

Reflection of Marginalized Voices in Indian Diasporic Novels

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Abstract

The paper discusses how the modern Indian diasporic novels reflect the life of the marginalized both in India and abroad. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is selected for this purpose. Desai's novel provides the picture of illegitimate immigrants like Biju in America and at the same time, the parallel story in India provides the picture of the marginalized communities i.e. women, the minority Anglo-Indian Communities, the Ghorkha community and the poor class workers like the cook. The novel makes the readers feel that the freedom we inherited at midnight has become nothing but a loss. This paper also analyses the way the marginalized communities are represented in the diasporic novels namely Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*, V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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The general use of the term 'marginalization' refers to the exclusion of certain groups on the basis of gender, race, culture, and religion. Specifically, in the Indian context, racial exclusion is nonexistent. Hence here it can refer to the religious minorities, cultural minorities, and women in general. These groups had been denied articulating their feeling in the mainstream literary production. Thanks to the recent reforms, they have found a voice. This article discusses how Indian diasporic novels represent the lives of the marginalized people.

The term 'Diaspora' with capital D refers to Jewish in particular as Wikipedia defines the term thus:

“A diaspora (from Greek διασπορά, "scattering, dispersion") is "the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland"[or "people dispersed by whatever cause to more than one location", or "people settled far from their ancestral homelands"(Wikipedia)

The term when specifically applied to the Jewish Diaspora refers to the Jewish exile from their homeland i.e. the Jerusalem (Israel). Hence their migration as Wikipedia explains goes back to 6th to 7th century B.C. However, in the modern usage of the term, it refers to those who live in other countries either temporarily or permanently. To distinguish the Jewish Diaspora from other diasporas, the former is referred with capital 'D' whereas the latter is referred with the small letter 'd'. The adjective 'diasporic' is used less and the word 'diaspora' is sometimes used both as a noun and an adjective. Here the word diasporic is used instead of using 'diaspora' as an adjective so that it becomes convenient to distinguish both.

The expression 'Indian Diasporic Novels' specifically refers to the novels of those novelists who or whose ancestors are from India and who, at the time of writing their novels, should be living outside the frontiers of India. In this sense, Kiran Desai, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Bharathi Mukherjee, V S Naipaul, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Suketu Mehta, and Kamala Markandeya, among others, are considered some of the prominent Indian diasporic novelists.

In the present paper, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Amitav Ghosh's *Calcutta Chromosome* are chosen for studying how the marginalized are depicted in these two novels.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* presents the picture of illegal immigrants in the U.S.A and at the same time, it presents the bleak picture of South Eastern India. Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a retired judge lives with his granddaughter Sai in an old house named Cho Oyu in Kalimpong which is a small town near Darjeeling. The judge had a humble early life as he was from a poor and low caste family. Thanks to his marriage with a rich man's daughter, he was able to move to England to study. Right from the beginning his father who owned a profitable business of procuring false witnesses to appear in a court made sure that his son had to get all the best from love to food. However, all these were made at the cost of his sisters' deprivation of anything. It is the common practice in the rural Indian families that spending money on their son's studies happen only at the cost of the fulfillment of their daughters' basic needs. The people don't want to spend more on their daughters' education. Later the judge marries a girl of fourteen and at the time of his departure, he did not even look at his wife's face properly. While moving, he hurriedly half-dressed and undressed his wife and he had an erection.

Right from the beginning, he ill-treated all the women characters. He was unable to understand his mother's affection for him and packed food and some bananas for him in case he feels hungry in the

middle of the journey. But he threw the bundle in the sea. After becoming a member of Indian Civil Service, he treated his subjects very badly. He relished his power over the classes that controlled his families for centuries. His stenographer was a Brahmin, so he made him crawl into his tent while the judge seated on the cot like a king.

He ill-treated his wife Bela, the most beautiful daughter of Bomanbhai Patel. After his marriage with her, he changed her name to Nimi Patel. He is enraged to see that his powder puff was used by his wife. He saw his puff “pounded beneath her two lavender-powdered pink and white breasts” and “from beneath her sad breasts, pulled forth, like a ridiculous flower, or else a bursting ruined heart - his dandy puff”. To teach her a lesson he wanted to break the bed. So “he violently grabbed her.” To stop her attempt to escape from him, he “clamped down on her, tussled her to the floor” and “in a dense frustration of lust and fury”, “he stuffed his way ungracefully into her” (Desai p169) Soon after his consummation, he spent hours cleaning his body with Dettol and soap. When he found her footmark on the toilet seat, “he pushed her head into the toilet bowl.”

