

# Themes of Alienation and Displacement: A Study of Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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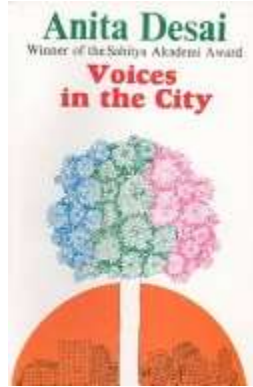
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## On Defining Alienation

*Alienation* is not an easy term to define. Literally, it means estrangement and separation. It has various meanings. According to the Britannica Perspective, “An alienated man is . . . stranger to himself; he has lost his essence; he is in search of his being” (129). Edwards Paul defines alienation as “an art or the result of the art through which something or somebody becomes (or has become) alien (or strange) to something or somebody else” (76). According to Encyclopedia Britanica, “a term used with various meanings in philosophy, theology, psychology and social sciences, usually with emphasis on personal powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation, or self-estrangement” (243). Part of the difficulty of providing an adequate analysis of this concept is that the term occurs in such a wide variety of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, psychology, existentialist philosophy, feminism and so on. Thus, it can be said that the notion of alienation is widespread and hardly there is any discipline which has left untouched by this.

## Displacement

On the other hand, displacement, unfortunately, rarely has a definitive terminus, for it seems to perpetuate itself. The displaced often suffers from an almost-pathological wanderlust. Successive migrations prevent the formation of tenacious roots and disregard the laws of gravity. Continually roaming and shifting, migrants simply float, incapable of being attached to something so palpable as land. This freedom, however, becomes a burden, almost like Kundera's

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*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984).

## **Diaspora**

In recent years, the meaning of the term diaspora has been extended to refer to situations other than the experiences of the Jewish community outside their homeland. In recent times, diaspora refers to the displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland. It comprises an idea of up-rootedness from homeland, a place from where the displacement and dislocation occurs and the narrative of the ruthless journeys of the migrants begins. The process of the survival of the diasporic individual 'in-between' the 'home-land and host-land' is the voyage undertaken in the whole process of 'alienation'. Stephen Gill, India born Canadian poet and novelist has remarked, "Diaspora essentially is a bitter experience of dislocation that leads to alienation, a sense of loss and nostalgic desires. It refers to that particular class of immigrants who are unable to go back . . . Usually, Diasporas are not happy anywhere, and suffer silently . . . (qtd. in Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal 32). The term 'Alienation' also has revived and achieved great heights in terms of expatriate inhabitants or migrant population in second half of the twentieth century. Due to the diasporic writing of these displaced people, the theme of alienation has again become prominent. Thus, it can be said that alienation and displacement are inter-connected and inter-related terms as both affect each other and at the same time themselves get affected.

## **Emigration and Expatriation**

As Vijayashree sums up the expatriate condition in his essay, "The Politics and Poetics of Expatriation: The Indian Version(s)":

The phenomena of emigration and expatriation are by no means new but their scale in the present times is dramatic. The growing incident of expatriation, particularly in the post-colonial societies in the second half of the twentieth century, and the psychic states attendant upon the awareness of connections and disconnections it effects, however, constitutes a contemporary phenomenon. This experience of inhabiting two geographical and cultural spaces simultaneously is wrought with subtle and involuted tensions which get polarized into patterns such as dislocation vs. relocation, domicile vs. diasporic consciousness, dispossession vs. integration, heritage vs. hybridity and exile vs. involvement. (qtd. in Kripanath Mishra 147- 48)

## **Intra-national and International Migration**

Diaspora may refer to intra-national as well as international migration. It refers to the movements of people from one territory to another, either within or without national boundaries.

