

**Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* –
An Analysis of Cultural Diaspora**

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Abstract

It is not that easy to move from one place to another, particularly from their motherland. It takes long time to adapt in the new kind of society. The humans face lot of problems when he migrates to other states or country. The migrated person relation to the society forms a people's alienation and pessimism due to dislocation in life and morbidity of temperament. However, Desai presents a situation where one's society keeps on changing day by day. The absence of an address protests to have fixed identity. As man is having a limited existence, he has to keep something behind him to remind him. The individual has to live according to the societal norms. This endeavour will be falsified in certain cases, as there is an inner self against him. It creates the loss of faith in one's own country and its values. The detailed study of *The Inheritance of Loss* gives us the feelings that there is a note of compassion in the delineation of various characters in the novel. Almost all the characters Sai, Gyan, the retired judge, the cook, the tutor, and the cook's son living in abroad- all get the compassionate feelings of the author. All these characters dwell in the context of compassion and pathos. And there is a sense of yearning in their minds and hearts. Totally, in *The Inheritance of loss*, Kiran Desai gives us the mixed complete package of everything.

Keywords: Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, Identity, Migration, Compassion, Society

Introduction

In defining the term *diaspora*, questions dwelling on the emergence of the diaspora and their discussion in a historical context have been the focus of academic debates. Sometimes, diaspora is understood in reference to 'emigrant communities-populations that originate from a nation-state that is different from the one where they reside'. Other scholars have engaged in conceptualizing diaspora as 'encompassing a wider range of originary moment' (Poonam Bala 25).

In this modern world many contemporary writers' ideologies focused on the concept of diaspora. Among them as an Indian novelist, Kiran Desai lights the new lamp in the kind of writings through her novel '*The Inheritance of Loss*'.

The novel deals with the losses the characters of the novel went through. They suffer from emotional and intellectual loss as the title of the novel suggests. This novel seems to be the perfect peace of artistic perfection. The novel unfolds many trends of globalization, terrorism and post-colonialism.

Discussion

The first and foremost act of diaspora traces its origin from the origin of our world. We all know that Adam and Eve are the first being of our human kind sent out from heaven to the world. The world is a new place to them, they have adapted themselves and learned how to habitat in the new place. Starting from them and till now the act of diaspora prevails among us. To see an Indian diaspora is rooted from the Vedic period and it is evident in the two great epics of India. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the literary masterpieces open a window to the culture of the people along with the diaspora. An exile of Ram and his wife Sita in Ramayana and an exile of Pandavas in Mahabharata to the forest from their kingdom show clearly what the diaspora is.

According to Amitav Ghosh, the Indian Diaspora is one of the most important demographic dislocations of present day which is growing and assuming the form of representative of a significant force in global culture. One of the contemporary post-colonial writer, Salman Rushdie focuses on the crisis moments in an essay, "Imaginary Homeland" and he throws light on the positive side of diaspora. He argues that the displaced position of the immigrant is an entirely valuable one. According to Rushdie, to live as a migrant may well evoke a sense of loss but on the other hand, it opens different windows of possibility to have new knowledge. This diasporic experience can be the source of creativity. Rushdie thinks

“...if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge-- which gives rise to profound uncertainties-- that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India of the mind” (10)

The experience can give birth to dignified feelings. The distance between abroad and the motherland may act as a stimulator that makes migrants nostalgic and at the same time sensitive to the respective homeland.

