

Diasporic Consciousness in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

The Inheritance of Loss written by Kiran Desai is a South Asian Novel written in English reflects the diasporic consciousness of the characters since the characters have feelings of a sense of loss, hybrid identity, consciousness of being an outsider, longing for home, double consciousness, split personality, and alienation. Regarding diasporic consciousness, human beings have had such consciousness since they started migrating to other nations leaving their nations due to their compulsion to adapt in the culture of the hostland along with the culture of the root land. However, this research focuses on the diasporic consciousness of protagonists such as Biju, Jemu Bhai Patel, Fathe Booty and Sai portrayed in *The Inheritance of Loss* in the post-colonial era. The research discovers the impact of post-colonialism on these characters, which means that India became independent in 2047, but Indians throughout the world are still under the influence of colonialism. Biju's life in New York, Jemu Bhai Patel's life in London and Sai's life in Kalimpong reveal their sense of loss, dislocation, split personality, double consciousness and hybrid identity, which reflect their consciousness in diaspora. Hence, for the research methodology, the qualitative approach is applied since the research deals with the fictional characters portrayed in the select novel. Likewise, for the broad theoretical framework, Avtar Brah's and Vijay Mishra's theory of diaspora, and Homi K. Bhabha's Hybrid Identity are applied as theoretical tools to explore how the characters struggle for identity, suffer due to loss of identity and are under the influence of colonialism in the diaspora.

Key Words: Diaspora, Post-colonialism, Consciousness, Migration, Loss of identity, Hybrid identity,

Introduction

This research deals with the exploration of Indian immigrants' pathetic plight of their struggle and life in the Indian diaspora in the USA and the UK and the effects of colonization on the minds of Indians even in India. The major characters portrayed in the select novel *The Inheritance of Loss* written by Kiran Desai are Indians who happen to experience diasporic life in the West due to migration. People have been migrating since

human civilizations began. In the very beginning of human civilization, such travellers were regarded as nomads. But along with the passage of time, development and civilization, the travellers who cross the borders and study, work and live in other nations are regarded as migrants and their movement is regarded as migration. But, this select novel reflects Indians' migration to the West. Regarding migration, Judith M. Brown states in *Global South Asians: Introducing the Modern Diaspora*: "Men and women have been on the move since the earliest beginnings of human societies. Migration in small and large groups, and the establishment of new homes, have been among the strongest creative forces in the peopling and settling of the world's land mass and the making of human history" (1). Thus, migration causes establishment of new homes and diaspora is created.

Diaspora means 'scatter' or movement of people from home nation to host nation. The word 'diaspora' has its origin in Greek language 'Diasperio' which means distribute or scatter. Regarding diaspora, the Greek diaspora which is known as the classical diaspora is the earliest known diaspora. In *Global Diaspora*, Rabin Cohen writes "Jewish (and Greek and Armenian) Diasporas can be taken as non-normative starting points for a discourse that is travelling in new global conditions" (22). Cohen further adds regarding Jewish diaspora relating it to Christian myth too "The image of the 'wandering Jew' became part of a continuing Christian myth, a myth often absorbed and perpetuated by Jews themselves. Jews are forced to wander, so the dogma went because of their part in the killing of Christ. The son of God is said to have condemned them to eternal restlessness" (25). Cohen's ideas about Jews diaspora even indicates that the earliest diaspora was forced or victim diaspora, whereas today's diaspora or postcolonial diaspora is voluntary diaspora. The voluntary diaspora shows voluntary movement or migration of people from one nation to another nation. *The Inheritance of Loss* reflects the voluntary diaspora of the Indian characters Jamubhai Patel and Biju to the West and that of Father Booti to India from Switzerland. Unlike the classical forced diaspora, their diaspora is for better opportunities.

Kiran Desai, who was born on 3rd Sep, 1971 in India, is a South Asian novelist in English. Like her mother Anita Desai, she has become a brilliant and established Indian diasporic writer. She has written different books such as *The Inheritance of Loss*, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, *AIDS Sutra: Untold Stories from...*, *Generation 1.5* and so on. Her *The Inheritance of Loss* became the best seller in 2006 and won the Booker Prize in the very year. Her novel mainly deals with Indian immigrant characters located in America and Britain, which *The Inheritance of Loss* reflects. In 'Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* as a diasporic novel', Vimal B. Patel claims, "As a diasporic writer, she exposes all the diasporic elements like marginalization, cultural insularity, nostalgia, alienation, quest for identity and assimilation in her work" (108).