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Thus instances of displacement whether internal or external compel us to rethink the ways in which dominant understandings of displacement imagine place. The 'sense of place' or more specifically the 'absence of the sense of place' as the referent of the fixed identity of the displaced induces a sense of alienation. As place is consistently important both as the location of the narrative and the imagined homeland to which protagonist look for a sense of belonging. Displacement presumes an attachment to a given landscape and that landscape becomes the anchor for bonds of kinship and religion, for livelihood and provisioning, for memory, identity and being- it becomes a socially-inhabited place. These displaced people have nothing with them to cherish, but only to mourn. These displaced people constantly struggle to craft a sense of place but failed. Apart from that, displaced people are highly vulnerable. They suffer from discrimination, experience significant deprivation and are frequently impoverished. Marginalized within their own society and facing the emotional trauma of their uprooting experience, displaced people turn into excluded people who suffer loss of economic opportunities, breakdown of cultural identity, loosening of social and familial structures, interruption of schooling and increased poverty levels. They also suffer from grief relating to dead or missing family members and, in extreme cases, resort to delinquency and begging in order to survive. According to Michael Cernea, "Displaced people confront eight main risks of impoverishment: landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, morbidity, food insecurity, loss of access to common property assets and social disarticulation" (qtd. in Mathur 167-68).

### **Treatment of Diaspora by Anita Desai and Kiran Desai**

Anita Desai and Kiran Desai both have dealt with the themes of alienation and displacement in their respective novels. This problem of an individual who feels emotionally and spiritually alone forms the backbone of both of the novelists' theme in their respective novels. This is a dominant theme in Anita Desai's novel *Voices in the City* (1965) (hereafter VC) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) (hereafter IL) but their dealing with this theme is quite dissimilar. This may be due to generation gap, different upbringings, different social and cultural surroundings, difference in cognitive level, and the most important, the time during which they have been writing. As it is difficult to deny the effects of time in making of the mind of an author, because an author's personality doesn't mould in the vacuum but by the main currents around him/her and both the writers are not the exceptions.

### **Anita Desai – An Early Post-independence Writer**



Courtesy: [www.kids.britannica.com](http://www.kids.britannica.com)

Anita Desai started writing in 1950s when India had achieved freedom from British rule. As the euphoria of independence evaporated, the focus in the Indian English novels shifted from the socio-political milieu to the exploration of individual's interior world and his existential dilemma. As according to Harish Raizada, "The waves of idealism and political fervor which had enthused Indian writers in pre- independence period were ebbed away . . . Like the European existential writers of the post- second world war period, they felt frustrated, alienated and isolated . . ." (128).

The post 1950s witnessed a number of major women writers in English like Kamala Markandya, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala and Nyantara Sahgal, but Anita Desai carved out a special niche for herself. Anita Desai epitomizes the emerging women's search for fulfillment, their feelings, quests for identity, aspirations and agonies- an act which challenges the basic tenets of culture and tradition of her time. Pursuing his dreams single mindedly, and confining women to the periphery of the 'masculine' world, Nirode in VC reflects the arrogant dominance of Indian man in the 1950s. In portraying the character of Amla as opposed to Monisha, Anita Desai seems to refute with Indian women who, "nothing in her heart but a stupid sense of injury and affront", a women who, after the country's independence went "back to old beauty sleep of neglect and delay and corruption" (VC 81) because of her 'slave' mentality. Even after their great contribution to freedom struggle, their contribution is not recognized. Also she points out the frenzied rush of the villagers to city life, where they achieved nothing but disappointment.

### **Kiran Desai – a Writer of Multiculturalism and Post-colonialism**

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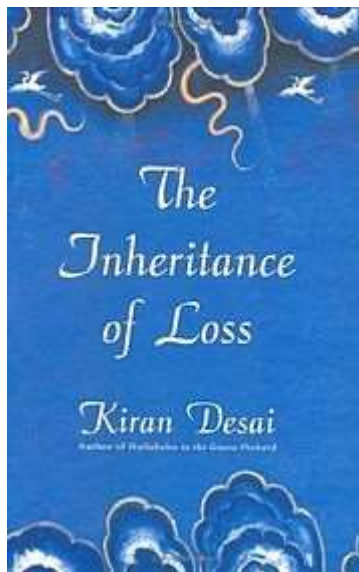
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Courtesy: <http://www.biography.com/people/kiran-desai-507348>

On the other hand, Kiran Desai is the product of multiculturalism and post-colonialism, an immigrant, well read, well bred, whose rootlessness itself has become a kind of shelter. She travels amid three geographical locations inheriting different cultures from her kinship with India (Kalimpong, Gujrat), England and USA which gives her the wide perspectives on the ideas of exile, dislocation and displacement. It was her own inheritance and disinheritance that has come with globalization of which she talks in her novel, IL. In the modern world, we have moved from an isolated, slow growing economy to one that is growing faster and beginning to integrate with the global economy. The transition began with liberalization but it remains incomplete.