Kiran Desai depicts the situation of Indian women characters who live in America. Harish-Harry’s daughter no feeling or respect for her parents. She does not wear nose-ring as she feels it does not match with her **“combat boots and clothes in camouflage print”**. She does not even hesitate to tell her father that she did not request to be born and they had her for their selfish reasons. They wanted a servant. She even proclaims **“... in this country, Dad, nobody’s going to wipe your ass for free.”** (Desai p149)

Similarly, Lola and Noni are being ill-treated by GNLF men. When she goes to Pradhan the head of the Kalimpong wing of GNLF, he proudly tells her that he has already four wives and mockingly says that she can be his fifth wife. Lola is humiliated and goes. Similarly, Sai is also deceived by her lover Gyan who rejects her. Thus, throughout the novel, women characters are depicted as being marginalized and ill-treated by the male characters. The Judge’s attitude towards his wife is unpardonable. In spite of the fact that it is the dowry from his father-in-law, that realized his dream of completing his ICS exams, he becomes ungrateful not only to her but also to his sisters, his mother and everybody else. He doesn't even seem to have felt the slightest pain for his daughter’s death. The arrival of his granddaughter Sai to his house is also felt like a big hurdle to him.

On the other hand, Biju and his fellow men in America are marginalized because of two reasons. First, they are neither Europeans nor Americans, and secondly, they do not have green cards. Hence, they remain incognito in the American undergrounds moving from one basement to another basement to suffer more. For many, America is like a dream but for the people like Biju, it is a hell. Finally, he resolves to return to India. But here also he becomes a victim, as, at the end of the novel, he is found robbed completely by the GNLF men that he comes home literally stripped off. The cook is also another marginalized character whose feelings have no value for the people living around him. The judge treats him worse than an animal. In his naivety, the cook weaves romantic stories around the judge’s life and in the course of the time, he begins feeling that his stories are true.

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Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* presents the impact of colonial dominance on the individuals' psych which creates a sort of inferiority complex in them. This quality makes the novel essentially a postcolonial one. The three major characters of the novel, Sai, the Judge, and Biju have direct exposure to either colonial or western dominance. So in a way, it presents the plight of those whom Gramsci calls subaltern. The judge is a subaltern in a way that he comes from a poor caste family and he is the victim of colonial dominance on his psyche the wound of it is so deep that he cannot escape from it. Throughout his life, he can neither become an Indian nor a European. In between the space, he lives like a haunted ghost. It is clearly observed by Sai the very moment she sees at him. She exclaims "Oh, my grandfather more lizard than human". He for her looks old and the powder on his face seems to have distanced from his dark skin to such an extent that it becomes difficult to distinguish the powder and vapor. From his body, the smell of cologne is felt by her. The smell of the powder is little far from the perfume and little close to "a preserving liquid".

The cook is also the victim of identity crises. He has a sense of shame when the judge abuses him. He is the representative of the lower-class people who are being denied of any dignity. It is a common notion among the people that it is the servant who always steals. He unconsciously has accepted this fact. While the police are upside downing everything and exposing the cook's poverty, the cook justifies the act of the police because he feels that they need to search everything because it is the servant who steals. He defends the police as

"Were they having to search everything ... naturally. How do they know that I am innocent? Most of the time it is the servant that steals". (Desai p19)

In spite of these kinds of humiliation, the cook is still optimistic about his future. Because he believes that his son is in America and he will make a rich man. He also dreams of marrying his son with a suitable girl who will serve him, and he may lead a comfortable and happy life with his grandchildren, but that dream too becomes a disillusionment at the end of the novel when Biju returns home penniless. He feels disheartened to witness the tragedy in his son's life. Biju has a great American dream of going to America, earning a lot of money and getting a green card, but all these are shattered into pieces at the end of the novel. When he returns India, his native place, he remembers and longs for the peace and happiness that he once enjoyed when he was a child in his homeland, but the land has already lost its innocence. He is robbed completely that he even does not have adequate clothes when he returns to India. In a way, both the cook and the judge's father share a similar optimism of getting comfort, wealth, respect, money and happiness from their children. These never realize in the case of both. The judge's father dreams of his son becoming the judge. Even though his dream has come true, he gets nothing out of that. He is even accused by his own son as a "village idiot". He returns home heavy-hearted after being humiliated by his son.

Apart from that, the novel represents the marginalized community of illegal immigrants in America. It draws the difference between the lower-class illegal immigrants and the upper-class illegal immigrants. The residents of Kalimpong, Mrs. Sen and Lola too have their children working in abroad.

