

Translation of Diasporic Conflict as Represented in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

There has been an evident shift in the focus of English literature towards the new writings of the erstwhile colonized nations. The new writers wanted to posit their multifarious experiences that went beyond the boundaries of ethnicity and diaspora, to a level that claimed the recognition of main stream literature on the basis of the human experiences recorded in them. Thus, diasporic literature had the touch of writers who wanted to assert their national identity and also to express their point of view on the impact of colonization. The writings relocated, reconstituted, re-examined and re-established the contours of culture among others.

*The paper titled Translation of Diasporic Conflict as represented in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* takes a look at the current issues of globalization, multiculturalism, immigration, westernization, postcolonialism, terrorist violence, alienation and exile. Technological advancements have made the concept of space and time shorter and thus a new connotation can be given to the term diaspora. Thus, the paper finds out how diaspora works on two levels – life on two continents – the cultural encounter in the context of a globalised scenario. This new reading of diaspora is done in the context of the wide canvas of the 2006 Man Booker Prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* by the renowned Indian born American author Kiran Desai.*

Keywords: Diaspora, cultural conflict, ethnicity, westernization, globalised scenario.

Introduction

Diaspora can be defined as a group of diverse population who belong to different ethnicities, religions and languages. They share social, cultural, linguistic and religious practices across national boundaries. Diaspora, as a cultural lingua from the context of a third world country, has several socio-political concerns like poverty, ethnic conflict, terrorism, communalism and even fundamentalism that the third world countries share with that of the other.

South Asian literary diaspora has the robust vernacular literary tradition of Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao to boast about. Times have changed and South Asian writing in English has taken a step forward – going global with Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Arvind Adiga and so on. There was a time when there was an evident lull in the area of study of South Asian literatures. But again, following the September 11, 2001 attack on the US, the term South Asia became a lingua open to contests and its relevance was questioned for all the wrong reasons. Despite the flux, South Asian literature is to a great extent dominated by diasporic writers who migrated from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal to western countries like the USA, Canada and the UK. Elleke Boehmer, in her *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphor*, remarks about diasporic writers as such:

For different reasons, ranging from professional choice to political exile, writers from a medley of once colonized nations have participated in the late twentieth century condition of migrancy. ... In the 2000s the generic postcolonial writer is more likely to be a cultural traveler, or an ‘extra-territorial’, than a national. Excolonial by birth, ‘Third World’ in cultural interest,

cosmopolitan in almost every other way, he or she works within the precincts of the Western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/ or political connections with a national, ethnic or regional background (226-227).

The new understanding of the term diaspora owes its origin to a new outlook in the way issues have been focused on by writers of the recent times. Contemporary novels have moved away from traditional themes of colonialism, freedom movement and partition. The focus is on issues that are more immediate and local. Thus, there is a reimagining to the term diaspora as writers have moved away from events in the colonial history of their nation to focus on those that may have made great global impacts. Representation of terror, trauma and violence, themes and issues pertaining to middle class issues, focus on issues affecting marginal groups in Indian society on the basis of class or religion, political and social conflicts caused by ethnic tensions burning in the country, plight of the underprivileged, concerns of marginalized and repressive communities have gained popularity in the hands of the recent writers. Paul Briens, in his *Modern South Asian Literature in English*, remarks thus “fiction tends to concentrate on a handful of topics: family life, love, marriage, death and war in particular ... fiction exists to reshape human experiences to tell disturbing stories to amuse, to excite, intrigue, challenge and move the reader”(5-6).

To analyze a similar reimagined diaspora, *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai is selected. The main reason for selecting Kiran Desai is her contemporaneity. Also she is a representative writer who has expressed her concerns pertaining to the Indian subcontinent ranging from ethnic conflict, communalism, fundamentalism, alienation, terrorism and other socio-political conflicts expressing the desires and

aspirations pertaining to life. Also her works concentrate on areas of ethnicity, identity, migration and transnationalism. These ideas have gained urgency because of the large scale movement of people in the twentieth century as well as due to the phenomenon of globalization. People have been dislocated from their homelands to new host countries not forcefully as the term diaspora originally signified but voluntarily as well. This new mobility and dispersion have been prompted by many factors such as education, job opportunity, business and seeking asylum. Also advancements in modern means of transportation and the development in all means of communication have made it easier for people to travel from their homelands to other parts of the world. Thus, a new definition to the term diaspora has gained momentum, framing a novel way of reading and envisaging the term. The reimagined diaspora has an identity that is plural in nature. The modern diasporas are very much conscious of their ancestral homes. But at the same time they are aware of their present status as citizens of a particular nation. They maintain close relation with their ancestral homes, thus by declaiming a double identification or “double consciousness” as Paul Gilroy comments. Modern diasporic generation is hybridized in nature where there is a negotiation with their dual identities. But it is a happy compromise where they have relocated themselves from the country of their birth to their new homes more out of choice than any kind of compulsion.

