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HOME, HOMELAND AND DIASPORA: KIRAN DESAI'S THEME

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Abstract:

Actually, for the young and talented people, migration proves to be a Garden of Eden. Developed countries like U.K and U.S.A. invite the scholars to contribute their genius in the progress of their country and pay them a huge money and comfort. But sometimes migration leads to frustration, homelessness, and loss of identity. Kiran Desai's diasporic experience is also bitter because more than twenty years time, she has spent in West; however, she still holds on her Indian passport, struggling to get American citizenship. Desai is an Indian citizen but a permanent resident of America. Increasingly she, too, is unsure that she would really want to surrender her Indian citizenship.

Keywords:

Disarmament, Multiculturalism, Modernity, Immigrants, Emigrants, Insurgency, Racial-discrimination, Globalization

Diaspora Literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs. It is a narrative of harsh journeys undertaken on account of economic compulsions. In almost all the

cases, diaspora keeps a sense of displacement. 'Diaspora' as an expression and experience has extended its terms, conditions and effects beyond imagination since the Post Second World War period. Now, it stands for all migrations, settlements, journeys and movements voluntarily or forcibly when people from different communities shift from their homelands into new regions, across the world, both from the Third to the First World and vice-versa. However, the experience of migration and diaspora also produces various problems displacement, un-belongingness, discrimination, banishment, identity crisis, cultural clashes, yearning for home and homeland etc.

There is a though pathetic but distinct feature of diaspora people is that in physical and material space, they live in a particular country but in imagination look across time and space to another and as Robert Cohen remarks: "... acknowledge that the old country-a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore- always have some claim on their loyalty and emotions."¹ Thus migrants to Mr. Rushdie "straddle two cultures . . . fall

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between two stools.”² Swaraj Raj has aptly marked the tensions and ambivalences of diasporic consciousness:

*“... curious accretion of homing desire and a state of homelessness; a state of belonging and the awareness of not being able to belong; the contradictory pulls of the nostalgic longing for the home behind and the desire to feel at home in the new dwelling; and the discrepant centrifugal pull of staying at the margins of the centre to maintain cultural difference and the centripetal seductions of assimilations in the adopted culture.”*³

It is always seen in diasporic imagination that home remains almost a mythic place of origin and of radical lack. And as Avatar Brah states: “The concept of diaspora places the discourse of home and dispersion in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origin.”⁴ These above-mentioned issues and tensions have been explored and challenged in most of diasporic discourses from multiple approaches. Besides it “Home has become such a scattered, damaged, precarious concept in our present travails,” says Rushdie.⁵ (East West 1994)

Actually, for the young and talented people, migration proves to be a Garden of Eden. Developed countries like U.K and U.S.A. invite the scholars to contribute their

genius in the progress of their country and pay them a huge money and comfort. But sometimes migration leads to frustration, homelessness, and loss of identity. Kiran Desai’s diasporic experience is also bitter because more than twenty years time, she has spent in West; however she still holds on her Indian passport, struggling to get American citizenship. Desai is an Indian citizen but a permanent resident of America. Increasingly she, too, is unsure that she would really want to surrender her Indian citizenship. Kiran Desai reacted sharply to this question in an interview:

*I feel less like doing it every year because I realise that I see everything through the lens of being Indian. It’s not something that has gone away – it’s something that has become strong. As I’ve got older, I have realised that I can’t really write without that perspective”.*⁶
(wiki/Kiran Desai)

While Kiran Desai’s *Hullabaloo* in the *Guava Orchard* is a comic fable; *The Inheritance of Loss* has a much larger canvas and contains Desai’s insightful and frequent humorous commentary on multiculturalism, cross-cultural interactions, globalization and immigrant experience. The novel takes on such huge subjects as cultural conflicts, post colonialism, illuminating the pain of exile, generation gaps, religions and races with equal felicity and ease. In the words

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of Tapan K. Ghosh: “While *Hullabaloo* is a brassy and somewhat whimsical novel; *The Inheritance of Loss* is a dark and ambitious glimpse at globalizations and its discontent.”⁷

As in today’s world, it is well known that all societies are culturally diverse in nature and everyone lives within a global village. Culture, which includes a particular social group’s beliefs and behaviours, has been defined in many ways. The classic definition most useful in this discussion is one derived from anthropology: Culture is “a way of life of a group of people...the stereotyped patterns of learning behavior, which is handed down from one generation to the next through means of language and imitation.”⁸ Likewise, a modern definition is that culture is “the shared ways in which groups of people understand and interpret the world.”⁹

The increase in international business, triggered by more efficient transportation and advanced communication technology, has led to an increased need for effective intercultural communication, often referred to as global communication. Effective intercultural communication supports in eliminating communication problems like language barriers from international business which permits workers from different nations to work together as a group. The basic need for a successful intercultural communication can be established in all

aspects of a business, from internal communication to marketing and advertising. Moreover, poor translations in marketing and advertising can lead to poor sales globally.