### Focus on Rural India

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Liberalization has benefited only a fraction of India, the organized economy and urban Indians. It has yet to reach the largest part of our country so that the rural Indians can also live with dignity and freedom. So, this is the reason perhaps why Kiran Desai moved towards rural area and tried to give us a glimpse how these people still struggle to meet even their basic needs as when Sai thinks of Penna Lal, “a few clothes hung over a string, a single razor blade . . . a broken watch that would cost too much to mend, but was still too precious to throw away” (IL13). Kiran belongs to the time when Anglophone literature is being created by a remarkably transnational, multicultural group of writers exploring many of the same concerns, including the intersecting effects of colonialism, decolonization, migration, and globalization. In this way both the writers belong to their times.

### **Displaced Characters**

In IL, almost every character is a displaced individual who struggles to invent a life out of place away from their ancestral home and homeland. Set partly in USA and partly in India, Kiran Desai 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). While in VC, Anita Desai uses polyphonic narrative to enlarge upon the theme of urban alienation of displaced people in Post-independence India. The callousness of the metropolis Calcutta is evoked through a spirit of the place that pervades the novel. Meena Beliappa remarks, Anita Desai, “seeks to relate the subjective world of the individual to the spirit of the place” (26). Nirode rebels against the traditional notion of love and family, and struggles to settle down to a bohemian life of “three drinks a night and a room of one’s own” (VC 13), yet this longing for “shadows, silences, stillness,” in contrast to the “light of success” that his younger brother, Arun, pursues in studying abroad, remains unfulfilled (VC 10, 8). As Usha Bande observes, “. . .as Nirode’s basic needs have been frustrated, he alienates himself from his essential nature, his value system is damaged. He accepts neurotic values, thereby developing neurotic wants which are destructive, both for self and for others” (73). Monisha and Amla also feel alienated from their middle class upbringing because of its lack of creative fulfillment. Nirode’s sister Monisha, who comes to Calcutta when her husband Jiban is transferred there, identifies Calcutta with “City of Kali, goddess of death” (VC 137). Monisha trapped in domesticity, feels stifled by responsibility, until love and communication remain no longer possible. It intensifies the claustrophobia experienced by her in the joint family of her in-laws, “It makes you feel lonely, but doesn’t allow you to feel alone” (VC 138). Monisha, Nirode’s sister, in VC does not possess ‘homeostasis’ or the capacity to adjust easily and naturally to a changed set of circumstances and ends up in committing suicide. She is too stifled by her surroundings and the tradition bound household in which “feet before faces” (VC 109) syndrome rules. Since she has not been able to bear a child because her fallopian tubes are blocked, she is consigned to an obscure room on the top of the house. The choice, she had long realized, has existed only between two options, “it is a choice between death and mean existence and that, surely, is not a difficult choice” (VC 121).

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Monisha's suicide inscribes the message that she was unable to express in words, the importance of reaching out to others. Amla outwardly less of a recluse, nevertheless suffers a similar sense of alienation when their aunt Leila says, "Amla was melancholy . . . The thread of communication was broken, she saw how friable it had been" (VC 179). Faced with the failure of language, her love for the artist Dharma "became one uncontrollable desire to communicate" (VC 193). They all become the strangers to each other. Amla sees that both Nirode and Monisha are in a similar predicament and concludes, "What point was there in asking one stranger about another?" (VC 232)

### **A Mélange of Interconnected Stories**

IL is a mélange of interconnected stories about various losses inherited by a group of uprooted and isolated characters: Jemubhai Patel, son of a well reputed Patel family of Gujrat, the self-hating misanthrope and a living artifact of colonialism, is alienated from his own culture and identity. In a completely alien West world, he feels hesitant and timid to go out and talk and deal with people comfortably. Jemu actually remains conscious and ashamed of his brown colour, Indian accent, pronunciation and above all, the despising as well as discriminatory racial looks of the whites. The judge becomes a split psyche as a result of discrimination, alienation, isolation, and the feeling of marginalization. In him, Kiran Desai has very precisely portrayed the suppressed psyche of a young Indian among the white Britishers:

