
Unravelling Indian Diaspora through Literature

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ABSTRACT

*The objective of this paper is to reach an understanding of the effects of diaspora on the Indian English writings, with special reference to Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Mrs Sen's from Interpreter of Maladies*. The yearning of an individual to come back to one's homeland, the experiences which that individual gathers from the other places in the world and the effects on her psychology are highlighted in this paper. No matter how much we travel around the world, away from our homeland, we can never forget the very essence of our roots. The colonial influence on Indian English writing can be felt in almost every novel, especially when India was colonised by the British. Divided into several parts, this paper explores the various facets of Diaspora Literature, highlights the personal experiences of one of the authors, attempts to find traces of the inner battles of the characters as a binary to the outer world and finally aims at revealing the perspectives of these changes in the mindset and literature from a woman's point of view. Both the works are critically analysed along with references to other Indian English works as well.*

Keywords: colonialism, diaspora, globalisation, migration, multiculturalism, diversity

UNRAVELLING INDIAN DIASPORA THROUGH LITERATURE

“A journey once begun, has no end.”, a famous quote by Kiran Desai that can be

appropriately used to describe the blooming Indian English writings. Indian English Literature refers to the different works written in English by the Indian writers since the British period. English is a foreign language but since the British came to India, this language has played a vital role in many aspects and its impact is wide.

The past few years have witnessed an Indian language literary boom through the

remarkable contributions of several Indian English authors like Raja Rao, Anita Desai,

Khushwant Singh, R.K. Narayan, Amitav Ghosh et al and one of the prominent authors among them is Kiran Desai. Indian writers in English have not only ‘nativized’ the language in terms of stylistic highlights, but also acculturated English in terms of the ‘Indianized’ context. India has emerged as a major literary nation. Writers of the Indian diaspora have entered the elite sphere of international writers!

The word “diaspora” in its Greek form means dispersing or scattering and it originally referred to the scattering of seeds during the process of sowing. However, the modern connotation refers to the dispersion of people rather than seeds. In the early instance where diaspora means dispersion of human communities, the idea of diaspora is closely linked with the notion of exile or of being removed from one's homeland, as a form of punishment.



Diaspora refers to the communities of people who live far away from their homeland and this state of living away has a negative impact on them both mentally and socially. A sense of nostalgia emerges within the diasporic community and there is a strong desire to return, which is often called 'home consciousness'. Diasporic literature deals with these issues which has laid an impact on the readers. Indian Diasporic Literature in English is the second largest diasporic literature after the Chinese literature. The diasporic Indians suffer from a hybrid identity and its root cause is home-consciousness. It leads them to search for their roots and they often pen down their personal perspectives and experiences. They suffer from discrimination and loss of self in their new homeland and they try to retrieve those through writing.

Human dispersions and formations of diasporic communities are integral to the process of colonialism. This is the scattering of colonised subjects from their original lands to the colonial metropolis. However, many people were simply displaced during colonialism from one part of the colonial periphery to another like the dispersion of slaves and labourers from Africa and India to colonial plantations like the Caribbean islands. Amitav Ghosh, the Indian diasporic novelist describes in detail how these labourers were gathered from various parts of India and then shipped to distant lands to work as bonded labourers, in his 'Ibis Trilogy' ('Sea of Poppies', 'River of Smoke' and 'Flood of Fire'). The ancestors of the Nobel Prize winning author V.S. Naipaul migrated to Trinidad from northern India to work in sugar plantations and in various writings of Naipaul we get a vivid glimpse into the ways of life of diasporic community of Indians that started

taking shape in the Caribbean from nineteenth century.

Women were not absent from the colonialist activity and they always played the role of either a traveller or writer and diary-maker. However, they could not come into prominence like the male members. Nevertheless, after several struggles and movements, women writers were given importance. With the passage of time women diasporic writers are becoming popular and the readers can broaden their knowledge about this concept through their experiences shared in the novels. Prominent women authors like Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have excelled in interpreting the cross-cultural dilemma and the social and psychological impact on them and on the diasporic community at large. Women have made a great success in the field of writing and one of the reasons behind this is the liberal western world, especially America, as said by Divakaruni-- "Had I lived in India, I would have been expected to get married, raise children and pursue a career -- if at all -- that was not very demanding. Of course, women writers have succeeded in India but the struggle there is far bigger than the one here." Hence, we can note that culture and societal setup can still act as a hindrance for writers, especially women.

