

Reframing the Diasporic Realities in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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ABSTRACT

Most recent diasporic fictions that came after 1980s stand out prominently by coalescing or separating the aspects of individual experience highlighting a wider web of issues and compulsions; in this sense, the projection of Third World histories and contemporary nationalist climate within the problematic posed by nations and cultures in transition, within the overall pressures exerted by globalisation, migration, movement and the powerful impacts of late capitalist developments. A position taken up by the subaltern studies group led by Dipesh Chakraborty sees independence and post-coloniality scripted or drawn in terms of this transition. However, it should also be understood that this transition(s), are conceived and worked out in the wake of relativism, which of course implies that any construction of the present from the point of view of difference, has to be in terms of a non-coeval development across nations and societies. At its most subtle level, if also the negative, the question of homogeneity and order precludes any ultimate conclusion. One may take a host of other writers, who have written out of this or that liminal, hybrid position, impactedness of imperial control, or a specific ethnic enclosure: in almost every case a disaffection and disquieting scene that must find a central focus informing the postcolonial or diasporic literary constructs. The paper attempts to investigate such aspects of importance in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Keywords: Diaspora, post-coloniality, transition, diasporic literary constructs.

Projections or representations of Indian components of politics, culture, religion, democratic institutions and practices and material-moral corruptions, understandably form a crucial site of the writers' interventions. However, the construction of an organic idea of India appears to be abortive, let alone leading to a nationalist discourse given the linguistic and ethnic-religious heterogeneities. It is in this sense that Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) cuts through the fragmented, bordered and uneven trails and peripheries in contemporary India, ominously wavering between and exploring into meaningless shreds or simply disapproving the wider globalised world acknowledging little of one's innate commitment or the authenticity of pure origins. Spielman opines: "Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* shows us a radical postcolonial subjectivity in which flexibility, assimilation, and multiculturalism are preferable to maintaining difference" (74).

There is perhaps little to cheer in the present dispensation of disenchantment whose reasons provide a longish list; starting from the dark side of Independence itself and following the disastrous turn of partition which is itself an avoidable mistake. The period of contemporary history after partition and wars, destabilisation and economic slumps presents a litany of woes-emergency, terrorisation of states on linguistic bases, sectarian violence, casteism, regionalism, the question of minorities – these questions remain unanswered. One of the dangerous offshoots of this political chaos – the rise of extremism or extremist varieties of this or that 'Nationalism' that reappear with distressing frequency – is an important refrain in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

At the back of Desai's macabre tale of individuals in their solitary shells and self-formed ghettos, lies the uneasy sense of location of belonging, the precarious strength of a whole national idea that carries along with all the turbulence, corruption, violence, separatist sloganeering and the

disappointment with transitional history as pointed out in the beginning. Despite the glitter and bonhomie of homespun celebration of Indianness and of Indian diasporics in huge festivals, one may recall the remarks of the likes of Churchill who thought that India was not a nation but just an abstraction or John Kenneth Galbraith who more memorably described it as 'functioning anarchy'. This would seem to belie V S Naipaul's belated views in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* where he speaks approvingly of the emergence of 'a central will a central intellect, a national idea'. However, what Naipaul had felt on his first nervous arrival in India – the atavistic edginess of mood – is precisely what informs the menacing climate drawn up by Kiran Desai in the novel under scrutiny and on the other hand, there is a whole gallery of the post-raj mimic men living a closed, stagnating and failed life already on the edge of a funeral ending. This includes the Jemubahi Patel shut up in the decaying Kalimpong house perched up on the mountains, because in more than one sense, ex-High Court judge symbolises the end of imperial India and the colonial hangover. Jayaraman believes, "the portrayal of Jemubahi Patel in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* portrays his experiences in colonial, postcolonial and post national spaces of India in order to identify what makes India a diasporic space for him and how he needs to repeatedly strategise performance of his perceived identity to survive in these spaces" (54).

