

Lost in Diaspora: Kiran Desai's *Biju*

LEANORA PEREIRA

The Oxford Dictionary defines diaspora firstly; as the movement of the Jewish people away from their own country to live and work in other countries, secondly, as the movement of people, from any nation or group, away from their own country. (Oxford, 8th edition)

“As per William Safran, first, Diaspora as a term refers to people who have “been dispersed from a specific original ‘center’ to two or more ‘peripheral’ or foreign regions”; (Brazier 24)

History has always witnessed movements of people. Searching for food and water has been the priority, for nomadic movements. Post war and post-colonial eras have witnessed the greatest mass migrations. These migrants are searching for a better tomorrow, a better way of life. No one wants to be left out from this foray for greener pastures; Upper, merchant class, middle class and even the lower labour class.

Biju from Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* is a character from the lowest echelons of society. He is unskilled but longs to go abroad in search of success and money. In the novel he is son of the cook, working for Judge Jemubhai Patel. Biju's journey is a journey from a small hell, to a larger hell and then back to India during the insurgency, which is the greatest hell.

It was Selma Carvalho who described Diaspora as a ‘Wilderness’, in her book on Diaspora entitled *Into the Diaspora Wilderness*. (Goa 1556, Broadway Publishing 2010). Biju's journey

and experiences in America can be described most appropriately as lost in the diasporic wilderness.

Diasporas a displaced people, struggle constantly to assimilate to their host land. Theirs' is a journey of transition, struggle, alienation, and marginalization. Biju with his rudimentary qualifications finds himself in another planet. He is unaware of the most basic needs like language to survive in an alien land. He is unable to understand their way of life and is constantly struggling to comprehend this new world. He is an unqualified Indian abroad.

PURSUIT OF THE GREEN CARD; A TICKET TO HEAVEN?

America in our perception is a land of plenty, a land of excesses. No one goes hungry. Everyone lives in surfeit and more. But it turns out that this America of 'milk and honey' is not for Indians like Biju or citizens of the third world. This untold reality of America, is the truth that many migrants realize, only when they reach America; by then it is too late. They spend all their fortunes to embrace a life of misery in America. There is nothing left to return to, back home. There are a million untold stories of America; stories of misery, shattered dreams and shattered lives.

"The green card, the green card—Saeed applied for the immigration lottery each year, but Indians were not allowed to apply. Bulgarians, Irish, Malagasies—on and on the list went, but no, no Indians. There were just too many jostling to get out, to pull everyone else down, to climb on one another's backs and run. The line would be stopped up for years, the quota was full, overfull, spilling over." (Desai 81)

The above lines show the innumerable and over population of Indian migrants in America, much more than other nationalities. Is seems overpopulation is synonymous with India, whether at home or in Diaspora.

Another important fact is that, the migrants are awaiting the green card, through a system that is like a lottery. Their lives in America, is a gamble—the outcome of which; depends their

future and present. This lottery is for every nationality, except Indians. Indians are doomed in this process for legalizing their migration.

BIJU THE LOST IMMIGRANT

Biju is an illegal migrant. He needed the green card to legalize his stay in America. He is also the victim of the Green Card Dream, "Without it he couldn't leave. To leave he wanted a green card. This was the absurdity. How he desired the triumphant After the Green Card Return Home, thirsted for it—to be able to buy a ticket with the air of someone who could return it he wished, or not, if he didn't wish...." (Desai 99)

"He watched the legalized foreigners with envy" (Desai 99)

Biju is aware of the obvious futility in his chances of acquiring the Green Card. "Then of course, there were those who lived and died illegal in America and never saw their families, not for ten years, twenty, thirty, and never again." (Desai 99)

In the marriage business, looking out for partners; "Even a disabled or mentally retarded green card holder would be fine" (Desai 100). This sentence very categorically sums up the all-consuming power of the Green Card.

BIJU IN A NEW WORLD

To say that Biju was out of his depths in New York is an understatement. He can barely stay afloat, and drowning seems unavoidable. Biju even lacked the street smartness and deviousness required to successfully continue to live illegally in America.

"Biju was so restless sometimes he could barely stand to stay in his skin". (Desai 81)

Biju is transported to a life he barely understands. He is constantly battling new jobs and new worlds, in a bid to survive in America. Some of his jobs included working in a Bakery called

The Queen of Tarts, Gracie Mansion, La Salle. He constantly fought with the Pakistani college at the French restaurant Baby Bistro. "Biju at Le Colonial for the authentic colonial experience" (Desai 21). At the American Stars and Stripes Diner, he worked with Guatemalans.

"There was a whole world in the basement kitchens of New York, but Biju was ill-equipped for it and almost relieved when the Pakistani arrived" (Desai 22)

BIJU THE UNDERGROUND MAN

Biju worked literally and hypothetically in the lowest strata of New York Society. But he also lived underground. He lived in Basements. Living in Basements in the Western World is normal for people belonging to the economically struggling strata. He lived in the basement of a building at the bottom of Harlem.

