
IMMIGRANTS' LIFE IN THE NOVEL THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

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Abstract

Winner of the Booker prize 2006, Kiran Desai was born in India in 1971. Daughter of an eminent Indian English author Anita Desai, Kiran Desai has carved out a name for herself as a novelist by writing just two novels, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss*. The plot of *Inheritance of Loss* narrates the parallel stories of a Gujarati family in the foothills of the north-eastern Himalayas and of undocumented immigrants in the New York. She brilliantly charts the map of Indian diaspora where past and present live in uneasy juxtaposition. Set in mid-1980s' India, on the cusp of the GNLFF movement for an independent state, the novel brings together many contemporary issues like migration, exile, effects of colonialism, modernity, identity and better way of living etc. She writes not just about India but about Indian communities in the world. Kiran has described her sense of alienation from America even though it is her permanent home now. A member of the Indian diaspora, Kiran's love for India is unlimited. This paper discusses the immigrants' life in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Keywords:

Immigrant, Indian Diasporas, colonialism, migration, alienation.

Winner of the Booker Prize 2006, Kiran Desai was born in India in 1971. Daughter of an eminent Indian English author Anita Desai, she has carved out a name for herself as a novelist by writing just two novels, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss*. The *Inheritance of Loss* skillfully intertwines two strands of narrative. The judge lives in retirement in an isolated and crumbling house named *Cho Oyu*, with his cook, his orphaned granddaughter *Sai* and his pet dog named *Mutt*. The other story is of the cook's son *Biju*, who is an illegal immigrant in New York. The novel begins with a violent incident in February 1986. Young boys from the *Gorkha National Liberation Front* are looking for weapons. They take away the judge's rusted guns which date from his days in the *Indian Civil Service*. The two stories come together at the end.

The novel examines the different phases of Indian migration to the European countries. The first wave of migrants reaches there for higher studies. The arrival of the orphaned granddaughter upsets the balance of the judge's life. It opened the floodgates of memories, compelling him to think of his journeys, of his arrivals and departures, from places far in his past. *Jemubhai Patel* born into a *Patel* family had a childhood in which he showed an intelligence which seemed to indicate some hope for the future. The

family's ambitions grew and the father began to hope that the son would soon join the ICS. College on a scholarship, Cambridge crossing the seas took Jemubahi to the shores of a foreign land. He had left a month after his marriage. He had barely seen the face of his newlywed wife who was fourteen years old at the time of his departure.

Jemu travelled to Bombay with a trunk that contained, among other things, a sweater knit by his mother, a new Oxford English Dictionary, and a decorated coconut to be tossed into the sea waves to bring luck to his journey. But even before he left the shore of the country, the would-be judge felt ashamed of his parents, his culture and tradition. So ashamed did Jemu feel of his superstitious progenitor that he did not throw the coconut into the sea, and he refused to cry. The Anglophile future judge was stunned by his encounter with the West. It was a time when people of color were not particularly liked in Britain.

Jemubhai, who was refused to rent a room because of his dark complexion and Indian origin. He visited a score of homes in search of a room before he met an elderly and financially constrained lady, Mrs. Rice, who allowed him to stay in her house as a paying guest. But the stay in Cambridge proved to be disastrous. Jemubahi, who had registered at Fitzwilliam, a third grade college by British standards, with the help of an essay he had written for the entrance examination, immediately settled down in his rented room to study. Because it was the only skill he had carried from his native land. As a student, isolated in racist England, Jemu experienced a remarkable

change in his personality. His loneliness left an indelible mark on his appearance that unsettled others.

People began to shun him. Under the unbearable pressure of solitude his mind began to warp. He became a stranger to himself and even forgot how to laugh. For five long years he did not make a single friend and see anything of the English countryside. He took refuge in the library, dreading the ridicule of young girls who giggled at his curry smell and of peers who laughed at his accent.

Unable to cope with the conflict of identities, young Jemu was consumed by self-loathing. The prejudice and rejection he experienced in England froze his heart and fuelled in his soul a shame and dislike for his heritage, his culture and the color of his skin. Finally, he passed the ICS examination by securing the lowest qualifying marks and being placed at the bottom of a supplementary list of successful candidates.

On his return to India, Jemu found himself despising his relatives and his apparently unsophisticated Indian wife. So thoroughly Anglicised he had become that he could not like his beautiful wife. He accused his wife of stealing his pack of powder puff and punished her by raping her. His hatred towards Nimi grew day by day, and he repeated this gutter act again and again.

The bitterness, distrust, and hatred began to snowball until erupted in an amazing act of violence which led the judge to abandon Nimi for good. A few months after independence, when Jemu, like other

Indian members of the ICS, rose to a very high position, he received a second telegram informing him the death of his wife. Desai has demonstrated the callousness of Jemubhai's colonialist attitude throughout the novel.

The second wave of immigrants takes to Europe in quest of better way of living. The place which is set in New York, delineate Biju's adventures in the underbelly of the American dream. Incredibly powerful and full of sad details, these sections are tartly observed vignettes about the price of immigration and the pain of exile. The early days of Biju in America which he spent standing at the counter of a junk food shop named Gray's Papaya along with a row of men selling hot dogs, chilly dog, soft drinks and frankfurter to a mixed clientele.

Even though Biju, like the other salesmen, energetically waved hot dogs to the customers in the multicultural and cosmopolitan ambiance of the shop, he could not forget the inhibitions and taboos of his culture. He felt relieved when the manager of the shop, after receiving a memo from the immigration authority instructing him to do a green card check on his employees, asked them to disappear.