For the entire day nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things, and elderly ladies, even the hapless -blue-haired, spotted, faces like collapsing pumpkins - moved over when he sat next to them in the bus . . . the young and beautiful were no kinder . . . girls held their noses and giggled, "pew, he stinks of curry! (IL 39)

Jemu is also a self-alienated personality. This self-alienation can also be seen when he tries to humiliate Gyan, Sai's maths tutor, by asking him to recite a poem. In truth, Gyan reminds the judge of himself as a young man and the shame when asked to deliver a poem from memory during the examination at the ICS at Cambridge. He feels compelled to belittle Gyan in order to create a distance between the two of them and thus between himself and his past. So, as narrator says, "He had learned to take refuse in the third person and to keep everyone at bay, to keep even himself away from himself like Queen" (IL111), and "He envied the English. He loathed Indians" (IL119). Thus he had become a foreigner to everyone including himself, "He retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow (IL 39).

Nimi, the judge's wife, also puts towards a depressive state of mind due to the intense humiliation and isolation from her husband's hand. She withdraws herself in silence, "She had fallen out of life altogether. Weeks went by and she spoke to nobody . . ." (IL 172). Their

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granddaughter Sai who has no parents, no home, no roots, no plans and no memories also suffers from alienation in the alien land. The only person to show love to the child is the old maternal cook Penna Lal. But even, “their friendship composed of shallow things conducted in a broken language, for she was an English-speaker and he was a Hindi speaker. The brokenness made it easier never to go deep, never to enter into anything that required an intricate vocabulary” (IL 19).

For Sai, it is a win some and lose some situation. She is the self-involved orphan. She feels even unable to cry over the death of her parents, “the emotional immediacy of their existence had long vanished. She tried to cry, but she couldn’t” (IL 28). In a country full of relatives, Sai suffered a dearth of affinity with any member of the family.

Penna Lal, the ridiculed cook and his immigrant son, Biju, a displaced individual; and Gyan, the confused and craven Gorkha are also alienated as well as displaced personalities.

Biju, like judge represents the difficult issues of leaving one’s homeland and the alienation that he felt abroad. The characters in this novel trek across vast expanses of geography, and when they do nestle in niches in the lush mountains of northeastern India at the foot of the majestic Kanchenjunga, they remains as alien and ‘other’ as temporary migrants; not only to their external surroundings but most troublingly to themselves.

### **Father Booty**

Apart from the major characters in IL, Father Booty, a Swiss man, who has been living in Kalimpong for the past forty-five years, has constructed his home here naming it ‘Sukhtara Star of Happiness’, too is ordered to leave immediately for his country, when he is found by the police living illegally without proper papers, but who never felt the need to apply for the papers as he always considered Kalimpong his home. Even Biju’s father, who is an Indian from Utter Pradesh and lived half of his life in Kalimpong, also starts feeling displaced and realizes that “where he had existed in what seemed a sweetness of crabbiness- was showing him now that he had been wrong. He wasn’t wanted in Kalimpong and he didn’t belong” (IL 278).

### **A Conscious Artist**

Like Anita Desai, Kiran Desai is also a conscious craftsman and very carefully builds up her plots. She also has the ability to tell the story skillfully. She takes her time in letting her story unfold. For example, we learn about Gyan in Chapter One, but it is twelve more chapters before Gyan actually enters in the novel. Even the character of the retired judge is represented by frequent page breaks. This device is the redolent of the old art of the story telling where the narrator would usually have the opportunity to take a detour from the initial tale and end up recounting a whole different in order to kept the reader engaged till the end. She seems to have



been inspired more by her own mother and have less in common with her contemporaries like Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie.

### **Special Features of IL**

In IL, we came to know about the characters through the omniscient narrator. This novel is written in third person narrative. VC is divided in four parts, devoting each section to the name of the main characters in the novel. But only second section named “Monisha: HER DIARY” is written in first person.