Certain parts of the narrative are compelling and are worth of a re-reading. Secondly, the deliberate and painstakingly fragmented structuration of the narrative keeps the reader alert with multiple significations. The small sub-sections of the narrative that connect to tie-up the narrative of the parallel lives of figures perhaps demand one's constant, sharp memory to re-link and map out the continuity of the past experience with the present going into extended forays of history, event, change and their fall-out. Desai's method in the narrative – is itself a little loaded with suggestiveness and with issues related to culture,

geography, and one's essentially exilic shape of reflecting the overall impacts of modernity – is to see half-completed, misfit, interrupted lives reduced to periphery and the position of the marginalised in a national post-freedom scenario in a number of ways. This aspect, echoing the underbelly of loss, deprivation and inauthenticity of the otherwise reductive globalised world, is surely what draws up and conflates several disconnected experiences in the novel; indeed a subject matter handled with sensitivity and technical aplomb. The major focus of the paper is in looking at the conflated but also discursive components of experience is on three figures and what they evoke: Jemubahi Patel; the relationship between Sai and Gyan; and finally Biju, who part visible and part invisible, represents the grueling, distraught, self-conscious existence in diasporas, hardly registered and much less attended to.

The key to the circular and spatially narration of the novel lies in the artful unraveling the personal, political and existential standards that have brought some of the key figures to their dismal present and 'encrypted journeys', routes and roots'– to use the theoretical vocabulary of Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contested Identities* – through Gujrat, New York and Britain. Each of these journeys and arrivals carries an unenviable burden of anxiety, erosion of self, fractured identity and the resultant vacuum, each told with a grim, brooding touch of words and signs. Desai's portrayals are suffused with projections that are simultaneously ridiculous, poignant and ironic, precluding any facile solutions to the dilemmas of the contemporary life and finally unabashedly critical and unsentimental.

The story opens in Kalimpong where the old Jemubahi Patel languishes in a decaying post-raj colonial style house. Having few precious possessions, he zealously guards them and defiantly sticks to his eccentricities like playing chess alone and consciously ignoring the outside change and commotion the

passage of time has brought except of course, Mutt, the dog, who is his sole source of joy. Otherwise the routine in which the new arrival Sai, the life-long companion of the judge, the cook and he himself indulge in lugubrious and uninspiring – reading *The National Geographic*, having high tea and making contraptions of snacks and food. Jemubahi's story, told in bits and parts, makes up a queer, eccentric, sporadic, spill-over of a life stretched over a long period. One in 1939, he had left home for Cambridge with a similar trunk that Sai had brought from Dehradun; he had left his town of Piphit, provincial, uninteresting and ridden with small events lives of petty shopkeepers. The journey had taken him to Bombay docks, then to Liverpool, and from there to Cambridge. The future judge had been given a typical ostentatious farewell with a hired military band; his frail frame and comic moustache, his Indian fear of English winter, his desperate clutching to *Oxford English Dictionary*. Such were the antecedents of this man, hurriedly married a month back. The text says, "whole he left the shores of India, never again would he know love for a human being that wasn't adulterated by another, contradicting emotion" (Desai 37). Jemubhai's difficult journey of cultural adjustment in England tested the worst of his fears and complexes but he developed habits of privation and a set of obsessive manners that he was to guard till the end of his life. The ex-judge's sojourn leading to his earning the ICS, though at the bottom rung of merit, reflects the colonial imperial fixities that Indians and other colonised people were to become accustomed to. Finally, Jemubahi looking back at the tawdry, poor, dirty, and meaningless Indian social patterns, develops a deep disdain for Indian heritage. The rest of his life's tale is nothing short of a growing schizophrenia and neuroticism directed at every aspect of life he was to encounter back home after carrying the label of ICS, including his pretty wife who becomes the most unfortunate victim of his oddities abominable, borrowed and unnatural aspects of his 'Brown Sahib's' psychology. Sufficient to say that beginning from his self-

loathing and skewed view of things, largely due to the decrepit Piphit environment and his forced embarkment for civil service, Jemubhai remained obsessed with fantastic adventure of his success – though precarious and pathetic. But this what propels him on a path of unending misery and loneliness in which others suffer and tolerate so much and which continues till the ‘present’ in the story as he cannot spend a day without calmpose and reliving his past, a futile relief, all said and done. There are numerous details of his punctuality in his past life as a touring official in civil service that are told by Desai in a vein of ironic distaste; it is clear that Jemubahi’s personality is portrayed in all its contradictions of culture, lineage, society, materialism, and the overriding Anglomania, only to be consigned to ridicule and deflation. His father Bomanbhai Patel’s ‘career’ is told in similar style and manner – prominently emphasizing his professional corruption, his sexual transitions while he follows double standards.