The Inheritance of Loss opens up with Sai, a teenage Indian orphan girl who lives with her retired grandfather, Jemubhai Patel in Kalimpong on the Himalayas. Her grandfather is a Cambridge-educated Anglophile retired judge. On the one hand, the research explores the painful experiences of Jemubhai Patel in London as he suffers from discrimination shown

to him by the Whites. Besides, the novel reflects the impact of post-colonialism upon his retired life in India. On the other hand, the research focuses on Biju's journey to America and how he suffers humiliation living and working as an illegal immigrant in New York. Thus, the research project focuses on how the Indian immigrants in the Indian diaspora in the West experience a feeling of dislocation, a sense of loss, hybrid identity and double consciousness.

Objectives

This research article which regards *The Inheritance of Loss* as the select text revolves round the Indian immigrant characters who suffer from various identity crises caused by their transcending the Indian border. When people from any home country transcends the border and enters another country, their identity gets affected. Such a diasporic novel gives a clear picture of the life of the immigrants in the host land. There are multiple objectives of writing this paper. However, one major objective of this research paper is to explore causes for people to migrate from the home land to the host land. But, the second major objective of the research article is to discover major elements of diasporic consciousness.

Methodology

The research article applies the qualitative research approach because it deals with the life experiences or diasporic experiences of fictional Indian immigrant characters portrayed in the select text. Besides, the critics' views, feelings and ideas on the characters' experiences are discussed critically in the textual analysis of the article to support that the Indian immigrant characters face different problems that indicate their diasporic consciousness.

As for the theoretical tools, the textual analysis is applied as a major analytical tool. Likewise, for the broad theoretical framework, the theory of diaspora of Avtar Brah and Vijay Mishra is used. In *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Avtar Brah defines diaspora as: "At the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of journey. Yet not every journey can be understood as diaspora. Diasporas are clearly not the same as casual travel. Nor do they normatively refer to temporary sojourns. Paradoxically, diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down about putting roots 'elsewhere' (179). The South Asian Diaspora or Indian diaspora that the research deals with is caused by migration mainly in the post-colonial era, about which Brah states: "Economic inequalities within and between regions, expanding mobility of capital, people's desire to pursue opportunities that might improve their life chances, political strife, wars, and famine are some of the factors that remain at the heart of the impetus behind these migrations" (175). Likewise, Bijay Mishra in *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*, theorizes about diaspora: "All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passports" (1). Besides, Homi K. Bhabha's Hybrid Identity is also applied as a theoretical tool to explore how the immigrant

characters struggle for identity, have traumatic experiences due to loss of identity and are under the influence of colonialism in the diaspora.

Discussion

The study reveals how the immigrants get affected by diaspora in the West. *The Inheritance of Loss* starts with a young and orphan Indian girl Sai who is living with her retired grand father, Jemubhai Patel who had studied, worked and lived in Britain. On the one hand, both of them are living in Kalimpong. However, they feel displaced in their own nation. On the other hand, Biju, the son of Patel's cook, who travels to America and works as an illegal immigrant in New York feels displaced. Thirdly, the novel shows the displacement of a Swiss national Father Booty. These characters Desai has portrayed in the novel feel displaced in different locations such as America, Britain and even in their own nation India. The Jemubhai is compelled to do what he does not like by a group of rebels demanding Gorkhaland. They even rob his house. Their threat others Patel, Sai and their cook:

“Say, Jay Gorkha,” they said to the judge. “Gorkhaland for Gorkhas.”

“Jay Gorkha.”

“Say, ‘I am a fool.’”

“I am a fool.”

“Loudly. Can't hear you, hazoor. Say it louder.”

He said it in the same empty voice.

