



Rootlessness among Diaspora: A study of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

The term 'diaspora' literally refers to man's scattering in an alien soil, far away from homeland. It implies a cultural travel; a nostalgic reminiscence of home- the culture of origin, and an anchoring in the new world- the culture of adoption. The word often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. Often the term is used as a synonym for migration or immigration and the diasporic is equated to an expatriate. Diasporic writings are invariably concerned with individual's or community's attachment to the centrifugal homeland. But this attachment is countered by a yearning for a sense of belonging to the current place of abode. This sense of homelessness and nostalgia for their motherland constitutes one of the most important themes in literature. The narratives of the diaspora may well be considered the narratives of 'self', for the very act of migration implies a 'bodily' lifting out of the familiar and relocation in the new and the unfamiliar. My paper would discuss the issue of rootlessness and identity crisis in diasporic situation with reference to Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. The paper also centers upon how Desai portrays her characters leading the lives of dislocation- physical, emotional, political both in the alien land and homeland. The novel also insists on the character's feeling of homelessness, exile, marginalization, uprootedness, hyphenated identity and loss of belongingness.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Dislocation, Rootlessness

Kiran Desai, daughter of the prominent Indian origin writer, Anita Desai, has carved a niche for herself with her novel, "The Inheritance of Loss". She created a literary history by being the youngest ever woman to win the prestigious Man Booker Prize for fiction at the age of thirty five. The Inheritance of Loss heralds Kiran Desai as one of our most insightful novelists. The present novel of study, captures the dichotomy and duality in the lives caught between two continents that infuses the Inheritance of Loss – a story replete with sadness over globalization and with pleasure at the surviving intimacies of Indian village life. The Inheritance of Loss is a highly contemplative novel, in which Desai gives voice to the pain of exile, the characters struggling as exiles to maintain their dignity and self-respect in the encroaching morass of the westernization.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai juxtaposes under privileged diasporic subjects in India and USA in both the colonial past and the global present. Desai employs a fragmentary structure that shifts between different times and spaces and a somber tone in order to underscore the idea that immigration is a difficult movement predicated on a rift between home and host land. The issue of homeland occupies a central position in the imagination of diasporic writers. A nation needs a diaspora to reaffirm its own sense of rootedness, while the migrant who did not feel like an Indian in India may suddenly discover his Indianness as a diasporan. A modest attempt is being made in this paper to delve deep into the issue of migration, a sense of loss, consciousness of being an outsider, yearning for home, burden of exile, dispossession and relocation.

The life of immigrants is not a simple one. They have to live several lives and roles. They experience a sense of uprootedness in the alien soil. In spite of their attempts of acculturation, they do remain at the periphery and are treated as 'others'. "Migrants", says Salman Rushdie, "..... Straddle two cultures..... fall between two stools" and they suffer "a triple disruption" comprising the loss of roots, the linguistic and social dislocation" Rushdie (279). Edward Said in his essay *Culture and Imperialism* has elaborated on the journey of exile from his homeland to globe. The exile first becomes 'tender', then strong and finally perfect: "the person who finds his homeland sweet is tender beginner, he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong, but he is perfect to whom the entire world is a foreign place". Said (P.407)

"Boast of Quietness", a poem by Jorge Luis Borges can be used as a fitting epigraph for *The Inheritance of Loss*. Just as the poem speaks of loss, of universal human feelings and of the difficulties in achieving contentment. In the same way, the novel also meditates upon – loss of culture, loss of identity, loss of emotional binding, loss of human values and loss of human being's faith in each. A retired, reclusive judge, Jemubhai Patel lives with his orphaned

granddaughter Sai, his beloved dog Mutt and his cook Panna Lal in Cho Oyu, a crumbling house in Kalimpong. Jemu can't free himself from the "Colonial neurosis" Desai (48). "He worked at being English with passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians both" (119). And due to the ills of colonization, his life lacked the human warmth and love of family. Sai also loses indigenous cultural values due to her academic learning in a convent school. Western Christian values enter into her blood. The poem speaks of the ambitious whose day is greedy, as a lariat in the air and in the novel it stands for the cook and Gyan's parents who want their children to achieve, what they failed to achieve in their lives due to poverty.

Biju in other part of globe leads the life of an immigrant to fulfill his father's dream and Gyan after deserting Sai in love tries to search his cultural identity by joining Gorkhaland Movement without acknowledging that they are all voices of the same poverty. Biju faces tough and discriminating immigration laws in America, fails to procure green card; listed "shadow class" (102) of illegal immigrants in New York. This poor fellow had to spend thirty years time dodging the authorities, moving from one ill-paid job to another. He always feels home sickness but, even in his own country, he finds total loss of peace, law and order. He is robbed of all his possessions by GNLFF activists. Biju becomes a representative of such young crazy men from the Third world, who dream a plan to go to the west and face tough problems there.