The worse comes, however, when after his return to India, Jemubhai, in his hatred of all things human, his growing abnormality and obsessive narcissism, finds his wife, the object of his ire. Ironically then, Jhemubahi’s scruffy, intolerant and grotesque behavior, his impatience with Indian squalor, smells, heat and poverty, even beauty, turns him more and more cruel and vindictive. In textual language it turned his ‘civilised stomach’. He resolves, strangely “to teach her (his wife) the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself” (170). Vimi, in her loneliness begins to fall out of life; speaking to nobody, nor allowed to do so, moves towards a slow death, because of her real and metaphorical banishment by Jemubhai’s inhuman and outrageous sense of a constructed superiority. Now in his life’s terminal years after his wife’s death, any regret is insufficient, even criminal and unreal. It is the arrival of Sai, after the death of his daughter, which he hopes, will erase some of his debts in the system of justice. Jemubhai’s connections and dis-connections therefore present a distorted picture of a man

elevated to a high position, travelling from colonial to postcolonial phase with all too well-known ingredients of mimicry and a conscious subterfuge, which prove disastrous in the end.

Living a reclusive, identity-less existence, the ex-judge can be appropriately called a cultural orphan; Sai, on the other hand, tied to her grandfather in a knot, is a real, biological one. She brings with an assortment of burdens, losses and little promise for future; she comes because she has nowhere to go, having lost his parents a few years ago. Sai is a symbol of post-modern generation, which while sensitive and sharp is intellectually and culturally directionless. Secondly, Sai also an offspring of a mixed-ethnic marriage between a Zoroastrian and a Hindu, further a result of mutual loneliness of late Mr. & Mrs. Mistry, brings a whiff of the new middle-class Indian freedom of choices and relationships. What further problematises Sai's troubled history is that her other was disowned by Jemubhai's family in Gujrat after she eloped with her future husband; hence Jemubhai paid for her schooling in Dehradun but never visited the convent; "In a country so full of relatives, Sai suffered a dearth" (28). But, in a way, Sai is relieved to say goodbye to the 'perversities' of the convent, the superficial modesty, the fear of humiliation, the obsessive system expecting faith in another religion. Ironically, however, Sai was to enter another depressing, dripping landscape at Kalimpong, besides confronting the residues of tyranny and hatred in the old ex-judge. Sai's late arrival triggers several other patterns in the story line; the gatherings of several people in Kalimpong who do not belong, who don the identity of outsiders given several traversals and passages that have made them ensconced in acquired homes left by colonisers, and the story will unfold, living dangerously at the new turn of incendiary regional strife.

The brief romantic interlude between Sai and Gyan, her tutor, is quite unconvincing, much less in giving a substance to