“Jay Gorkha,” said the cook and “Gorkhaland for Gorkhas,” said Sai, although they had not been asked to say anything. (7)

Though Jemubhai and his family are in their own nation, they feel displaced and othered. It reflects identity crisis of them. In “*The Inheritance of Loss* as a diasporic novel,” Patel argues, “In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai portrays such characters that are dislocated in one way or another. In this novel, there are different types of displaced people. Some characters are experiencing the pain of exile in America when few persons are enjoying the pleasure of being immigrants in the subcontinent” (10). Patel's argument indicates that Jemubhai who was the diasporic Indian in Britain feels so even in India due to post-colonial.

When people leave their ancestral home and transcend the border in search of education or career, they have to face different identity problems. Firstly they feel displaced as Jemubhai does. His journey to Britain in search of higher study separates him from his home country, family and kiths and kins. Desai gives a clear picture of Jemubhai's journey “The town he had left was his ancestral home of Piphit. From there he had journeyed to the Bombay dock and then sailed to Liverpool and from Liverpool he had gone to Cambridge” (35). The scene of the family at his departure “The judge was accompanied by his father. At home, his mother was weeping because she had not estimated the imbalance between the finality of good-bye and the briefness of the last moment” (36) gives a painful experiences of people when they are about to be diasporic. Such a pathetic scene even reflects a new hope of gaining in the new land and a new

beginning. Brah's diasporic theory can rightly be applied in this context, according to which, "Diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation and this is certainly a very important aspect of migratory experience. But diaspora is also potentially the site of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individuals and collective memories collide, reasonable and reconfigure" (190). The judge/jemubhai firstly feels a painful separation at the time of departure, secondly he feels a trauma of separation and dislocation in Britain and thirdly he suffers from it in India.

The sense of separation and dislocation that migration causes weakens the relationship between him and his wife Nimi, which the statements "He would teach her the same lesson of loneliness and shame he had learned. In public, he never spoke to or looked in her direction" (170) reveals. Jemubhai tries to assimilate in British culture, whereas Nimi can not even learn English, which becomes obvious from "Nimi learned no English, and it was out of stubbornness, the judge thought" (170). However, it does not mean that the conflict between wife and husband is caused by the migration because they are together. But, it is caused by their different attitudes and training in their own homeland. The important issue that the displacement or dislocation that they feel in the diaspora is caused by the migration. In 'Diasporic Literature with Special Reference to Kiran Desai,' Mandeep Kaur claims: "The judge has a feeling of separation and isolation. The sense of displacement is caused by loss of cultural connections with the place. This problem is in court. He left his home first at the age of twenty in 1939 from his ancestral home to Bombay and then went to Liverpool before he joined Cambridge" (93). Kaur means to say that the main cause of his displacement is the loss of his cultural connection led by his migration. Regarding the judge's displacement/dislocation, Muhammad Asis Asghar's arguments in "A Diasporic Study of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*," "The displacement and lack of cultural understanding caused the judge to live a very lonely life. He had no cultural connections with Britain and since he was not accepted for his otherness, his loss of self-esteem caused him also to lose his self-respect" (31) are similar to Kaur's.

Like Jemubhai, Biju also feels displaced living in the USA. Biju who is Jemubhai's cook's son migrates to America in search of a better opportunity due to his family poverty. His journey to America represents the migration of Indians to the West in search of better opportunities. Why immigrants migrate and feel displaced can be explained with Brah's concept "the economic, political, and cultural specificities linking these components that the concept of diaspora signifies" (180). Biju's poverty leads him to America, but his identity crisis becomes the cause of his dislocation or displacement. In 'From pain to gain: A Study of diasporic dislocation in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*,' a critic Jannatul Farhana states "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" (34). Biju's process of preparation to America indicates how the diasporic humiliation starts from his own nation. Biju's displacement in the novel is critically analysed by V. Sahiti

Raj and Sandhya Tiwari in their article “Aspects of Diaspora and Cultural Displacement in Kiran Desai’s Novel *The Inheritance of Loss*”:

The acknowledgement of migration and cultural displacement, which facilitates understanding long term historical processes, is interconnected with their account of the potential for inspiration in literature. It is most visible in Desai's novels, which exemplify global mobility, historical periods, and socioeconomic systems, and highlight dominant narratives of global individuals and collective sense of belonging to oneself. (77)