Hence, the understanding of diverse cultures is imperative in order to survive in the present world. The contemporary study of intercultural communication in literary discourse tries to focus the significance of the study of Indian Diasporic literary texts by analyzing intercultural communication as represented in *Hullabaloo* in the *Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai. Desai is an Indian Diasporic novelist who introduces words from the Indian languages in particular contexts, and predicates culture specific differences to convey her meaning to the readers.

Hullabaloo in the *Guava Orchard* is the story of the Chawla family of Shahkot including Mr. Chawla, his mother Ammaji, his wife Kulfi, their son Sampath (who is the protagonist) and daughter, Pinky. The whole family is unconventional. For example, Kulfi has an undefined desire which she fulfils by consuming large quantities of food and roaming aimlessly. Mr. Chawla, who instead of caring for his son, thinks only of his status. He exploits the situation of Sampath’s fleeing to the guava orchard and turns it into a religious act. It is an appealing book about what happens in an Indian small town when an

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ordinary post office clerk does the unexpected, and how the town reacts - in equally unexpected ways. The interpretation makes living in India, an entertaining event. For the reader who is unfamiliar with India, Desai provides a context to facilitate understanding. Her characters are comprehensive and well thought out; their flaws and their peculiarities are portrayed vividly and with clarity. In particular, characters such as Kulfi and her son, Sampath Chawla, provide an excellent medium through which to see the world of Shahkot.

Kiran Desai's Booker Prize winning novel (2006) 'The Inheritance of Loss' is replete with problems of self-identities. The novel achieves the best quality and content for being a diasporic novel. Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss' discusses the issues of home, homeland, diaspora and belongingness. She makes the novel an Indian treating subject concerning Indian life in India as well as in abroad. The novel is set for the most part in the town of Kalimpong in the North Eastern India, close to the Nepal border. Desai problematizes the issue of the Gorkhas movement for their homeland through the speech made by the GNLFF leaders which projects them as brave and loyal soldiers. Politically, India has been hit by insurgency for a long time. It has always imposed a big threat to law and order. 'The Inheritance of Loss' is set in the backdrop of insurgency rising in the North-

East areas i.e. GNLFF movement which is continuously disrupting the normal life, tourism, business and peace. Out of fifty-three chapters are remarkably devoted to describe insurgency to highlight the worst picture of the particular region.

Desai has portrayed the state of homelessness, displacement, exile, marginalization, and lack of belongingness being experienced by the illegal and legal diaspora communities and individuals in America as well as by the people from other states, religious and communities from India residing in Kalimpong. The novel begins with the town of Kalimpong. Here resides an old retired judge Jemubhai Patel, with his cook, a lush-lashed maiden and the long-tailed dog named, Mutt. Soon his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, joins the family. Sai's arrival sets the judge down the vista of years and he remembers making his journey to England as a young lad leaving his hometown of Pilphit, Gujarat. Originally, Jemu (Jemubhai Patel) goes to Cambridge for higher studies, completes I.C.S. and becomes a judge. He is so much impressed and indulged in Western culture that he loses his original identity i.e. an Indian one. Desai writes: "The judge could leave here, in this shell, this skull, with the solace of being a foreigner in his own country, for this time he would not learn the language."¹⁰

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The judge, despite his lost glorious days, continues to retain his habits and good taste and struggles to maintain his dignity. He likes cheese, straw and cake with his tea. He wants perfection in everything. Always wishing for his neat and clean clothes and even the underwear should be ironed by the cook, was among his habitual activities. His manners are thus described by the author:

His faced seemed distanced by what looked like white powder over dark skin- or was it just the vapour? And from him came a faint antibiotic whiff of cologne, a little too far from perfume, a little too close to a preserving liquid. There was more than a hint of reptile in the slope of his face, the wide hairless forehead, the introverted nose, the introverted chin, his lack of movement, his lack of lips, his fixed gaze.¹¹

His experiences in England and the discriminations he faced on account of his colour, his religion, and his language which made him other created an identity crisis for him resulting into a complete distortion in his personality. The judge seems to have had his heart frozen long ago when he studied at Cambridge University and learnt to despise his fellow Indians. His mental condition is very concretely described by the novelist at several places in the novel. Krishna Singh, a noted critic, writes:

The novel is essentially a study of losses –loss of culture, loss of identity, loss of human relations, loss of emotional binding, loss of human values, loss of rationality, loss of peace and harmony, loss of human beings' faith in each other etc.¹²

And so we experience with the different characters of the novel. The anger and frustration of Jemu is vented on his innocent young wife. Being an unloved, uncared and a hated wife, she leads a desultory life until the judge sends her back to her parent's home. She gives birth to a daughter after their separation that the judge hardly ever knew. After retirement, Jemu being a recluse settles himself in Kalimpong. As Jemu goes in the flood of remembrance he realizes his faults as well as achievements.