In *key concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin assert, “Diaspora is the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands to new regions”. (68). Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* is an excellent example of diasporic novel in the first decade of the twenty-first. The textual study of the novel has multiple meanings and explanations according to a number of readers as well as a number of readings. The beauty of the text lies in its intermingling of history, myth and contemporary life. The novel presents East and

The novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* begins picturizing the nature’s beauty of Kalimpong which is filled with snow from the peak of Kanchenjunga. Desai introduces Sai, a teenage Indian girl. She is an orphan, living along with her Cambridge-educated Anglophile grandfather, a retired judge, and the cook at Cho Oyo in the town of Kalimpong. Sai comes from Dehra Dun after her parent’s death, but she was born in Russia. Till six years she was in Russia and then she joined the convent in Delhi and now she is in Kalimpong. Her maternal grandfather Jemubhai Patel is a westernized literate person who always thinks about his journey from Pilphit to England and from England to India. Then, Desai talks about the cook’s son Biju who is the illegal immigrant from India working in America and Gyan, a Nepali who is tutoring Sai the science subjects and he becomes Sai’s beloved. The others Lola, Noni, Uncle Potty, father Booty are settled in Kalimpong from their motherlands. Settlement in alien land makes them experience dislocation. Dislocation can be considered as a break with the old identity. They experience the sense of loneliness in an alien land feel as they face non-acceptance by the host society and also experience ethnic discrimination. The term ‘multiculturalism’ has come to mean the accommodation of ethno-religious groups formed by immigration. The ethnic assertiveness associated with multiculturalism has been part of a wider political current of ‘identity politics’ which transformed the idea of equality as sameness to equality as difference (Young 1994). The idea of equality as assimilation and contented a liberty politics required allowing groups to assert their difference and not to have to conform to dominant cultural norms.

Desai says, “Here in America, where every nationality confirmed its stereo-type—” (30). New York is the representative of global village because people from all over the world specially belong to Third World, come here in order to get jobs and improve their livelihood. An intense kind of commercial outlook and attitude prevail here. There is hectic activity and rush on the one hand and clamoring among people on the other hand for achieving something ‘new’ in their lives. The more the world is developing, the less the human emotions and feelings prevail. People come here to see the new heights of development, but they are afraid of such heights because of inevitable collapse. The whole world seems to be growing in the darkness of feelings, distrust and duality. Biju found himself in too difficult circumstances to cope with such situations. Biju is a less educated teenage boy from a poor family. His father is a cook who wants to see his son in the most prosperous part in the world, the United States of America. In order to gain cultural and material prosperity Biju fixes up his mind to migrate to America.

Biju's journey to America starts from USA Embassy. Each and every step toward America invites Biju with unexpected humiliation. At Embassy Biju joins a crowd of Indians scrambling to reach the visa counter at the United States. Biju's experience at Embassy goes on

“Biggest pusher, first place; how self-contented and smiling he was; he dusted himself off, presenting himself with the exquisite manners of a cat. I'm civilized, sir, ready for the U.S., I'm civilized, man. Biju noticed that his eyes, so alive to the foreigners and went dead”. (Desai 34)

After reaching New York Biju's life faces a series of challenges. He just enters the alienated world as a migrant, as an exile. His dream of a secure future is defeated by the harsh reality. In America, Biju is on a restaurant called the Stars and Stripes Diner: "All American flag on top, all Guatemalan flag below. Plus one Indian flag when Biju arrived" (42). Biju's daily life in America reflects his insight of being an exile. He begins to think himself as an unexpected individual.

Many immigrants think that if they get citizenship in America their life is settled and fulfilled. Desai proved the fact and status of Indians in America.

“The green card, the green card—
Saeed applied for the immigration lottery each year, but Indians were not allowed to apply. Bulgarians, Irish, Malagasy—on and on the list went, but no, no Indians. There were just too many jostling to get out, to pull everyone else down, to climb on one another's backs and run. The line would be stopped up for years; the quota was full, overfull, spilling over”. (Desai 88)

Saeed is Biju's friend working in Banana Republic, America. He is from Africa and he wants to become a Green card holder. Since he is from Africa, he was ill treated by the Whites. In order to get a Green Card, that is to get the American Citizenship he marries an American woman Toys who is a co-worker of him. Saeed used the institution of marriage for only for his benefits.