Raj and Tiwari point out mainly the socioeconomic cause for Indian immigrants like Biju to be compelled to migrate to such a developed nation like America for better opportunities and hence they face cultural displacement as a problem of identity crisis. Besides, the displaced immigrants like Biju and the judge feel insecure in the host land, which gets quoted by Vijay Mishra in his book *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*, “These displace Indians insecure, confused, disoriented and hysterical from the start and who upon arrival referred to Fuji as narak, ‘hell’ manifested classic features of fragment societies studied by historians such as Louis Hartz” (qtd. in Mishra 26).

The Inheritance of Loss does not reflect only displacement of characters but it also shows how they get alienated in the diaspora. He faces humiliation, discrimination and feelings of exile in America. He feels homeless and alienated in the Indian diaspora. His loss of identity starts from the American Embassy, which Desai’s statements “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, mam. Biju noticed that his eyes, so alive to the foreigners and went dead” (34) reveals. He gets disillusioned in his dream nation as he is discriminated and alienated in the first restaurant where he works. He firstly joins Baby Bistro restaurant where he sees “Above the restaurant was French and below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian” (23). When he joins the Stars and Stripes Diner, he again sees a horrible sight of discrimination of alienating Indians along with other immigrants from previously colonized nations “All American flag on top, all Guatemalan flag below. Plus one

Indian flag when Biju arrived” (23). This is how he is isolated, humiliated and discriminated and is made to feel that his home nation India is much inferior to America. His painful alienation reflects the pains and sufferings of diaspora, about which Mishra theorizes in *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*:

All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are the people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements. (1)

Diasporic people like Biju become unhappy as they feel alienated due to identity crisis in the host nation. Patel's comment on Biju "After arriving in America, a sense of alienation starts haunting him continuously. He frequently changes the restaurants one after another to adapt himself with the cultural and linguistic differences" (112) also reveals his alienation in America.

Like Biju, even other immigrant characters such as Jemubhai, Father Booty, Sai and Saed also feel alienated in the diaspora. However, unlike Biju who does not think of mimicking Americans, Jemubhai does not only try to mimic British culture but he also tries to avoid other Indians in the diaspora to look like Britishers rather than Indians to adapt in British culture. However, he is regarded only as an Indian immigrant. He is also discriminated, and humiliated. So, he also feels alienated.

Apart from the above mentioned aspects of diasporic consciousness of the portrayed characters in the select text, Desai presents the homelessness of the diasporic characters too since feeling homelessness is one major aspect of diasporic consciousness. Desai writes: "He walked to the far where the homeless man often slept in a dense chamber of green that seemed to grow not so much from soil as from a fertile city crud. A homeless chicken also lived in the park" (81), which shows a comparison between a homeless man and a homeless chicken. Desai gives a message that life for immigrants in the diaspora is painful as the diasporic immigrants feel painfully isolated. Due to humiliation and feelings of homelessness in the diaspora, he expresses his regret and anger towards his father: "Biju couldn't help but feel a flash of anger at his father for sending him alone to this country. . ." (82). In 'Conflicts of Globalization: A Study of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*,' Nuzhar F. Rizvi asserts about Desai "Desai has portrayed the state of homelessness, displacement, exile, marginalization and lack of belongingness being experienced by the legal and illegal diaspora communities and individuals in America as well as by the people from other states, regions and communities. . ." (17). So, the critics views on the painful state of diasporic people becomes obviously. As a researcher, I find the problems and pain of the immigrants in the diaspora in the West. The homelessness of diasporic characters gets reflected in Brah's concept "The problematic of 'home' and belonging may be integral to the diasporic condition, but how, when, and in what form questions surface, or how they are addressed, is specific to the history of a particular diaspora. Not all diasporas inscribe homing desire through a wish to return to a place of 'origin'" (189). Farhana's comment upon Father Booty "It is the crisis moment in Father Booty's life when his ideology has started to be changed. He becomes nostalgic and strongly feels for his homeland, Switzerland" (35) indicates that diasporic people always feel homeless or desire for their home though they feel comfortable in the diaspora as Father Booty does.