He remembers how he had roughly shown his disrespect to his parents on the first day of his journey to Cambridge. The incident when his father asked him to throw the coconut and he refused to do so and from that moment, his love for his parents was turned into pity and shame. The other incident which heightened the anger against his parents, when he founds his cabin-mates

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twitching his nose at the smell of the bundle of puris, onion, green chillies etc. packed for his lunch by his mother, who had prepared the items, getting up early in the morning, he felt rather furious at the thought that she had humiliated him in front of his cabin-mates.

*The cabin-mate's nose twitched at Jemu's lump of pickle wrapped in a bundle of puris; onions, green chillies and salt in a twist of newspaper; a banana that in the course of the journey had been slain by heat. No fruit dies so vile and offensive a death as the banana, but it had been packed just in case. In case of What? Jemu shouted silently to his mother.*¹³

Jemubhai Patel is the symbol of sadness of the debris of Indian's colonial history. The novel traces the process of the judge's displacement from centres of power to its ignominious periphery in a well-constructed combination of stories from his past and the present experiences in India as well in England.

From the very outset novel seems to be impressed with Wordsworthian view of nature. The presentation of the surroundings and nature around the Kalimpong is really remarkable. The novel opens with a poetic description of a quiet and cool landscape dominated by the irresistible beauty of Kenchenjunga in the Northern- Eastern Himalayas:

*All day, the colours had been those of dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains possessed of ocean shadows and depths. Briefly visible above the vapour, Kanchenjunga was a far peak whittled out of ice, gathering the last of the light, a plume of snow blown high by the storms at its summit.*¹⁴

And this stillness extends to the lives of the people occupying Cho Oyu, namely Jemubhai the retired judge, his daughter Sai and their cook:

*They sipped and ate, all the existence passed over by nonexistence, the gate leading nowhere, and they watched the tea spill copious ribbon curls of vapour, watched their breath join the mist slowly twisting and turning, twisting and turning.*¹⁵

Sai, the granddaughter of Jemu, leads and represents a new generation and a new dawn even in these conflicting identities. She stands for the revival of a failed scientific endeavour of his father and mother, a harbinger of a new identity that considers the demands of her grandfather and her math tutor, a Nepali, whom she loves, she is a tender teenaged loving girl, who understands her surroundings, and is capable of suffering and facing the atrocities of life and its demands too. She represents a new beginning which grows

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from the scrapes of destruction and injustice of an old age that will never come and heal the wounds of aching souls. She is a lover of the lost past glory, a lover of the extinct giant squid, which she explores in an old national geographic, and an admirer of the immense and awful manifestations of nature which always cast a spell on her with a shiver. She puts it nicely:

She tried to smile, but her tail kept folding under and her eyes were those of a soldier in war, finished with caring for silly myths of courage. Her ears strained beyond the horizon, anticipating what didn't fail to arrive, yet another wave of bombardment, the sound of civilization crumbling- she had never known it was so big- cities and monuments fell- and she fled again.¹⁶

Highlighting the introduction of characters, we have again a vital character i.e. the judge's cook named PannaLal. The cook in the novel is also a typical product of feudalism and colonialism. He had earlier migrated from his native place in U.P. after losing five mango trees to his brother in a court case and managed to get a job with the judge and remained with him in the old house Cho Oyu. He is the person who has experienced all the bitter and biting: ups and downs of the judge's family. In other words, we may say that he has also shared silently, the tortures of the judge. Reena Sanasam has correctly written:

The old cook, a witness to the crumbling glory of the judge, trembles from joint pains and aching bones, as he struggles to serve the judge and his family notwithstanding his old age. He has no other wish but to see his son once before he died but the worst part is that he cannot even remember where he works as he keeps changing jobs from Don Pollo to Hot Tomato or Ali Baba's fried chicken still he dreams of seeing him, no matter how reasonable he is in hoping so."¹⁷

His son had migrated to the USA in the hope of a better life as the before migration the migrants' hope. The cook was tempted by the prospect of a legal employment in the USA and collected some fake recommendations for Biju. He is finally selected and the cook's Joy crosses the limit. For the cook this achievement brings somehow equality in status with Mr.Sen whose daughter was also employed and stayed in America. To everyone he takes of America and American standard of living. He proudly says:

