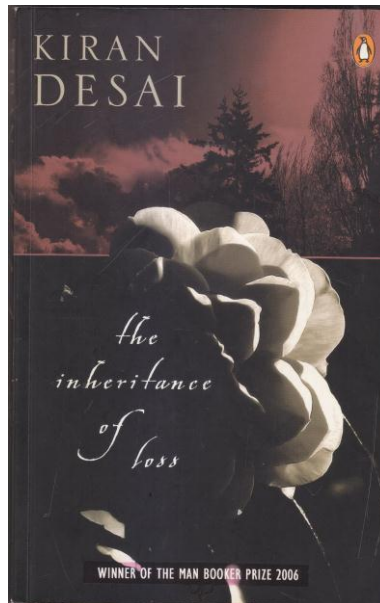


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Agonies of the Immigrants in Kiran Desai's
The Inheritance of Loss

B. S. Jadhav, M.A., PGCTE, M.Phil., Ph.D.
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Pain and Suffering of Immigrants

This paper analyzes Kiran Desai's second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, about which *Publishers Weekly* comments thus, "It is a majestic novel illuminating the pain of exile, the ambiguities of post-colonialism and the blinding drive for 'better life' when one person's wealth means another's poverty" (cited from the inner flap of *The Inheritance of Loss*). This

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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novel won the 2006 Man Booker Prize as well as the 2006 National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award. It traces the pain, pathos, despair and agonies of the immigrants.

Kiran Desai touches also upon the minute issues concerned with immigration and the swings between the East and the West. She 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). The novel examines the lives of immigrants in a very insightful manner.

The Issue of Immigration

Immigration is an old issue which has drawn out deep concerns throughout human history. However, in modern times, the level of migration is very high for various social, political and economic reasons. Immigration has become a global phenomenon and it affects many nations and communities. Immigration and the related themes such as exile, diaspora, dislocation, displacement, expatriation, assimilation, acculturation, up-rootedness, identity and selfhood have become focal points in literature around the world.

Immigration is commonly defined as ‘permanent change of residence by an individual or a group.’ It denotes movements out of a country into another country. In the Indian context, recent migration in the 20th century is voluntary and takes place largely for economic reasons, which could include better employment opportunities, better utilization of the talents individuals have and family re-union. In the past, say a few hundred years ago, migration from India was not always voluntary in most cases as individuals and families moved as plantation and bonded labor under colonial rule. Others such as members of service professions, including merchants, followed this trend. And about a thousand years or earlier, migration from India was caused by some spectacular successes of Indian rulers who were able to win over distant lands through war, or through spiritual spread of the dominant religious sects in India. The records of ancient migrations were very sparse and do not reveal fully the mindset and the suffering and pain and pleasures of immigration. 19th century bonded and plantation labor migration, however, resulted in some documented records by the colonial rulers as well as migrant labor population. However, in the 20th century, the pain and passion of Indian migrants became subject matter of many creative works.

Modern narratives indicate that the immigrants, whatever their reason for immigration, have shared common experiences. The similarities as well as differences are based on their conditions of immigration and period of stay in the adopted land.

Continuing Pain and Suffering in Immigration

Immigration proves a pleasant experience only to a few immigrants who succeed in assimilating themselves with new geographical, cultural, social and psychological environment (Agarwal V). To most of the immigrants, immigration is not a delectable experience. They often find themselves sandwiched between two cultures. They find themselves displaced with their fractured selves and lose their identities and accept the dualities and multi-cultures. The sense of displacement, desire for the return to their roots, feelings of nostalgia, remembrance of the homeland with a sense of loss that informs the diasporic consciousness and the experience of a painful process of acculturation and adjustment is common to all who have left their homeland for an alien land.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 7 July 2011

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Kiran Desai has very effectively portrayed these agonies of the immigrants living far away from their homeland in her novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*.

The Inheritance of Loss

Kiran Desai presents the miserable life of illegal immigrants in European countries so vividly. She also records the suppressed anguishes, agonies and sense of loss of the immigrants. Immigration depicted in the novel shows the voluntary emigration to Europe in quest of higher education or better living.

In fact, the novel examines the different phases of Indian emigration to European countries.

The First Wave of Immigration

The first wave of immigrants reaches there for higher education. Mr. Jemubhai Patel went to England for higher studies. He never feels at ease there and is shocked to see slums and squalor in the localities around Cambridge where he could afford to rent a room. But English landlords do not like him, and even in the filthy cluster of houses he is refused accommodation by twenty-two people before he could get space in the house of Mrs. Rice. The house was so remote from the university that Mrs. Rice had so far got no tenant at all. While young and beautiful girls avoid him because he "stinks of curry" (39), even old, hapless... blue-haired, spotted, haggard ladies are not interested in him: "For entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things..."(39).

The result of all these humiliations is finally a warped mindset, hardly human, that continues all through Patel's life in India where he keeps himself rigidly away from human relationships. Mala Pandurang comments: "Yet despite his unhappiness as an alien in land, he envies the English and loathes Indians and grows increasingly embittered by the realization that he would be despised by absolutely every one, English and Indian both" (94).