the developing narrative. In a way, the physical passion between two young people is perhaps thrown into the story, only to expose the wide hiatus between their class and cultural milieu. It is this which connects itself with other significant offshoot – the separatist uprising sponsored and spearheaded by Gorkha National Liberation Front. As shall be observed, the growing political discontent not only rattles the calm and modernity of Kalimpong, draws Gyan into it, both because he is a Nepali – and due to the gnawing realisation of his joblessness, poverty back home and the uselessness of his education in the opportunistic and corrupt governance in Bengal, and per se, India. For Sai, her getting interested in love is more a romantic diversion. For Gyan, love has come suddenly and without any platonic ideas; on the other hand, the fondness for Sai is paralleled every week by the growing agitation, sloganeering and calls for liberation from Indian slavery, turning into marches, echoing sons of the soil rhetoric under the impact of this communal local xenophobia, Gyan reels under the impact of personal interest, group loyalties and regional politics. Gyan oscillation between a mundane, unchanging existence, and on the other hand, ‘with the making of history’ in which he too could have a share, a voice, value, an affirmation. Cleverly, Desai shifts the focus to India’s post-freedom constitutional privileges for minorities, dalits, tribes, out of which the Nepalis now feel excluded systematically. The Nepalis’ reduction to the status of coolies, load bearers, servants and slaves -after their bravery in World Wars, and loyalty to India – is now seen by GNLF as a clever trick played on their history of sacrifices. The calls for separatist Gorkhaland, the rage, the militant rhetoric on Gyan’s weaker self, cowardice and shame – one of which he thinks is his present involvement with the leisure class, a challenge to his adulthood and masculinity – and Sai being a member of his westernised class, becomes Gyan’s object of criticism generated by his exasperation and sense of betrayal. Though the passionate longing for physical touch keeps coming back, the distance

created by attitudes and values gets the better of it. Finally, Sai's violent confrontation with Gyan after she walks into the slum areas of Kalimpong is for larger issues – father Booty's forced removal by the agitators and hypocritical role of Gyan in his complicity in being educated, his duplicable opposition to Sai and others in privileged positions, and sending robbers to Cho Oyu. The end of the affair gives the turn in Kalimpong's political climate. S

A sizeable part of the novel deals with Biju and his diasporic predicament in America, while the cook's longings and indulgence in his son's success is another part of his pathetic story. One has to obviously understand that Biju, one of the poor and the son of a man who had had a life of serving others, can have no great opportunity in America. Early in the novel, the cook tells his acquaintances about Biju, 'he works for the Americans'. The doting father tends to cushion Biju's possible travails as an illegal migrant in America, but that is perhaps his only hope in a life otherwise replete with sadness and limited to smallest expectations. Desai's portrait of contemporary diaspora – a multicultural and multifaceted experience is suffused with spark and blunt exposures of the grim, inconsequential reversals and ironies, such as restraints in New York that reflect hidden disparities for being perfectly first-world on top, perfectly third-world twenty two steps below. Backhome in the ex-judge's servant quarters, the cook's meager belongings display Biju's letters, Biju dressed to leave home, Biju as a child etc. – things which the police raid following the stealing of judge's rusty guns are cruelly spilled.

On the other side of the divide, Biju's humiliations and the racial banter directed at minority communities take on several forms; from mild satire, abusive language, to callings immigrants to 'Pakis', poor, colonialals and so forth. Interestingly, in America, as we are told, "every nationality confirmed its stereotype" (23). From one dissatisfying and

humiliating job to another, Biju changes restaurants and eating joints with euphemistic titles flaunting international, intercontinental cuisines. But innate, the grim struggle, the constant bullying and threats are a constant, day to day feature of Biju's and other's lives. As though it isn't enough, the tough immigration laws and procedures in the U.S. menace those like Biju and scores of others from small nations; though they manage to survive because of some fortunate cracks in the system. In this depressing scenario of somehow pulling on, Saeed and the likes of him have survived, come out successfully by being con-men and by cleverly ducking the authorities – perhaps one way of survival and managing a transient happiness. Saeed, for one, is projected as a man having overcome hatred and racial dilemmas, something that keeps haunting Biju while he learns about the reactions of the world towards Indians scattered all over the world. What is of importance is that Saeed and his cohorts have learnt to relish the game of success in America by charming, cajoling, cheating, for which he has been rewarded. Biju, small as he remains, is not destined for any such luck or even its dream. Paradoxically, back home in Kalimpong, the cook keeps receiving requests from others to ask Biju to help them get a job. Such is the poverty of poor Indians' imagination, and the naiveté of the cook, who is again and again made to feed on illusions of his son's "fire-suited and booted success" (80). The growing loneliness and inner vacuum in Biju is portrayed a number of times, but a few instances would suffice. Already his patience running out, Biju finds a few minutes from the grueling routine of washing and scrubbing, to walk around the more cramped outskirts of New York, feeling a wave of anger; Biju could not help but feel a flash of anger at his father for sending him alone to this country, but he knew he would not have forgiven his father for not trying to send him, either. This is the imprisonment and desperation that often dog those trapped in the webs of interminable debts, papers and borrowed assets they would never really be able to