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Lola's daughter works for BBC as a newsreader. Mrs. Sen's daughter Mun Mun too works in America. Mun Mun works in CNN and Mrs. Sen is proud of that. She often points out that those who have gone to England are feeling sorry for that. The cook knows neither about America nor about England. He is also ignorant of the difference between legal and illegal immigration. Lola and Mrs. Sen's children have a good education and go to foreign countries as legal immigrants. But Biju does not have a good academic record to be qualified for a well-paid job. As Biju goes on a tourist visa and its period is already over, he can neither live peacefully nor return respectfully to India.

Calcutta Chromosome by Amitav Ghosh was first published in 1996 and soon found more than ten impressions. This shows the popularity of the novel. Many critical surveys have been done on this novel, but all concentrated mainly on the post-colonial aspects of the novel rather than postmodernist which, in fact, are inherent in it. This study intends to foreground those postmodernist elements in the novel.

The reinterpretation of the early medical history of malaria research and an imaginary exaggeration of the Indian ingenuity in the process of the research along with the fantastic elements make the novel postmodern. It incorporates some of the elements of a postmodernist novel through extensive use of non-linear narration, rhizomatic structure, plurality, and mystery.

The novel is based on a medical history of the malarial research done by a famous Nobel winning doctor Ronald Ross. The Nobel was conferred upon him for his discovery that described the way in which malaria spreads from one person to another through mosquitoes. The novel, instead of giving the credit of this discovery to Ross as a lone genius, creates an alternative history in which Ross was just a discovered rather than a discoverer because there was a group which already knew this truth, but instead of claiming authorship over this, it allowed Ross to have it for the reason that it was working on a mission which intended to get the technique through which a person could migrate from one body to another body when his old one was decayed and thereby could achieve eternity. It can be achieved with the help of artificially induced malarial parasites. The members of the group had some technical drawbacks because they lacked scientific background and equipment. In order to achieve it, first, they manipulated D.D. Cunningham a British scientist and once they got the best out of him, created a sort of situation which made him to fled out of Calcutta in panic. Ronald Ross then came to Calcutta, now the group headed by a low caste woman named Mangala, entered his lab in disguise. Mangala joined that place as a sweeper woman and her assistant Laakhan entered the lab with the name Lutchman. They guided Ross towards the discovery of Malarial parasites and in the process, they succeeded in getting that technology of interpersonal transmigration that L. Murugan, one of the main characters in the novel calls 'Calcutta Chromosome' which incidentally is the title of the novel.

Mangala, the low caste woman is the central character in the novel. She with the help of her assistant named Lakhaan controls the whole process of malaria research. Here, Ghosh's characters remain incognito in the mainstream process however, they dominate the process. In this way, the novel portrays the marginalized characters as dominant ones.

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Salman Rushdie's *The Midnight's Children* is another important diasporic novel to be studied here. His novel was published in 1981 and thereafter it gained worldwide popularity. It presents the lives of the marginalized communities like Muslims and women characters in the novel. It delineates the identity crises and insecure feeling of the Muslims in the communalistic setup. The characters suffer not only due to the oppression and marginalization by the dominant Hindu community, but also due to the fundamentalism, and religious fanaticism in their own community. Tai, an uneducated boatman, is able to drive Dr. Aziz, Saleem Sinai's father out of Kashmir because he hates him for using a Heidelberg bag i.e. a doctor's attaché which in Tai's opinion is made by the skin of a pig which is a prohibited animal according to Islam. Tai feels that a person is made impure just by looking at the bag.

The dream of Aziz and Mian Abdulla to unite Hindus and Muslims also fail because the people from their own community do not want the unity between the Muslims and the Hindus. As a result of this, Mian Abdulla is brutally murdered by the hardcore Muslims and thereby their dream is shattered into pieces.

The insecurity of the marginalized community is represented through the character Ahmed Sinai. His profitable business suffers a loss due to an anti-Muslim communal group named Ravana gang, which paste slogans on the walls claiming that "No Partition or Perdition" and "Muslims are the Jews of Asia. They give a lot of trouble to Muslim businessmen. They burn the Muslim owned godowns in hatred. Soon such a group evolves itself from a communalist group to a well-conceived commercial enterprise. They send anonymous letters to Muslim businessmen demanding huge money in order to let their world unburnt. Ahmed Sinai too receives a letter from them. To save his godown from burning down, he goes to pre-decided spot to pay the money. But unfortunately, his money bag is snatched by the monkeys there. As a result of this, Sinai is unable to pay the money. The Ravana gang burns his shop that makes him become an anti-Hindu.