Food is used as metaphor of identity in the novel. Kiran Desai, has used food to show class difference and as a measuring standard of religious identity. For Biju and Gyan food is a basic necessity but for the judge, Loal, Noni and Sai it is an indication of their appreciation for England. Jemubhai is a man disgusted with Indian ways and customs to such an extent, that he eats chapattis with a knife and a fork, hates all Indians including his father whom he breaks ties with and wife who he abandons at his father's place. In the present novel, the characters also feel culturally uprooted. In Rig Veda, cow is treated as a Devi; to kill a cow is equal to kill a Brahmin. Harish Harry is a mammon worshipper but he is against serving beef. The ironic laugh of odes and the remark "nobody eats beef in India and just look at it's the shape of a big T-bone" (Desai 135) reveals the ambiguity of Indians who in India worship cow but in the host country eat it. Biju leaves his job at Brigitte's when made to choose between serving beef or to work by killing his religious consciousness.

Kiran Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss* pokes into the problem of illegal migrants. Indians, in search of livelihood for subsistence come to foreign land away from their homes & families, cultures and tradition, i.e. they willingly get uprooted from their motherland. She presents the overwhelming feeling of humiliation experienced by ethnic groups who arrive at the global village

of America to secure a better future. Jemu goes to Cambridge for higher studies, selected in I.C.S and become a judge. He is so much impressed and immersed in western values, he loses his original Indian identity and feels “foreigner in his own country” (29). Through the ordeals of Biju, Desai presents the status of illegal immigrants and the feeling of alienation experienced by expatriates. The people like Biju feel pangs of isolation and grief. They live their without any home. Further lack of access to technological world makes life more miserable. But in spite of these additives he says,

No jobs here anymore, if I were a young man. I would go back to India, more opportunities there now, too late for me to make a change, but you should listen to what I’m saying. Everyone says you have to stay, this is where you’ll, make a good life but much matter for you to go back. (98)

Kiran Desai, presents heart rendering picture of mental torture faced by these immigrants in foreign lands. The Indians treated as uncivilized and weak, “Black people, living like monkeys in the trees, not like us so civilized.....” (185). Biju realized “white people looked clean because they were whiter and darker you were, the dirtier you looked” (186). He shows his resentment in these words:

Without us living like pigs, what business would you have? This is how you make your money, paying us nothing because you know we can’t do anything, making us work day and night because we are illegal why don’t you sponsor us for Green card? (189)

Along with Biju, father Booty is the character who has to face this adjustment problem in India. Kiran Desai also expresses her anguish on the fact that binarism exists within the boundaries of home culture also, provide more facilities to foreigners than to Indians. Desai creation clearly shows that identity refers to the various ways we position ourselves. A mere possession of the Green Card places a mortal equivalent to God. If Indians are treated as others in the host country due to their colour then the same Indians consider Nepalese inferior who are also a part of India. Indian Nepalese are “fed up being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority. They wanted their own country or at least their own state, in which to manage their own affairs” (9). Gyan’s involvement in the Gorkhaland Movement is the reflection of young Indian’s deep-rooted frustration, for which Gyan even abandons Sai. Their plight is symbolic of their feeling of rootlessness even in their own country. The novel portrays the Indian society as poverty-stricken moreover, illiteracy, unemployment, cultural conflicts, traditional values. Poverty is the root cause of GNLf movement and migration. Cook and Biju epitomize the misery of

common folk. Biju's migration to America is the result of that poor life. Jemu, Lola, Pixie, noni, Biju, Cook, Sai, Gyan, all reflect the pain of transition.

The concept of homelessness, rootlessness has attained new dimensions in the dexterous hands of Kiran Desai. The novel encompasses broader issues ranging from ills of colonization, Gorkhaland agitation, deportation, to homelessness by choice & death. Desai has presented India as a concept, and a land of hope & desire. Jemu is homeless out of his own choice, by banishing his family. Sai is homeless though no fault of hers, except that of birth. Gyan & Budhoo are Indians but in their own country they are treated as a marginalized under the tag of Nepalese. For both Biju and father Booty India is a land of hope & desire. For Biju India is the final homecoming. Thus the novelist have presented a realistic picture of the palpable life of the Diasporas, who are on a river with a foot each on two different boats and each boat trying to pull them in separate position. But every coin has two sides of it. Being an immigrant teaches them much about the world & about human beings. It enhances their consciousness about things which they would never have understood if brought up in one place. It enables them to speak concretely on a subject of universal significance & appeal.

References

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