Nevertheless, Jemubhai is unlike other diasporic characters such as Biju and Father Booty since Jemubhai feels homeless in Britain and feels unhomed in India. It is natural for people to pine for their nation which has given birth and nurtured them when they live in the diaspora. The nostalgia like the shadow is likely to follow them. However, Jemubhai

who regards himself unlike other Indians and like a Britisher can not adapt to his own country India when he returns. In 'Ethno- Racial Identities in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*,' Kamaljeet Sinha tries to reveal Jemubhai's problem of negotiation in his own land:

Having experienced awful dislocation in England, he now finds he can't make a place for himself in India; he is too English. He is sent back to India equipped with a snake-bite kit, a twelve -bore shotgun and a tennis racket. Despite a glorious reception, Jemu finds his wife grotesque and his people alien. He even rejects his daughter, his family, their ways and become more English than the Indians. . . (72)

The post-colonialism has a powerful impact upon Jemubhai, so he becomes such a mimic man that he feels unhomed in his own nation. In *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson defines unhomed "To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak" (368).

One very noticeable aspect of diasporic consciousness of the immigrants is their hybrid identity. America and Britain are such multicultural nations which are fertile lands for hybridization as the immigrants who settle there come from different nations carrying with them different cultures. Desai has located her characters in these nations in such a way that it does not become a wonder when these characters form hybrid identity. In this context Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity can be taken. Bhabha regards the hybrid third space as an ambivalent site where cultural meaning and representation have no "primordial unity or fixity" (176). It means according to Bhabha cultural identity in the third space is hybridized, which can also be argued that identity is not fixed. In the same way, Jemubhai's cultural identity is hybridized as he mimics British culture mixing his original Indian culture to British culture. According to Desai Jemubhai mixes both Indian English and British English: "By the time they stood for the ICS, most of the candidates had crisp- ironed their speech, but Jemubhai had barely opened his mouth for whole years and his English still had the rhythm and the form of Gujarati" (119). Nadia Krige finds hybrid identity of all characters in the novel. In 'Hybridity, the Uncanny and the Stranger: The Contemporary Transcultural Novel,' Krige argues:

It is, however, interesting to note the difference between Sai's postcolonial cultural hybridity and the judge's colonially-rooted hybridity. The judge's hybridisation occurs abruptly when he leaves India to study law at Cambridge as a young man. Sai's process of hybridisation takes place more gradually as, from birth, she grows into an English-Indian culture and knows nothing else. (48)

Krige's writing reflects the hybridity as an inherent part of diasporic life.

Apart from various aspects of the immigrants who live in diaspora, the double consciousness is also one very important aspect. Desai's characters Biju and Jemubhai neither regard themselves fully American or British nor Indian. Instead, their identity is divided. They happen to look at themselves from the eyes of the whites. In 'The Postcolonial Identity in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*,' the critic Ravi kumar Shrestha reveals the double consciousness of characters "As the immigrant characters such as Biju in America and Jemubhai Patel in India feel dislocated, they neither become fully Indians nor British/American. Despite living in New York, Biju feels he is only an Indian. Though Jemubhai Patel lives in India, he regards himself like a Britisher. Both of their consciousness/identity is divided" (188). W. E. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness which he theorises in *The Souls of Black Folk* is very contextual and applicable in this context. Du Bois' concept "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. . ." (8) Explains the divided identity of diasporic people.

Conclusions

Finally, Desai's novel shows how all the diasporic characters return to their homelands from the hostlands. Biju returns from America facing the horror of diaspora. Jemubhai returns from Britain and is still under the horrible impact of postcolonial identity. Likewise, Father Booty returns to his homeland, Switzerland from India. However, though Desai seems to point out the negative aspects diasporic life in this novel, diasporic life has so many positive aspects in the form of privileges. Anyway, regarding the diasporic consciousness of her characters, Desai becomes successful in showing different aspects of them such as dislocation, a sense loss, alienation, homelessness, hybrid identity and double consciousness. As a result, how the immigrants that in the form of characters portrayed in the select novel feel in the Indian diaspora becomes obvious.

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