

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*: A Post-Colonial Reading

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Abstract. Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) depicts the lives of its main characters – a judge, his 16 year old granddaughter Sai, and the son of their cook, Biju- at specific moment in India's colonial and national history and amid a fast- changing, increasingly globalized world. Deploying a self-reflexive narrative style which combines humour, a sense of grotesque and the tragic, the text presents an emotional and affective parallel to the political and economic complexities of postcolonial globalization. The emergence of globalisation and internet superhighway coupled with liberalization of economy has accelerated the attraction of diasporic life. Consequently, its consequences find the most fruitful expression in Kiran Desai's novels. Her innovations and new techniques of fiction provide richness and projection to the diasporic panorama in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Multiculturalism; economic inequality; terrorism; diaspora; imperialism.

Kiran Desai is an Indian writer. She was fifteen years old when she left for England with her mother, Anita Desai, who is also a well known author. She is a part of the Indian diaspora and she is a citizen of India and a permanent resident of the United States. Her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* was published in 1995, when she was still a creative writing student at Columbia University. For this novel she won the Betty Trask Award. Her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, which appeared in 2006, took her almost eight years to complete. For this novel she won the 2006 Man Booker Prize, and she is the youngest female writer ever to win the prestigious prize. Kiran Desai points out regarding every contemporary issue – Globalization, multiculturalism economic inequality and terrorist violence. The desperate characters of her novels are bound by a shared historical legacy. However, after the withdrawal of the English, the post colonial period, countries of the world have suffered. This period is often associated with financial and political difficulties, injustice in the law system, corruption and violence.

Etymologically, the term 'Diaspora' originates from Greek word 'diaspeirein', meaning "to scatter about, disperse". 'Dia' means 'about, across' 'speirein' means 'to scatter'. I have clearly analysed the fact that diaspora is the displacement of a community or culture into another geographical or cultural region for purposes of livelihood, education, business or for acquiring higher skills in

different branches of human knowledge. The emergence of globalisation and internet superhighway coupled with liberalization of economy has accelerated the attraction of diasporic life. Consequently, its consequences find the most fruitful expression in Kiran Desai's novels. Her innovations and new techniques of fiction provide richness and projection to the diasporic panorama in the twenty-first century. The present stature of Indian English literature is far away from its earlier image of being 'derivative' and 'imitative'. With its own 'independent' and 'distinct' identity it poses certain ambiguities. Especially, the migrant writers claiming to be Indians or included in the Indian English literature, have settled somewhere else, away from their homeland or prefer to be divorced from their ancestral being, and yet their works have deeper links with their roots.

Indian writers grouped under 'expatriate', and 'diasporic' writers reflect certain exclusive trends that are altogether different from the major stay-at-home writers. In this context, the connotation of these words such as 'expatriate' and 'diaspora' have undergone a sea-change with its expectation and reinterpretation as 'common phenomenon' all over the globe. There has been a distinct change in the psychological architecture of traditional man and modern man. It is a transition from a familiar frame of reference and relationship, and it needs a reorientation of the entire social being.

The reasons attributed to such dramatic withdrawals and sensational callings are manifold such as the freedom from political repression, angst, loneliness, existential rootlessness, dissatisfaction and search for identity. 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 Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Kamala Markandaya, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, and Rohinton Mistry. They have explored the themes of 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. For every second generation assimilated, a first generation in one way or another is spurned.

The title of the novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* is more complex but still informative and realistic. First of all, the title can relate to the loss, Sai feels as an orphan. Sai's mother also experienced a corresponding loss when her mother, Nimi died when she was a little girl. The novel soon reveals that it deals with themes related to the post colonial period and that it examines the inheritance from the British Empire. The story is set in the mid 1980's in a Himalayan town in India by the foot of Mount Kanchanjanga and also New York. At the same time it shuttles

back and forth between Sai's youth and that of her Anglophile grandfather, Jemubhai Patel. Through Jemubhai Patel, a Third World Horatio Alger, we experience the post colonial era in all the cruelty of its old, ingrained hatred and prejudices.

The action focuses on the lives of Jemubhai Patel, a retired Cambridge educated judge and his orphaned granddaughter, Sai living in a ransacked old house in the Himalayan town of Kalimpong near Darjeeling, and their cook, who worries over his son, Biju, struggling from job to job as an illegal immigrant in New York city. On the other side a young Nepali, Gyan, is hired by the judge to tutor sixteen year old Sai in Science and Mathematics. The tutor gradually becomes attracted to the Nepali insurgency movement gaining momentum in the border region. The novel has one long flash back, which traces the incidents that led up, in the beginning of the story, when a band of young Nepali would be revolutionaries, invading the judge's house in search of guns. We come to know that Sai's parents died in Moscow, leaving her an orphan at her boarding school in Dehradun. Her grandfather, a Cambridge educated Judge, is left to send for the child he has never met. Sai befriends his cook, who lives in a hut near the Judge's house, "It pained Sai's heart to see how little he had: a few clothes hung over a string, a single razor blade and a silver of cheap brown soap, a cardboard case with metal clasps..." (Desai 2006 : 33) The cook is proud of his son, Biju, whom he imagines to be successful in America. His efforts to get a tourist Visa for the United States have been both challenging and humiliating for him, and he is well aware that his only possibility is to stay and work illegally. Where Biju works for a period, the owner's wife prepares illegal workers from the poorer parts of Europe rather than workers from other continents.