The lower-class community is represented in the characters Lifafadas and Wee Willie Winkie. Once, Lifafadas goes to a Muslim area with his *Dunia Dekho Machine* to entertain the children. A silly matter on the seniority of peeping through the machine turns communal. As soon as the people come to know that he is a Hindu. They are enraged. They abuse him by calling him using the expression "**Mother raper**" "**Rapists**" "**badmash**"; the schoolboys to begin chanting "**Ra-pist! Ra-pist! Ray-ray-ray-pist!**" **without really knowing what they're saying**". Even this hatred does not spare the educated. They begin using their own expression in their own way,

"So, mister: it is you? Mister Hindu, who denies our daughters? Mister idolater, who sleeps with his sister?" (Rushdie 36)

Similarly, Wee Willie Winkie also suffers a lot. His wife is seduced by Methwold and he cannot do anything for that. The novel also presents the government programs like the Civic Beautification Program which destroy the slums and the residents of the slums become homeless.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* also provides a picture of marginalized gender characters in the form of Ashima and Moushumi. Ashima is married to an unknown person whose name is unknown to her. However, she learns to love her husband slowly and successfully performs her gender role as a homemaker. When her husband dies, she is able to lead the family and control the whole of the family's affairs. At the end of the novel, she resolves to split her time in India and in America. As her own name Ashima means one who has no boundaries, she too has no boundaries. She is able to survive both in America and in India and thereby proves that the marginalized gender, the woman is capable to survive anywhere in the world. Moushumi, another female character is in exact opposition to the character of Ashima. She as a symbol of resistance against her oppressive and conservative upbringing dates with innumerable types of individuals. She dates with the people of a different color, age, and religion. She also hates the traditional role of an Indian Bengali wife hence she resolves never to marry a Bengali groom in her life. However, due to the circumstances, she married Gogol, a Bengali, but their marriage is short-lived. Moushumi develops an illicit relationship with a French man and divorces Gogol.

V.S. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* presents the picture of a marginalized community in the form of indentured laborers and women characters. The novel also provides a vivid and remarkable description of the lives of indentured laborers in Trinidad. Biswas' maternal grandfather's muttering that all human sufferings are due to Fate and human beings cannot do anything for them expresses his grief for leaving his homeland and immigrating into Trinidad as indentured labor. Here he is destined to suffer from asthma, to become old prematurely and to meet his death inevitable.

The predicament of Bapti's father (Bapti is the mother of Mr. Biswas) represents the sufferings of the indentured laborers. These were the people who were brought to the sugar plantations in Trinidad with the assurance that they would definitely find their 'fortune' in the host country and they would be provided a free return passage once they had completed their indentured tenure. But that did not happen. When observed from the historical evidence and from official documentation over seven percent of mortality occurred within a short span of the indentured laborers' arrival into the new land. A feeling of nostalgia, loneliness, a common desire to go back to their motherland and a sort of frustration for knowing that they will never be able to go back to their homeland are marked features of diasporic sensibility that is found in the character of Bapti's father. V.S. Naipaul here gives an authentic picture of Indo-Trinidadian community. Hence Naipaul himself a member of the community, he is able to articulate it realistically throughout the novel.

The delineation of women characters in a diasporic set up is one of the important aspects to be observed. Mrs. Tusli is an important character in the novel. She manages a traditional Hindu Brahmin family with the help of her husband's brother Seth. Apart from her, all the women characters play their gender roles. For instance, In *Tulsi Household* the daughters have to sweep the house and cook the food for the members of the family whereas the male members go to the field to work. The wife beating is considered a natural phenomenon. Ajodha's brother Bhandat has the reputation of beating his wife and keeping whores.

Mr. Biswas is against the habit of beating his wife. He feels that he lives in a wife-beating society. Except for Tulsi and Tara, all the women Biswas knows are like Sushila, the widowed Tulsi daughter who takes “the pride of the beatings she had received from her short-lived husband.” (V.S. Naipaul, p. 71) Naipaul here seems to suggest that the women in general due to the way they are constructed to play their gender roles in traditional Indian society which like all primitive societies is male dominated. Due to the way they are brought up, they regard their beatings as a necessary part of their training. Here the novelist directly comments that this wife beating culture is one of the causes of the decay of Hindu society in Trinidad.

Thus, the diasporic novels represent the lives of the marginalized community like the women, lower caste people, illegal immigrants, minority communities and the poor. So, these novels are helpful for the depiction of marginalized culture.

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