

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* : A Thematic Study

TAMKANAT MUKHTAR

Abstract. What makes Desai's fiction so fascinating is the vast canvas of our contemporary society in which the themes of alienation, cultural clashes, displacement and exile are presented in the broad perspective of globalization. The sensitive socio-political issues concerning hybridity, insurgency, immigration, inter-cultural communication, identity crisis, loneliness, multiculturalism, poverty, racial discrimination, social realism and socio-cultural realism have been discussed in her novels. Her first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) has presented different perspectives of life. In her second, Man Booker Prize winning novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) she has analysed several current issues of modern civilization. In this paper, I wish to explore and evaluate the themes and techniques of Kiran Desai in her fiction.

Keywords : Diaspora; magic realism; globalization; home and identity.

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 a 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 acclaim. *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's second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* lucidly demonstrates the socio-political situation in Kalimpong. It is a brilliant study of Indian socio-cultural scenario in its transitional phase. In fact, significant social changes have occurred in India due to the people's craze for western values, manners and life-style; impact of modernisation, consumerism and globalization. As a diasporic writer Desai presents the characters who fail to assimilate new culture and give up their original culture in totality.

Like a careful observer of human behaviour, Desai brings her narrative and characters to life in her both novels. She creates ordinary people trying to make their lives better, using whatever resources are available. Her characters behave cruelly towards people they love, reject traditional ways of life and old values, want to be a part of modern society, refusing to cast off the structures of colonialism yet continue their struggle against poverty and the trappings of their

social class as they have to suffer at the hands of faceless government officials, and they learn, and grow, and make decisions gradually. Dealing with all levels of society and many different cultures, Desai delineates life's humour and brutality, its whims and roughness, and its delicate emotions and passionate commitments in this novel.

Kiran Desai is one of the Diasporic writers who have chosen materials for their art from contemporary Indian socio-cultural situations. Desai left India at the age of eleven when "India was quieter then with a closed door economic policy, the world arrived only through books, and they meant everything. For her *The Inheritance of Loss* was a return journey to the fact of being Indian, to realising the perspective was too important to give up. America might give me half a narrative, but I had to return to India for the other half of the story, for emotional depth, historical depth". (Interview) That's why the book is able to deal with the implicit reference to the post-British colonialism and influenced by the historical reality. The novel illustrates the life of an illegal immigrant in New York's underground culture where exploited workers work in the city's restaurants. She describes this life as 'a trap', "My own experiences of travel have been positive but I also realise that things are so complicated," (Desai 2006:1) Set in the mid - 1980s in Kalimpong, high in the north-eastern Himalayas, *The Inheritance of Loss* describes how the inhabitants of a household are affected by a Nepalese insurgency. There is a retired Judge who lives with his granddaughter and a cook. The cook's son is an illegal immigrant in New York and struggles for survival there. As the story unfolds the Judge's granddaughter and her tutor go under the microscope as their peace is wrecked by what becomes a bitter and bloody argument for an independent state. The Judge's granddaughter Sai is an orphaned teenager who lives in Kalimpong. It is a small town in northern India. Before living with her grandfather, she lived in a convent school. At the convent school, she learned English as well as western values and appreciation of all things English. She falls in love with Gyan, her mathematics tutor. Although he is from a lower class, this does not stop Sai from falling in love with him. In India, most marriages are arranged, so falling in love is not considered a prerequisite. In her everyday life, Sai speaks to the judge and the cook as if they were equals. She is strong and ambitious. She is open-minded about the world around her. As the novel proceeds, she learns about her privileged life and she feels guilty. She becomes aware that being a westernized Indian is difficult and dangerous. Eventually, she tries to find how to leave Kalimpong. Desai manages to represent contemporary international issue e.g. globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence.

The term 'Diasporic/Diaspora' is derived from the ancient Greek word which means "Sowover". (Cohen 2008 : 9) It is originated from the ancient Greek tradition of migration and colonization. According to Cohen, "Diasporas can be characterised as being of a mass nature with catastrophic origins and as having

been dispersed from an original centre to two or more foreign regions". (11) Dispersion is directly connected to globalization and it has enhanced economic and political interdependence and, at the same time, has afforded opportunities for the people who want to run fast in the race of modernism. Globalization has brought many benefits, including the reduction of poverty in several countries. But it also has a dark side – the unleashing of negative forces as a result of the compression of time and space made possible by modern technology and marginalization is one of the negative forces which overshadow the positive growth and benefits of globalization. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 'marginalize' is an act "to make somebody feel as if they are not important and cannot influence decisions or events; to put somebody in a position in which they have no power". (Dictionary 2010:924)

The Inheritance of Loss tells the story of two different kinds of diaspora – 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 common to 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 globalised society that is ironically loaded with increasingly exclusivist, separatist, and nationalistic agendas. 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 treat 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 years 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 :

They were falling back into familiarity, into common ground, into the dirty gray. Just ordinary humans in ordinary opaque boiled-egglight, without grace, without revelation, composite of contradictions, easy principles, arguing about what

they half believed in or even what they didn't believe in at all, desiring comfort as much as raw austerity, authenticity as much as play acting, desiring coziness of family as much as to abandon it forever. Cheese and chocolate they wanted, but also to kick all these bloody foreign things out. A wild daring love... but also a rice and 'dal' love blessed by the unexciting feel of everyday, its surprises safely enmeshed in something solidly familiar... Every single contradiction history or opportunity might make available to them, every contradiction they were heir to, they desired. But only as much, of course, as they desired purity and a lack of contradiction. (Desai, 106)