Among the diasporic writers, the works of Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri are quite prominent. They both have a personal experience of multiculturalism, globalisation and colonialism. Lahiri, a Pulitzer prize winning author was born to a Bengali couple in London and later her parents migrated to the United States of America due to work. NilanjanaSudeshnaLahiri, better known by her nickname Jhumpa Lahiri, is infamous for her

debut fiction, *The Interpreter of Maladies* and also *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth* and *The Lowland*. In her interviews, Lahiri admits that her knowledge of Bengali is only partial, and this sense of lack has informed her cultural identity. Although, she was brought up in America, Lahiri always kept a connection with her Bengali roots in Kolkata, where she primarily started writing because of her loneliness. From this incident it is much clear that she could only partially assimilate herself within America. She said that she doesn't have a language or culture of her own and cannot firmly identify any one place as her home. This sense of being without a particular culture as well as spatial home strongly informs all of Lahiri's works. By making oneself independent from the confines of one homeland and one native culture, the condition of being an exile makes an individual an heir to all cultures.

'Mrs Sen's', a short story from her collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies* is narrated by an American boy, Eliot who tells the readers about his days spent with his Bengali babysitter, Mrs Sen. This story revolves around the theme of multiculturalism, linguistic diversity, the psychological impact of the immigrants and also home-consciousness. Mrs Sen is the protagonist of this story and she is unable to break free from the mental cocoon of her original homeland and her subsequent emotional breakdown amidst a new socio-cultural and physical terrain. She felt that she was uprooted from her homeland and she also experienced isolation in this new land. Mrs Sen tries to recreate her homely atmosphere in America by repeatedly rereading the letters that she receives from her friends back in her homeland, Calcutta, by listening to the Indian classical music and the

voices of her relatives in a cassette player and also by cooking Bengali food. She has migrated to America only for her husband's job and it has proved to be very painful for her. Here, another facet of the story comes up and that is the position of women and their choices. Right at the beginning of this short story we can see how Mrs Sen has described her as a "Professor's wife" on an index card. Also, she is called as "Mrs Sen" throughout the novel and her name is not revealed. Hence, she apparently bears the identity of her husband. Female existentialism holds a primordial position in Lahiri's story because the central character struggle against the cultural difference to create an identity. Also, it is mentioned that she has come to the United States just for her husband's job, therefore we can say that Mrs Sen's migration is not her own decision which makes her feel like the fish out of water here. However, her difficulties are overlooked by her husband since he almost does nothing in order to make her feel comfortable in this new land.

The tension between the inner Bengali reality that Mrs Sen creates within her apartment and the outside reality of the American roads reach a breaking point when one day she decides to drive herself to a fish shop. From the commencement of the story we come to know that Mrs Sen did not know how to drive but still she wanted to break free. With young Eliot sitting by her side, they meet with a minor accident due to a wrong turn taken by her. This also proves that she can never completely adjust herself to her new surrounding and culture because perhaps she never wanted to due to her extreme passion for Calcutta. Therefore, Eliot's mother stops sending him to her house and the last thing that Eliot remembers of Mrs Sen is the sound of

crying coming out of the bedroom of her apartment within which she had locked herself in. Her emotional breakdown can be interpreted in several ways. It can be out of utter grief, worthlessness and loneliness. Perhaps, she felt that she would become lonely again since Eliot would not come to her house anymore and worthless at the same time because she could not take good care of Eliot that her writing on the index card claimed ---” I will care for your child in my home”. Eliot feels compassion for Mrs Sen, but his mother has the opposite feeling towards her. Here, a binary of feelings and perspectives can be figured out—both Eliot and her mother belong to the American society and culture but their reaction to the same individual is completely contrasting. The isolation of Eliot’s babysitter and the sound of her sobbing forms the dark underside of the diasporic condition which is otherwise marked by the luminosity of eclectic cultural possibilities.