get out. Indeed, Biju's feeling of being abandoned among foreigners is real enough; he is sucked into a collective fate of thousands who, if they wish, could hope for ever to get back without the coveted green card. For enough, he realises, it was horrible what happened to Indians abroad.

To overcome the continuous feeling of being trapped and maneuvered, Biju assuages his homesickness by taking a job in Gandhi café owned by another dubious success man in America, Harish Harry, who allows him to sleep in the rat-infested kitchen, but pays him below minimum wages. Despite having got a slice of home, this once 'luckiest boy in the world' becomes increasingly distraught and burdened by his expanded self-consciousness. Harry turns out to be a bigger cheat and despicably mean when he refuses to call a doctor when Biju slips and hurts himself, besides telling him that he has been 'living like a pig'. By now, Biju has got accustomed to taking such insults, besides being treated like a slave from the likes of Harish Harry, who ironically acted as benevolent patriarchs to the hapless thousands. Biju's entrapment gives way to his bigger fears and tragedies; he may never be able to see his father if he continued his life like this:

Biju walked back to the Gandhi Cafe, thinking he was emptying out. Year by year, his life wasn't amounting to anything at all; in a space that should have ridiculed family, friends, he was the only one displacing the air. And yet, another part of him had expanded; his self-consciousness, his self-pity – on the tediousness of it. Clumsy in America, a giant sized midget, a big fat sized helping of small.... shouldn't he return to a life where he might slice his own importance, to where he might relinquish the over-rated control over his own destiny and be subtracted from determination altogether (268).

Not knowing much about the giant, expanding net of globalisation, Biju is told, America is in the process of buying the world; he may go back to India, anywhere, he may still be working for them. His decision to go back, the Indian poverty,

overpopulation and corruption withstanding, has by now been sealed by his memory, nostalgia, love, filial ties and all other aspects. Biju recollects his past life. In America, on the other hand:

He had tried to keep on the right side of power, tried to be loyal; to so many things that he himself could not tell which one his selves was authentic, if any (265).

Desai's scrutiny of society's cruelties has an unabashedly critical and unsentimental edge. It is not just a case of launching diatribes against the West and elitism. India too is fraught with disparity – cultural, ethnic, political, economic, and linguistic – and the gathering storm of GNLf insurgency meanwhile has taken the worse turn; murder, violence and usurping properties and comforts of Uncle Booty, Lola and others. This is cleverly grafted into the narrative while Biju is already on his way to India. For the joudge and Sai, the greater loss is that of Mutt, who has been stolen by the poor of Kalimpong as a vengeance. This is perhaps the most poignant moment – the speechless, innocent animal cruelly sucked into the vortex of hate and violence. The judge is driven to the verge of collapse.

Human life was stinking, corrupt, and meanwhile there were beautiful creatures who lived with delicacy on the earth without doing anyone any harm. "We should be dying," the judge almost wept (299).

Biju's arrival, after a tiring detour on tricky, bumpy roads due to GNLf violence, awaits the worse. Robbed of all his money and belongings and the luggage of gifts from America, he is nearly shot. Left in his underpants to walk down to Chou Oyu in the menace of darkness and fear, Biju's return can be seen as the end of the romance with migration and its unsettlements, for the parallel goings on in India are unpalatable and evil too. The truth on both sides – home and the West – is too bitter and worrisome to be faced. The loss of pride that Biju now bemoans and regrets besides the loss of everything else, is perhaps

collective in *The Loss of Inheritance* – everyone, from the ex-judge, to Sai, to Gyan, to the Cook, to Biju, to Lola and others – have suffered and lost, according to their choices and acts directed at people, relations, love but above all, life.

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