Moreover, the humiliation he has experienced in a foreign land forces him to feel inferior in front of the others and his act of not accepting his reality makes him a travailed character. When this old judge came back to India, he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him and he even forgets to smile. Till the end of his life, he would never be seen without socks and shoes and would prefer shadow to light, faded days to sunny, for he was suspicious that sunlight might reveal him, in his hideousness, all too clearly. He is an Indian but his pretension to look like an Englishman puts him on the way to marginalization. Bijju, the son of a servant, has entered into the United States on a tourist visa and simply overstayed and working illegally and thus being paid badly in New York. Desai beautifully describes Bijju's state of mind when he is granted his American visa. He stares at a park while celebrating the great luck, "Raw sewage was being used to water a patch of grass that was lush and stinking, grinning brilliantly in the dust..."(187) Bijju's father, the cook, has sent his only son to America to seek a better life. The cook hopes to enjoy contentment and dignity which lies in Bijju's success :

He imagined sofa, TV, bank account. Eventually Bijju would make enough and the cook would retire. He would receive a daughter-in-law to serve him food, crick-crack his toes, grandchildren to swat like flies. Time might have died in the house that sat on the mountain ledge, its lines grown indistinct with moss, its roof loaded with ferns, but with each letter, the cook trundled toward a future. (20).

But in reality the American Dream is inadequate to fulfil the emotional and basic needs of Bijju. The city full of endless opportunities and possibilities for self-invention actually becomes a source of pain for him. He eventually becomes "a man full of the brim with a wish to live within a narrow purity". (96). Again, a

victim of diaspora experiences rejection and discrimination which put him on the fringes of the society in the West.

The novel explores this social reality of a global underclass of globalization through the story of Biju. He experiences this ambivalence also for his own people who seem spawned through his experience of elimination and racism as an illegal immigrant living in America :

The habit of hate had accompanied Biju and he found that he possessed an awe of white people, who arguably had done India great harm, and a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India.(86)

Biju himself observes that this problem is rampant even with the younger, more trendy half 'n' half crowd, the Indian students coming in with American friends, wobbling then, downgrading sometimes all the way to Hindi to show one another" (148). He was increasingly dismayed by this problem, now he is more concerned about the question: who he is and what he is becoming rather than how he is doing financially. He realises that he is doomed to the same kind of divided identity he observes in others. According to Paul, "Their interest in modernity and the west breeds a kind of cosmopolitanism linked to the forces of globalization like the ones Biju struggles with in New York, but which here come into conflict with local identities and nationalist aspirations". (Jay 2010:132)

However, Biju couldn't see the meaning of striving in a foreign world because he has become disillusioned about his possibilities in New York and so he finds himself happier to come back to a country and he knows where he can live a dignified life :

Year by year his life wasn't amounting to anything to all; in a space that should have included family, friends, he was the only one displacing the air. And yet, another part of him had expanded : his self-consciousness, his self-pity—oh the tediousness of it ... shouldn't he return to a life where he might slice his own importance, to where he might relinquish this overrated control over his own destiny ...And if he continued on here? What would happen? Would he, like Harish-Harry, manufacture a fake version of himself...? (Desai 268)

Subsequently, it can be said that Desai's narrative about diaspora is so preoccupied with humiliation, racism and it ends in identity loss which put an individual on the way of marginalization. Jennifer demonstrates in her Journal :

The resulting marginalization and/or conscious social exclusion exacerbate the potential for conflict, on economic, political, and/or social grounds... Today, we live in a world where the implications of combined forces – increasing conflict and globalization – inspire fear and raise questions regarding the identification and feasibility of workable solutions to promote a more peaceful interdependent world.

(Brinkerhoff 2012: 25)

The novelist successfully describes the dark side of globalization and the encounter of the East and the West with the help of two characters. Both, the Judge and Biju have immigrated to West in the hope of their better life. The Judge after a career in the Indian Civil Service 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, who struggles as an illegal immigrant in America, and is 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 related to Diaspora and globalization and one can find an oblique suggestion that escapism is not the solution. As Bigsby remarked, "Art can never really be a protection against the real. Chamberlain's betrayals, Franco's victories, Hitler's barbarity were not defeated by wishing they might be so, and, as Auden lamented, poetry did not save a single Jew". (Roudane 1997 : 4)

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. Her 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 *The Inheritance of Loss* widely extends 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.

Tamkanat Mukhtar

Research Scholar

P. G. Department of English and Research Centre

Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya

Works Cited

Brinkerhoff, Jennifer M. *Digital Diasporas and Conflict Prevention : Review of International Studies* (2006), 32 : 25-47. Web. 9 April. 2012.

Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas : An Introduction*. USA : Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2008.

Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. USA : Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006. Print.

Jay, Paul. *Global Matters : The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*. USA: Cornell University Press, 2010. Google book search. Web. 11 April. 2012.

Rochester, Sophie. Interview by Sophie Rochester. Guardian. Co.uk.guardian Inc. 7th August, 2007 15.59 BST Web. 12 April. 2012.

Roudane, Matthew. C. *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. U.K: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Print.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. 8th ed. 2010. Print.