Another infamous author of the Diasporic Literature is Kiran Desai, daughter of the renowned author, Anita Desai. She migrated from India to England and then to the United States. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss* are two of her notable works. Through her choosy and powerful rhetoric as well as her descriptive style, Desai stands out from the rest of the present Indian English authors. Her debut novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* gained immense popularity and received accolades from the renowned author, Salman Rushdie. Desai was awarded the 2006 Man Booker Prize for her second and most famous novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. Her works have a strong reflection of the impact of colonialism on various aspects of the society as well as personal life. Quest for freedom and

self-identity is another prominent theme in her works.

In one of her interviews, Kiran Desai had mentioned about her own experience as an immigrant and how she had tried to portray those experiences in her novels, especially in *The*

Inheritance of Loss. Kiran Desai is undoubtedly one of the able representatives of the 21st

century Indian English writing.

The Inheritance of Loss is the second novel written by Kiran Desai which won the 2006

Man Booker Prize. This novel had an impact on many readers as well as in the literary field. It has a touch of Desai’s personal experience as an immigrant and her opinion on this matter.

Globalisation, migration, colonialism and hybridisation play vital roles throughout the novel.

As the name of the novel suggests, a sense of loss can be felt here and in the characters of the

novel. It deals with the loss of human identity and human dignity, primarily through the

characters of Jemubhai Patel, his cook and his granddaughter, Sai. An influence of the character Nanda in Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* can be seen here.

The problems faced by the immigrants and their miserable lives are described here,

mainly through the character of the cook’s son, Biju and his associates. He is portrayed as a

person who leaves India and visits America in search of a satisfactory job, but he fails to get

his green card just like the other immigrants. She has successfully highlighted the frenzy and

craze of the Indians for America and its apparently cultured, civilized and blissful life. Biju finally returns to his homeland and here the concept of home-consciousness becomes prominent. However, his journey back to Kalimpong was not a blissful one as he was attacked by the GNLFF persons who snatched everything what he had brought from the United States. Hence, Biju becomes the connecting link to the thematic progression of the novel.

Desai has described a panoramic life, society and culture in a small hill-town of India

which is Kalimpong. She has given a detailed description of the place and its beauty and

serenity just like E.M. Forster's Chandrapore in A Passage to India. The novel focuses on the

impact of globalisation and its discontent among many. Several fundamental questions are

aroused pertaining to identity, nations and nationalities, marginalisation and the subaltern

speaking. Desai has chosen a picturesque backdrop to focus on some serious and important

themes.

The Sai-Gyan relationship is one of the major parts in the novel. However, their

relationship takes on a negative turn and Sai is shocked by Gyan's abnormal behaviour. A

sense of loss can be seen in the minor characters of the novel as well. Noni and Lola – the two sisters find themselves desperate because of the increasing insurgency and rootlessness.

The Inheritance of Loss highlights the plight of the colonised and that of the immigrants

who leave their native land in search of better prospects and a secured life. The contributions

of the colonised are often not taken into consideration since the power lies in the centre and

they are mere puppets in their hands. Multiculturalism can have a great impact on the people

and that has been very portrayed here. This novel can also be considered as a 'stream of

consciousness' novel since there is no continuous flow of thoughts in a proper order. There is

a constant shift between the past and the present and back to past again. The novelist throws light on the ideas of displacement, homelessness and finally nostalgia for one's homeland. Desai's prominence lies in the fact that the diasporic experience is linked not only with the transitional land across political border but also with a matter of what a critic calls, "the positionality of the subject." The novel's background has focused on the activities of GNLFF's demand for Gorkhland, the home of people belonging to other's states of India and specially from West Bengal and Bihar who are considered outsider, is being raided and ransacked by the police and GNLFF activities. The rhetoric, style and description of the novel proves it to be a great success!



Mrs Sen's and *The Inheritance of Loss* can be considered as the two appropriate representatives of the Diaspora Literature. The multiple flavours of diaspora and several other themes are equally prevalent in the works of Lahiri and Desai. A close reading of their works can create an impact on the readers mind and they are bound to think about it for a considerable amount of time, hence they are encouraging social reformation as well as individual reformation through the remarkable novels.

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