My son works in New York," the cook boasted to everyone he met. "He is the manager of a restaurant business. "New York. Very big city," he explained. "The cars and buildings are nothing like here. In that country, there is enough food for everybody."¹⁸

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But the innocent cook is unaware of the truth that after the expiry of visa, one could neither live honorably as immigrants nor relinquish his aspiration back to their native country. Biju's living in America was purely illegal because of his expiring of visa. Embroiled in this unfortunate situation, he moved from one restaurant to another- French, Mexican, Italian, and Indian where many third world workers like him had to work under indignities that reminded him of the plight of the colonized way back in the past. Dealing with the fact Desai correctly writes:

Thus, if the restaurant (where Biju worked) was French- speaking on the top floor, replete with its first world aura it was perfectly third- world on its ground- floor- just twenty- two steps lower with its array of cooks assembled from (illegal) immigrants from America from the world over."¹⁹

Biju struggles hard to get visa from one to another counters. The more he tries to get it the more he frustrates because of the long queues and unfamiliar questions asked by the officers. He experiences it as:

Outside, a crowd of shabby people had been camping; it appeared, for days on end. Whole families that had travelled from distant villages, eating food packed and brought with them; some individuals with no shoes, some with cracked plastic ones; all smelling already of the ancient sweat of

a never-ending journey. Once you got inside, it was air conditioned and you could wait in rows of orange bucket chairs that shook if anyone along the length began to bob their keens up and down?"²⁰

The novelist therefore, depicts a life of illusion and reality in the life of the cook and his son, Biju. After chasing and changing jobs after jobs Biju is finally frustrated, and helplessly ponders over the idea of returning home as the immigrants use to do. Biju's returning home is so pathetic and horrific that anyone reading about it would prefer to starve in his own country than venture into greener pastures. Biju and many other immigrants may not agree but one of the characters in the novel perhaps correctly describes the act of immigration as an act of cowardice:

"He knew what his father thought: that immigration, so often presented as a heroic act, could just as easily be the opposite; that it was cowardice that led many to America; fear marked the journey, not bravery; a cockroach desire to scuttle to where you never saw poverty, not really, never had to suffer a tug to your conscience; where you never heard the demands of servants, beggars, bankrupt relatives, where your generosity would never be openly claimed; where by merely looking after your own wife-child-dog-yard you could feel virtuous. Experience the relief of being an unknown transplant to the

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locals and hide the perspective granted by journey.”²¹

Kiran Desai not only highlights the theme of alienation, estrangement and humiliation caused by the experiences of migration and exposes inhuman and discriminatory attitude of the Americans towards the weaker section of immigrants, but also explores the hollowness of globalisation which has created a world-wide digital divide. We have enough evidence to judge that the poor people of the third world countries who dream of a better future and are lured by the affluence of the American society, have no place in the world of their dream. They are bound and compelled to suffer in their homeland and in the exile, they opt for only increases their suffering. Though, apparently, they are not banished and they accept the exile condition voluntarily, it is a great mislead for them.

The myth that the UK and the USA are the dollar producing lands and whoever lands there is financially secure is at the root of their faulty decision. The facts become clearer when we see Biju’s encounter with other emigrants in America. Though a small number of the emigrants achieve success in earning a sufficient amount, the majority of immigrants are humiliated and compelled to live a disgraceful life. Like Harish- Harry knows how to manage the staffs and so he earns a

lot of money. Harish- Harry made their dollars through exploiting the new comers who thought Harish- Harryas:

“Towards his staff Harish- Harry was avuncular, jocular, but he could suddenly become angry and disciplinary. Shuddap, keep shut,” he’d say, and he wasn’t above smacking their heads. But when an American patron walked through the door, his manner changed instantly and drastically into another thing and a panic seemed to overcome him.”²²

Bharti Mukherjee, a noted writer and critic rightly writes:

Moreover, at a much deeper level, the novel is the tragedy of all emigrants to western countries; they are ‘lost souls, put upon and pathetic.’ And that they can be seen...surrendering little bits of self every year, clutching the souvenirs of ever-retreating past you’ll never belong, anywhere.”²³

As we have earlier experienced too that home, homeland, and homelessness are the recurring theme of this novel. And about every character is bound to suffer with these problems whether it is the judge, the cook, Biju or Father Booty. Even Biju’s father has been living as an emigrant in India though he is an Indian. He belongs to Uttar Pradesh but has lived half of his

