the end.

Displacement is again a major theme in *The Inheritance of Loss*. The people of the second generation of diasporic communities relocate themselves in the foreign land, as they are born and brought up in the settled land. The novel is written from a global perspective and the displacement of immigrants to England and America is self-exile. Jemubhai and Biju both accepted it by their choices. One for education and other for employment. Nepalese in India are suffering and feeling alienated. They can't hope to get love in the country they are part of. Jemu in the novel is a self-alienated personality. He himself wants to be attached to the culture and lifestyle of westerns. He displaced himself in his own country. Even after living in India he lived the life of an Englishman.

Gyan and other members who belonged from the Gorkha community are also displaced and lonely people in the book. They are alienated and their frustration turns out as Gorkhaland, where they demand for a separate nation of their own. Gyan and his family were struggling for their survival in India, which resulted in his betrayal of Sai. He hates her because of her upper class status. Through his character Desai focuses on how the issues such as poverty, discrimination, inequality, loneliness can affect severely one at personal as well as universal level.

The title of the novel suggests the sense of loss experienced by the characters in the novel. They feel the loss of identity, emotion, culture, and intellect and location. It brings out the complexities of people living as an immigrant, minorities and the other people of India. All her characters in *The Inheritance of Loss* suffer from diasporic ambivalence as a result of displacement which fills their lives with a sense of loss. As rightly stated by Ashcroft et al. that displacement and/ or shifting of location results in crisis of identity. Aspect of alienation and conflict are epitomized in the lives of the protagonists. Ashcroft et al remarks:

"A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place" (Empire Writes Back 8).

In short, the search for identity is affected primarily with the problem of location. There are many instances of displacement and shifting of location as is the case of Jemubhai, Biju, Sai and Gyan. They all are study in alienation and existential angst.

Jemubhai faced loss of respect and loss of identity. For entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with word unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things, and elderly ladies, even the hapless blue-haired, spotted, faces like collapsing pumpkins-moved over when he sat next to them in the bus, so he knew that whatever they had, they were secure in their conviction that it wasn't even remotely as bad as what he had. The young and beautiful were no kinder; girls held their noses giggled, "Phew, he stinks of curry!" (p. 45)

Jemubhai's granddaughter Sai senses the loss of identity and culture in India. She had no parents, no home, and no identity of her own. She was only known as granddaughter of Jemubhai, a man from upper-Indian class. Orphan girl was searching for her identity in the society and also facing the loss of individuality as a woman. In the novel she wished to marry Gyan the Gurkha boy but ultimately he left her for showing his loyalty for his community because Sai was an upper-class girl, and he always hated the people from upper-class, they are the reason for the harassment of Gurkhas in India. Sai realized: "Gyan could find adulthood and purity in a quest for a human and she would be left forever and she would be left forever

adolescent, trapped in shameful dramatics. This was the history that sustained her: the family that never cared, the lover who forgot..." (p. 290)

Sai and Gyan had different attitude toward western culture. Sai and her upper-class society inclined toward the Anglicized taste and habits whereas Gyan was following his native one. He didn't like western habits, "I am not interested in Christmas!" he shouted, "Why do you celebrate Christmas? You're Hindus and you don't celebrated or Guru Nanak's birthday or even Durga Puja or Dussehra or Tibetan New Year." (Desai 179). Characters in the novel are struggling from establishing identity of their own showcasing the struggle and conflict between their own culture and the culture of the alien. Gyan is a dislocated Nepali and he felt loss of identity as a Gurkha lover. Gyan shouts at Sai for insulting Gurkha. "The usual thing happened, exactly what always happened in their fighting. He began to feel irritated, for, really, who was she to lecture him?" Gorkhaland for Gorkhas. We are the liberation army." He was a martyr, a man, in fact, of ambition, principle."(p. 274)

Biju too found a sense of loss in every aspect of America. Biju migrated to America where he found himself captivated in the darkness of New York. He's been humiliated from the very start of his journey to America from the USA Embassy. He went to America for a secure future to come out of poverty but his dreams are shattered and defeated by hard reality in the host place.

Even the minor characters such as Saeed, Nimi, Luna and Noni were also the characters examining identity crises throughout the novel. The characters in the novel are searching for identity by following an alien country but couldn't succeed. It can be said, "The feeling of inferiority, indeterminacy and uncertainty leads an individual to a quest of identity achieving through professional success vis a vis social position either through participation in colonial administration or the insurgent movement." (Sen 103). The characters are living in hybridized form identity and culture. The story revolves around the losses of characters which they try to fulfill by being someone else that they are not.

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search for an identity with respect to the culture of their homeland and the new place of migration. Kiran Desai has also focused on the same recreation in her remarkable work *The Inheritance of Loss*. She discusses the hardships faced by the migrants at the home and abroad. Her novel also addresses issues related to acculturation, amalgamation, assimilation or disintegration of cultures. It reflects the immigrant experience that comes out of the immigrant settlement. The novel successfully deals with various diasporic themes of post-colonialism, dislocation and sense of loss, cultural conflicts and a quest for identity, trans-culturalism and multi-culturalism and the traits of the globalization.

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