Modern diasporic writers like Kiran Desai explores contemporary realities of shifting national boundaries, juggling different locales of the home and foreign lands, racial and cultural identities that they yoke together in the fast moving pace of the modern world in her works. The juggling of locales pictures a condition of the diaspora that envisages a twin process of displacement. Kiran Desai, a representative of

modern diasporic writer is an immigrant in the US who finds her past life in India-a store house to recreate Indian situation in a global context. She is the writer of *The Inheritance of Loss* which won the Man Booker Prize in 2006 for Fiction.

The novel is set in the mid-1980s in the Himalayan town of Kalimpong and revolves around the life of Jemubhai Patel, Sai Mistry and Biju against a diasporic backdrop. The novel has a wide canvas exploring post-colonial India and also the United States and thus two distinct cultures are the locales for the novel. Against the dual cultural backdrop, Desai focuses on basic human emotions like love, sex, conflict, struggle, marriage and even physical abuse. The novel projects the lives of people trying to find meaning in their lives-to have a sense of home and identity. Jemubhai Patel, the retired judge, lives in an isolated house, nestled in Kalimpong, at the base of the majestic mountains of Kanchenjunga. Sai Mistry, the young girl, is sent to live with Jemubhai Patel upon the untimely demise of her parents. The character of the cook, Panna Lal, is consumed by the thoughts of his son Biju who is busy hopscotching from one city to the other in the US searching for a Green card. Sai falls in love with her Nepalese tutor Gyan but their romance is affected by the fervors of GNLFF. He prioritizes his identity as an ethnic Nepali and despises her and her bourgeoisie way of life. Biju is the representative of people who believe they will make it big in America one day. But he fails miserably and returns home to the disappointment of his father.

The chaos depicted in the novel makes us realize that the novel is about the destruction of common man's life and how they are the inheritors of loss. The novel brings in daily concerns of joy and the fears of ordinary people of India and their relationships build on agony and ecstasy. The novel captures the loss of faith in India and the characters are portrayed to be

trying to survive the world of East and West. Kiran Desai analyses the painful efforts of her characters to adopt Western habits in Indian scenario. The four prominent characters – Jemubhai Patel, Sai, Panna Lal and Biju are drawn into a vortex dream for money, status and security which pull them into the dark pit where they struggle in vain for survival.

The Inheritance of Loss depicts the diasporic consciousness in the form of loss of cultural identities and conflicts present in the human civilization across the globe. The novel is an interesting journey from the base of Kanchenjunga to the modern cities in the United States. In order to delineate the travails of people globally shuttling, Desai moves between first and third worlds, illuminating the blinding desire for a better life. It is the story of the false hopes of immigrants, the ingrained belief of luxury in a foreign land, the racism, the exploitation of humans from the third world for cheap labor and finally the home coming of the immigrant who loses all but is happy to be back home. Jasbir Jain comments in her work *Writers of Indian Diaspora* thus about the characters in the novel “... who have moved away from one culture to another ... caught between two cultures ... often engaged either in a process of self recovery through resort to history and memory or in a process of self-preservation through an act of transformation” (101).

Kalimpong in the Himalayas on one side and the cities in the United States on the other side portray diasporic conflict in a global context. The characters in the novel live in two worlds – one is that of the western world and the other that of the inescapable Indian class system. This conflict engulfs them all their lives as their whole life is straddled with these two worlds – in their daily lives and in their world of dreams and hopes. The characters face the conflict inherent in the diasporic world when they learn that they can never escape their predicament

of letting go one world and embracing the other. There is no mistaking the contemporary relevance of Desai's exploration of the post-colonial chaos and despair that is driving the multi-cultural world of today. But we can never ignore the fact that diaspora is a combination of diverse cultures and languages. With it come the dark and the light sides of diasporic life when analyzing from a global context. To conclude, the novel projects the darker side of globalization – the great gulf of difference between the rich and the poor. It paints a shocking portrait of people with crumbling hopes nurtured on the western notion of rationality and superiority of the white race. The novel brilliantly captures globalism reverberating in the after effects of cultural encounters. There is the mingling of the East and the West, haunting of the past and the present that adds to the richness and profundity of Desai's writings.

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