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life in Kalimpong. This feeling of alienation sometimes dawns upon him:

This place, this market where he had bargained contentedly over potatoes, and insulated, yes insulted, the fruit wallah with happy impunity, enjoyed the rude words about decayed produce that flew from his lips; this place where he had with utter safety genuinely lost his temper with the deaf tailors, the inept plumber, the tardy baker with the cream horns; this place where he had resided secure in the knowledge that this was basically a civilized place where there was room for them all; where he had exited in what seemed a sweetness of crabbiness-was showing him now that he had been wrong he wasn't wanted in Kalimpong and he didn't belong."²⁴

Regarding Biju's and Father Booty's migration, Aparajita De again writes:

"Biju's migration and Father Botty's migration demand some elaboration. If Biju migrated for employment purposes, then Father Booty had entirely different reason for doing so. He is a Jesuit Priest who has blended with the culture and community of Kalimpong. Biju does not find himself at home in the United States- amidst immigrants for all corners of the world. It is this

feeling of un-belonging that makes him consider return. However, it is this moment of return that disregards their individual contexts and integrates their conditions."²⁵

Besides dealing with the issue of root, migration and exile, Kiran Desai has treated very deeply and intensely in the novel the theme of insurgency in the shape of the Gorkhaland movement. Actually, the genesis of GNLF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) is narrated by a man clambered upon the bench:

"In 1947, brothers and sisters, the British left granting India her freedom, granting the Muslims Pakistan, granting special provisions for the scheduled castes and tribes, leaving everything taken care of, brothers and sisters— "Except us. EXPECT US. The Nepalis of India. At that time, in April of 1947, the Communist Party of India a Gorkhasthan, but the request was ignored.... We are laborers on the tea plantation, coolies dragging heavy loads, soldiers. And are we allowed to become doctors and government workers, owners of the tea plantations? No! We are kept at the level of servants. We fought on the behalf of the British for two hundred years. We fought in World War One. We went to East Africa, to Egypt, to the Persian Gulf. We were moved from here to there as it suited them. We fought in World War Two. In Europe, Syria, Persia, Malaya, and Burma.

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Where would they be without the courage of our people? We are still fighting for them. When the regiments were divided at independence, some to go to England, some to stay, those of us who remained here fought in the same way for India. We are soldiers, loyal, brave. India or England, they never had caused to doubt our loyalty. In the wars with Pakistan we fought our former comrades on the other side of the border. How our spirit cried. But we are Gorkhas. We are soldiers. Our character has never been in doubt. And have we been rewarded?? Have we been given compensation?? Are we given respect??

“No! They spit on us.”²⁶

From the above written long quotation it can be seen easily the revolt and anger of the Gorkhas, particularly the last line, “No! They spit on us.” The motto of the movement is- Gorkhland for Gorkhas.

Gyan’s involvement in the separatist movement is the reflection of young Indian’s deep rooted frustration, for which Gyan sacrifices the true love of Sai. As it is written in an article that:

“Poverty is the root cause of any movement and migration. Gyan’s frustration and involvement in GNLFF movement caused by the extreme class division he experiences between the poor and the rich brings drastic changes in his attitude and love.”²⁷

The above quotation may be certified with the lines in ‘The Inheritance of Loss’ by Desai:

“It maddened him that people lived here in this enormous house and property, talking hot baths, sleeping alone in spacious rooms, and he suddenly remembered the cutlets and boiled peas dinner with Sai and the judge, the judge’s “Common sense seems to have evaded you, young man.”²⁸

With the all above issues Kiran Desai has brilliantly portrayed the culture and civilization of India and the changes after independence. As Krishna Singh points out:

“The novel is a brilliant study of Indian culture– the culture in its transitional phase changes is brought out by “Colonial neurosis”, craze of the Western values, manners, language and glamorous life style; modernization, consumerism, globalization and deep rooted reaction to indigenous values which fail to sustain life.”²⁹

To sum up, it can be said that the novel portrays the whole panorama of the Indian society with its poverty-stricken multitude, the evils of illiteracy, unemployment, xenophobia, cultural conflicts, traditional values, outdated customs and practices, linguistic chauvinism, conflicts of faith and cast etc.

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The novel contests the concepts of the fixity of home and identity to focus on its fluid borders. However, it shows that among these fluidities, home is everywhere and nowhere. In the phase of globalization, as the world becomes an increasingly smaller place, human beings experience a collective condition. The human beings are everyone and someone. To conclude the theme of home, homeland and diaspora nothing can be more appropriate than the quotation of Dr. B.K. Das: "The choice for twenty first century man is: either he has to take the whole world as his home or else he will become a homeless wanderer."³⁰

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