In contrast to Anita Desai, Kiran Desai’s IL is not about families, for all the families have been disrupted by deaths or migration. It is a novel more about a community made of single individuals; It is more a choral novel than a story about a central hero or heroine. So the range of Kiran Desai is not limited to portray the middle class families which Anita Desai intentionally chosen as her subjects and especially only exploring the women psyche in depth. She has also successfully portrayed people who belong to the servant class like Penna Lal and Biju. Apart from this, her range is also wide discussing topical issues related to politics and terrorism as well as immigration, globalization, multiculturalism, colonial neurosis, identity formation and the nationalist, gender, ethnic, cultural and class differences. As Anju Bala Agarwal rightly perceives, “her range is not a limited one restricted to only home affair. With a wide range of relations, she has presented the tense, chaotic, antagonistic and shifting locations and also the precarious, disgraced and displaced lives . . .” (254).

### **Contrast in Literary Styles**

There is also a stark contrast in their literary styles and themes. As far as style is concerned Anita Desai undoubtedly has a greater mastery and range; from the highly strung lyrical and poetic to the rich and dynamic. She brings out Monisha’s plight even at the verge of ending of her life, “No ashes of that fire drifted out over the city, no wind carried the smoke away to inform others of the cloistered tragedy” (VC 240). She uses a highly symbolic language which intensifies the meaning which she wants to convey. For example, Otima is associated with the powerful, destructive Hindu goddess Kali, explodes the myth of motherhood by rejecting her children. Nirotode is also compared with the caged birds many times. On the other hand, Kiran Desai is still a learner. Her writing is far less poetic than that of her mother’s. She uses very day-to-day English language. She delights with details and IL has moments of sparkling humour, of naughty playfulness, that her mother often seems too serious for. There are touch of humour, sarcasm and irony that pervades in the novel as in the case where Noni and Lola fight with each other, “Perhaps England and America didn’t know they are in a fight to the death . . . by these two spirited widows of Kalimpong” and as in the suicide case of Nimi, “Oh, this country, people exclaimed . . . where stoves were badly made and cheap saris caught fire as easily” (IL 131, 307).

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While in VC, we saw utter gloom where people can't see any chance of escape whatever they will try, in IL, the hope remains as the ending of the novel suggest, "The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent" (IL 324). Sai and Biju (IL) seem to stand in direct contrast to Monisha and Nirode (VC). While Biju returned to his father, Nirode never returns to her and while Monisha sees no escape, Sai becomes mature enough to understand and accept the differences. No matter whoever is responsible for their plight, it was their inheritance and they cannot escape from this. They have to endure it, "Never again could she think there was but one narrative and this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it." (IL 323).

Setting the story in Kalimpong and Sikkim, with keen and perceptive visual and aural details, Kiran Desai describes the beauty of the Indian landscape. It is set in the rural India while VC is set in the metropolitan city, Calcutta. IL is more concerned with the outer action and exhibits a very taut actions line, VC focuses on the inner climate, the climate of sensibility. The interplay of thoughts, feelings and emotions is reflected in the language, syntax and imagery aspects,. The introvert characters and the probing of love relationships do not occur in IL as Kiran Desai is an extrovert and her book displays the spectacle of life with a crowded gallery of characters, not with a handful of characters like her mother.

In IL, we find the richness of language both from a literary and linguistic point of view. It is full of stylistic playfulness, touches of comedy, subtlety of logic. The linguistic factor is provided by the mix of English, Hindi, and Gujrati. The characters are constantly moving between languages, in the same way that they are also moving between different geographical locations, even if the latter happens only in the mind occasionally, for instance the judge lying on his bed at night, reminiscing about his time in Britain.

The Hindi and other words and phrases are italicized. Some words are highlighted by making them entirely capital. Kiran Desai has used many Hindi, Gujrati, and Urdu words and phrases like "mithai", "angrez ke tarah", "they call this first world???", "Ek dum bekaar!", "Humara kya hoga", "kamal hai", "Dhanyawad", "Shukria", "huzoor", "nakhra", "khansama" and many more. Many slangs and abuses are also used in this novel. Apart from this, popular slangs, abuses of various regions, vulgar and obscene expressions have also been used. Their overlapping themes and charm of Himalayas makes them similar though both have distinct traits. While Kiran Desai is exuberant and conveys a leaping and darting energy, Anita Desai seems austere and having watchful stillness and restraint.

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