The Second Wave of Immigration

The second wave of immigrants is taken to Europe in quest of better living. They fall under two categories: the Green Card holders and illegal immigrants (Shameem 51). Biju, the cook's son, gets down at New York in search of better living. He is representative of undocumented and illegal immigrants. His experiences are more poignant and diverse. Through the experiences of Biju, the novelist presents the status of the illegal immigrants.

Here we would like to quote the opinion of Jhumpa Lahiri: "I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world is more explicit and distressing..." (Sinha 230).

Patterns of Loss

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 7 July 2011

B. S. Jadhav, M.A., PGCTE, M.Phil., Ph.D. and P. B. Nirmal, Ph.D. Candidate
Agonies of the Immigrants in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Actually, the novel is about patterns of loss - the loss of selfhood, identity, nationality and loyalty. Longing is the recurrent theme of the novel. The Indian immigrants in America long for home, they long for love and they long for 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 (Shameem 51-52).

A Shadow Class Living in Misery and Fear

Biju belongs to a 'shadow class' (102) of illegal immigrants who spend much of their time in search of a better living in an alien land. As fulfillment of his father's long cherished dream that his son would be in America, Biju, "At 4:25 A.M., made his way to the Queen of Tarts bakery" (75). He worked at various restaurants, moving from one ill-paid job to another. Within three years, he had to jump from job to job as cook, vegetable chopper, dishwasher, bearer, food carrier and what not, through the Queen of Tarts Bakery, Pinocchio's Italian restaurant, Baby Bistro, Freddy's Wok, Le Colonial, La Salle, Brigitte's, Gandhi Café, etc. He could not get proper job and accommodation because he overstayed in America without a Green Card. His predicament was exploited by his employers by giving him minimum possible wages. Even though, he tried to fit into the American Dream, he, in reality, finally appears to be a misfit.

The narrative voice announces: "But I WAS so hard and YET there were so many here. It was terribly, terribly hard. Millions risked death, were humiliated, hated, lost their families – YET there were so many here" (189).

The novel depicts the profound sadness of Biju through his miserable existence in New York. He used to paddle cooked food on his bicycle to the homes of the customers in the freezing cold of America without sufficient winter clothes. "Biju put a padding of newspapers down his shirt... And sometimes, he took the scallion pancakes and inserted them below the paper..." (51). He starts looking for work in a place where he would not have to cook beef, and ends up at the Gandhi cafe, run by Harish-Harry, who offers "free housing" (146) which means sleeping in the kitchen below the restaurant, amidst the pots and pans and sacks of masala, plagued by rats, "exulting in the garbage, clawing through wood, making holes that Harish-Harry stuffed with steel wool and covered with bricks" (147).

The growing sense of frustration caused by his failure to find a satisfactory job and the continuing green card problem makes Biju ill so much so that he begins to lose his temper: "The green card, green card, the *machoot sala oloo ka patha chaar sau bees* green card that was not even green. It roosted heavily, clumsily, pinkishly on his brain day and night; he could think of nothing else" (190).

Kiran Desai also depicts the overwhelming feeling of humiliation experienced by the immigrants like Biju. She records the inequity of a system, in which, as Mr. Kakkar, an

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 7 July 2011

B. S. Jadhav, M.A., PGCTE, M.Phil., Ph.D. and P. B. Nirmal, Ph.D. Candidate

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Indian travel agent in New York says to Biju, “one side travels to be a servant, and the other side travels to be treated like a king” (269).

Journey Home

After a long period of agony and humiliation, Biju books his return ticket tired of the pain and existence. Biju makes the return journey home out of fear of the greatest loss than can come out from one’s family.

Now he is not at all burdened by the memory of his stay in America: ‘There he was on his way home, without name or knowledge of the American president, without the name of the river on whose bank he has lingered, without even hearing about any of the tourist sights’ (286). Instead, he thinks of his reunion with his motherland. He feels satisfied: “Biju stepped out of the airport into the Calcutta night warm, mammalian. His feet sank into dust winnowed to softness at his feet, and he felt an unbearable feeling, sad and tender, old and sweet like the memory of falling asleep, a baby on his mother’s lap” (300). He feels relieved of ‘the enormous anxiety of being a foreigner’, the ‘unbearable arrogance and shame of the immigrant’ (300).

Misery in the Home Land

Biju’s never ending tale of agony continues in his motherland GNLf men robbed all his material possessions and even his dignity. “Darkness fell and he sat right in the middle of the patch without his pride. Back from America with far less than he’d ever had” (317). At last, he is completely dispossessed and made even poorer than when he left the country to pursue the American dream. No escape or withdrawal from violence is possible for Biju and for others like him, in this globalized world.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 7 July 2011

B. S. Jadhav, M.A., PGCTE, M.Phil., Ph.D. and P. B. Nirmal, Ph.D. Candidate
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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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