One of the most significant modes of diasporic practice affecting migrants' lives is the ability to telephone family members. This has become a particularly salient feature in recent years. In many cases, calls abroad that used to cost several dollars per minute now cost a few cents per minute. The number of calls made from the United States to other countries increased from 200 million in 1980 to 6.6 billion in 2000 (FCC 2002). Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* covers the events happened on 1986 and before independence, even she is a contemporary writer. Biju and Saeed from America talk with their family members over phone. The telephone plays a vital role

at the movement and through it the peoples shares their opinion and emotions from abroad. Desai shows how difficulty Biju called his father from abroad:

“..... he slipped out of the kitchen and purchased a twenty-five-dollar number from a bum who had a talent for learning numbers by lingering outside phone booths, overhearing people spell out their unsuspecting Mr. Onopolous making a phone call and charging it to his platinum” (Desai 236).

Desai also concentrate on the cook’s mentality when his son calls upon him on phone. The cook rushed towards quickly to attend the phone call from America. As a father the cook asked Biju about his life in America and as a beloved son Biju asked his father that is everything alright mentioning his health and strikes due to GNLf movement.

Another thing plays apart from telephone for communication is letter. The cook house is filled with so many letters of Biju from America. To contact each other on phone is difficult matter for both so, they write letters and exchanging their feelings. The first letter by Biju to his father after landed in a new place:

“Biju had just arrived in New York. "Respected *Pitaji*, no need to worry. Everything is fine. The manager has offered me a fulltime waiter position. Uniform and food will be given by them. *Angrezikhana* only, no Indian food, and the owner is not from India. He is from America itself." (Desai 21)

The prominent of cultural diasporic clashes is the varieties of food according to the country. The food is different from one another culture to traditions. New York is the very big city. There is enough food for everybody. Desai meant the American popular food the hot dog as cultural encounter. Biju ask the lady from Bangladesh while serving: "You like Indian hot dog? You like American hot dog? You like special one hot dog?" (23). There are so many rules to how to eat food in India. Sai who brought up in western culture enjoys her food by using fork and knife where in it is hatred by Gyan, who is a Nepali tutor. Only on rainy day we all enjoy the food much rather than other days. Desai did not miss that beautiful event also:

After the rains, mushrooms pushed their way up, sweet as chicken and glorious as Kanchenjunga, so big, fanning out. People collected the oyster mushrooms in Father Booty’s abandoned garden. For a while the smell of them cooking gave the town the surprising air of wealth and comfort. (Desai 289)

Even though the cook and Biju is blood relation, there is a border line in between them. The cook had thought of ham roll ejected from a can and fried in thick ruddy slices, of tuna fish

soufflé, khari biscuit pie, and was sure that since his son was cooking English food, he had a higher position than if he were cooking Indian. From the beginning to end, Desai cooked the novel with yummy tasty foods of cultural world.

Conclusion

The Inheritance of Loss deals with three worlds— Europe, India and America— simultaneously at the same time. Of these three worlds, Desai finds an opportunity to go through the concepts of globalization, multiculturalism, modernization, terrorism and insurgency.

Desai pointed, the Gorkhas in Kalimpong protested to want a new land (The Gorkha Land) like Pakistan, segregated from India. The GNLF Movement brought several losses which destroy the beauty of Kalimpong. Finally the movement has become like mirage and what is remaining is loss of everything. In spite of all terror and horror, Desai ends the novel with the note of hope:

The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent.

All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it. (Desai 332)

Kiran Desai as a diasporic writer mirrored the difference between Indian and Western culture in *The Inheritance of Loss*. There is a lot to learn from both the cultures but, not to adopt. Often adopting to new culture may cause a cultural loss. Today's world is losing its identity due to several demerits of developments. There are at least two different ways of thinking about 'cultural identity'. The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This 'oneness', underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence, of 'Caribbeanness', of the black experience. It is this identity which a Caribbean or black diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light and express through cinematic representation.

Such a conception of cultural identity played a critical role in all the post-colonial struggles which have so profoundly reshaped our world (Hall 223).

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