"Biju joined a shifting population of men camping out near the fuse box, behind the boiler, in the cubby holes, and in odd-shaped corners that once were pantries, maid's rooms, laundry rooms, and storage rooms at the bottom of what had been a single-family home." (Desai 52). Here electricity would go anytime, which would result in the inmates screaming, with no one to heed them.

The novel very realistically shows us the unglamorous side of one of the leading cities in the world, nicknamed the Big Apple. It is shocking that the marginalized are inhabitants of less than human conditions.

Through different episodes in different restaurants his feelings of loneliness and loss and longing is portrayed. In Biju, we can see the migrant's inability to deal with a situation due to cultural unfamiliarity.

In diaspora he has inherited a sense of only loss; loss of everything familiar. His loss is palpable. He is unable to cope with the challenges he experiences, in a gloomy world. The

kitchen world under prestigious restaurants is a hell. It is a world full of pretensions. While appeasing the appetites of an upper class of people, the likes of Biju represent Fanon's 'Wretched of the Earth'. We are witness to the back scenes of the glamorous restaurants. Biju is walking on a tight rope on a fragile financial and emotional state, impoverishment, and alienation. He is living in the hopeful dream of a green card.

Biju has different jobs, but through all these jobs there is no respite. The poverty, insecurities, marginalization continues.

America as represented to Indian pining to pursue the American dream is contrary.

Without his documents he is hanging in limbo, neither an Indian nor an American. He is psychologically, economically, culturally estranged and financially lost.

THE AMERICAN DREAM SHATTERED

Ever since America was re-discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492, it has been portrayed as a land of dreams. The Spanish, English, French, Irish, Jews all found solace and wealth in America. Asian migration to America began in the late nineteenth century.

"Asian Americans experienced exclusion by law from the United States between 1880 and 1965, and were largely prohibited from naturalization until the 1940s. Since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, a new wave of Asian immigration has occurred, and nearly 40% of all new immigrants to the United States in 2010 were from Asia." [1]

Americans are considered the number one citizens of the world. Their Human Rights Associations are very strong. These associations fight for any injustice done to any American Citizen in America or anywhere in the world. The world looks on Americans as the most gifted and fortunate nation. Therefore it

is understandable that most people crave a part of the American Dream- majority of people cherish the hope to live in America.

While the well-read, well informed and qualified Indian puts in a lot of wealth to migrate, they are aware of many hardships they will have to face, on reaching America and in gaining citizenship. But people from the lower echelons of society also cherish the hope for a better future in the land of plenty. Unfortunately they are uninformed of the perils and disasters of migration to a new land. Biju represents a whole class of migrants who blindly invest all their fortunes, to go to a place, not knowing what is on the other side.

Biju who is uneducated and unqualified experienced more than a climate and culture shock in America.

He was unable to cope with the winter. "Biju smelled the first of the snow and found it has the same pricking, difficult smell that existed inside the freezer; he felt the Thermocol scrunch of it underfoot..... Biju put a padding of newspapers down his shirt- leftover copies from kind Mr. Iype—and sometimes he took the scallion pancakes and inserted them below the paper,". Biju is very ill equipped to deal with American winter. "He began to weep from the cold, and the weeping unpicked a deeper vein of grief- such a terrible groan issued from between the whimpers that he was shocked his sadness was so profound." (Desai 51)

Biju was truly lost. He cried because all he dreamed off- would never materialize.

PARADISE LOST—ROBBED OF NATIVNESS

Returning home to India, is Biju's greatest tragedy. He is witness to anarchy, which was the price of India's freedom. He returns to his motherland a wiser man. His hopes and expectations abroad have come to nil, but Biju finds himself in a nightmare back home.

He is robbed in broad day light. There is open aggression in India, towards one another. He alights to an India, gripped with rebellions and transgressions.

CONCLUSION

Biju is unable to find solace in America, nor back in India. India's post-Independence history, questions the concept of unity. Independence in India ushered in new tensions and new animosities among Indians. Set in the 1980s, the novel is a story of "Dispossession and Dislocation" for not only Biju, but the Judge, Sai, the European migrants, the missionary, the local Gurkha Gyan etcetera. *The Inheritance of Loss* is a poignant Postcolonial novel of total loss, both in Diaspora and loss back in India.

WORKS CITED

- Pew Research Center. "The Rise of Asian Americans". *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*. Retrieved 2015-10-26. (Wikipedia).
- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. 8th Edition. Oxford University Press. 2010. Print.
- Brazier Jana Evans, *Diaspora—An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden USA P, 2008. Print.
- K.W.Christopher, *Rethinking Cultural Studies*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur 2005. Print.