While Biju was trying desperately to stay afloat in the underground economy of New York city, bobbing from one ill-paid job to another, the cook dreamt of his son making it big. He was sure that since his son was cooking English food, he had a higher position than if he were cooking Indian. Described as a globalized novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* records the multi-cultural reverberations of the globalized world in the

new millennium. "Above, the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian. And, when a Paki was hired, it was Mexican, Indian, Pakistani" (21). Biju also came to learn from fellow workers about the fast expanding Indian diaspora and felt amazed by his ignorance.

Kiran Desai brilliantly charts the map of Indian diasporas in her novel but her focus shifts mainly between the sleepy Himalayan burg of Kalimpong with its colonial heritage and New York, the post-imperial centre of global politics and economics. The Indians and the Pakistanis carried their old war to America where every nationality confirmed its stereotype. But the owner of the establishment, a Frenchman was not amused by this Indo-Pak war of words. Angry at the noise made by the troublesome pair, he bluntly asked them to leave. Thus, the Indian and the Pakistani lost their jobs in their attempt to be true to their racial and communal stereotypes. He started his second year in the new world as a cook in an Italian restaurant, stirring vats of Bolognese in the kitchen and listening, over a speaker, an opera singer's song about love and murder, revenge and heartbreak.

The wife of the restaurant owner resented the cook's smell so much that her husband bought soap, shampoo and deodorant and told Biju to use them. He even intimately asked him questions about his country to raise his self-respect. As things did not change, and they found no difference in Biju, the owner asked him to quit. After temporary unemployment, Biju again found a job in a place named Freddy's Wok where he was required to deliver ordered food to

customers on a bicycle. The novel depicts, with unsparing irony, the meeting between Indians abroad of different classes and languages, rich and poor, north and south, top caste bottom caste. It exposes the despicable attitude of the wealthier group of immigrants to their poor compatriots and reveals how the class divide that exists into India continues overseas. Desai also explores the pain of the undocumented immigrant in America and delineates his profound sadness through the meanderings of Biju whose dream of a dignified and glamorous life turned into nightmare while he, lonely and forlorn, led a miserable existence in the precarious anonymity of New York.

Biju soon lost his job because the customers began to complain that the food ordered by them arrived cold, and he could not pedal his bicycle faster as the owner of Freddy's Wok wanted him to do. Desai narrates the process of migration from the impoverished third world countries to the immigrant packed basements in New York City.

He joined the Queen of Tarts bakery and met Saeed, the man he admired most in the United States of America. Saeed hailed from Zanzibar, a place full of Indians. He was overwhelmed by a desire to befriend Saeed because of his confidence and adaptability which prevented him from drowning in the sea of humanity that was New York but helped him bob in the tide. Not only fellow illegal and Zanzibaris but also white Americans wished to cling to him like a plank during a shipwreck. Meanwhile, the craze for a green card made Biju restless in New York. At such

moment he suffered from an ambivalent attitude towards America and gave vent to his contradictory feelings for his father. Before long, they lost their jobs as the Queen of Tarts bakery was closed by health inspectors on receiving complaints from its customers that they had found dead rats inside loaves. Saeed soon found employment in a shop named 'Banana Republic'. In a striking vignette of the Western attitude to the endless human flow from the poor third world countries, mostly former colonies, a couple Odessa and Baz who owned a restaurant Brigitte were Biju worked for a brief period.

He refused to give up his religion or discredit the principles of his ancestors because he believed. He saw the difference between a holy cow and an unholy cow and decided to live within a narrow purity. With his poor adaptability and inhibitions against eating the flesh of holy cow, he continued to search for an elusive home in the alien world. Even though, he knew that it might be difficult for him to survive and succeed in America with that somewhat attitude. He was reminded of Saeed who had also refused to eat a pig. Kiran Desai shows how immigrants like Biju and Saeed clung to their religious faiths and cultural taboos so that they might not fall through the filthy differences between nations. Biju gave up the job at Brigitte's and left the place as a new person.

His quest for a home in America, where he could live within narrow purity ultimately brought him to a Hindu establishment named Gandhi Café where beef was not cooked. Its owner Harish-

Harry, ran, along with his two brothers Gaurish Garry and Dhansukh-Danny. Biju joined Harish-Harry's restaurant because it was a Hindu establishment whose ambiance reminded him of home and where he would be able to preserve his traditional if conservative identity. But his expectations were not fulfilled because all that he found was an owner who was lost between identities. He stayed in America a little more than three years. His growing sense of frustration caused by the failure to find a satisfactory job and the continuing the green card problem made him ill so much so that he began to lose his temper.

It was at this stage he learnt about the political turmoil in Darjeeling through an Indian newsagent in New York, Mr. Iype and felt worried about his father. He was overwhelmed by the sheer emptiness of his life in America which had not added up to anything. With the realization of the purposelessness of his life, the thought of returning home struck his mind. He now wanted to go back to his native place where he might experience the greatest luxury of noticing himself at all. Biju was advised by his well-wishers not to go back. Mr. Kakkar, the proprietor of Shangri-la Travel, told him that he would commit a big mistake if he went back. Despite his warning, Mr. Kakkar sold him a ticket to India on Gulf Air and Biju went out on a shopping spree. He returned to India in the Gulf Air plane that looked like a failing bus labouring through the sky. After reaching Siliguri, he found no bus to Kalimpong.

The situation in the hills had deteriorated. Things were very tense and no vehicle could

go to Kalimpong because the roads were completely closed. After four days waiting Biju found a GNLFF jeep leaving for Kalimpong. They rented extra seats for extraordinary amounts. At first, they refused to rent any seat to Biju. But when he showed them his wallet, which opened to American dollars, they agreed. But before reach Kalimpong, the GNLFF men take a detour and bring the jeep to a small village where Biju is robbed everything he brought from America. Left almost naked, he is chased by a group of dogs set on him by the robbers so that he starts running through the dark forest without his baggage, without his savings, worst of all without his pride.

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