Justice Jemubhai is the best example of the Colonial aftermath. One of the ICS men, he holds on to Colonial past even he lives in independent India. He has embraced the education, manners, and values of Britain. In addition, he is ridiculed because of his westernised way of life and in particular for the obsession with powdering his face. His frustrations, his temperament and his hate destroy Nimi's life, a nineteen year old wife. It is upon his return from England that Jemubhai's action and sadistic mistreatment of Nimi begins, as he also decides to teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself. He also mentally abuses her to an English name in an attempt to change her identity and he forces her to learn English and behave in a western manner even though she does not want to co-operate. Jemubhai himself is a victim of colonialism. But he was affectionate towards Mutt (a dog) though at last the dog too went away from his life. At the end of the novel, Sai is able to summon and the cook and Biju experience a reunion.

In this novel Desai constantly juxtaposes two extremes of Indian society – an example is when Sai turns up at Gyan's home. There she is met by the sights of chickens being hurt and raped by the rooster. This image figuratively refers to

the Colonial situation, where the rooster represents the English and the chickens the Indians:

The birds had never revealed themselves to her so clearly, a grotesque bunch, rape and violence being enacted, hens hammered and pecked as they screamed and flapped, attempting escape from the rapist rooster. (256)

Desai illustrates the unfortunate consequences of imperialism. The British influence in India developed a society where the differences between the colonizer and the colonized were distinctive in respect of power and wealth. Desai gives an example of how the difference between England and America can be seen in this novel. For a while Biju works at Brigitte's restaurant in New York's financial district. His fellow dishwasher Achootan, who has also lived in Canterbury for some years, describes the difference like this, "But at least this country is better than England", he said, "At least they have some hypocrisy here. They believe they are good people and you get some relief. There they shout at you openly on the street. Go back to where you came from". This suggests a direct discrimination against foreigners in England than in America but the intolerance against people from the Third World still seems to be the character of Jemubhai and Biju. (98)

Through the individual characters Desai lifts the discussion up to a top level – colonialism and the inheritance from the colonial period of Bangladesh and India. The concept of how the white imperial power of the West has influenced the prospects of former colonized countries is therefore, important. Desai emphasises how essential historical, geographical, cultural and religious aspects are and how difficult and challenging the issues of tolerance, acceptance and integration can be. Throughout the novel Desai illustrates the significance of personality and how individuals react differently in various situations. In accordance with traditional postcolonial views, the thought of a strong, developed west associated with masculinity, and a submissive, obedient and poor East linked to femininity, seems to be relevant to the theme of gender. Desai point out that the dynamic and multi-cultural situation of the world today demands a new way of thinking. In the western tradition the division of classes has been centred on higher, upper, middle, and lower, where high represents very rich, and the low poor.

Desai makes fun of formal British customs by placing their habits from the judge's viewpoint, however, his wealth and class identity is important in order to maintain the western-oriented life style. He feels he is entitled to and the power he has gained through his profession. Although the wealth and the luxury of the judge gradually decline his status and position remain the same. The cook on the other hand fills the role of the submissive and poor man from the east. Desai shows

a parallel to relation between the East and the West in accordance with postcolonial theories.

The novel ends with “losses” in many ways; it also shows glimpses of hope and optimism. Sai loses her lover, but obtains a higher understanding regarding her future and independence. The cook loses his dignity, but gets his son back. Gyan regrets his behaviour and promises the cook to find mutt and bring him back to Sai. The double juxtaposition of place and time might, in other hands, distract or distance us from the story. The most important thing is Desai's fierce specificity. In her skillful hands, the political is personal. Her characters are so alive, the places so vivid, that we are always inside their lives. As the story runs, Desai pulls these threads tightly together. The denouncement combines betrayal, retribution, and hope in a surprising yet wholly believable outcome.

Thus Kiran Desai's achievements lend a universal significance to the hopes and aspirations of the diasporic characters in their approach to identity and response to multiculturalism in the midst of the trials and tribulations of their diasporic environment. The challenges of contemporary global issues which shape the new society confronting the problems of competition, cultural assimilation and the loss of inheritance have also been explored. Desai has secured a distinctive place among the great contemporary Indian authors exploring life and society in India and elsewhere. Her novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is a charming, lyrical, fable about destiny—a work of comic eccentricity, charisma, and joy in language and life. Kiran's language is original; she brings something totally fresh and new to the writing scene in an era of diasporic fiction.

Kiran Desai's approach to the traditions and conventions of diasporic fiction in the last quarter of the twentieth-century acquires a rich dimension in the twenty-first century. The depth-dimension of both the novels *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss* widely extend the scope and flexibility of global compulsions of the twenty-first century – its aspirations, challenges and artistic possibilities in a global society embroiled in ethnic strife. Indeed, the problems of commitment and artistic resolution of social and cultural issues constitute the central matrix of Kiran Desai's vision.

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Work Cited

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