

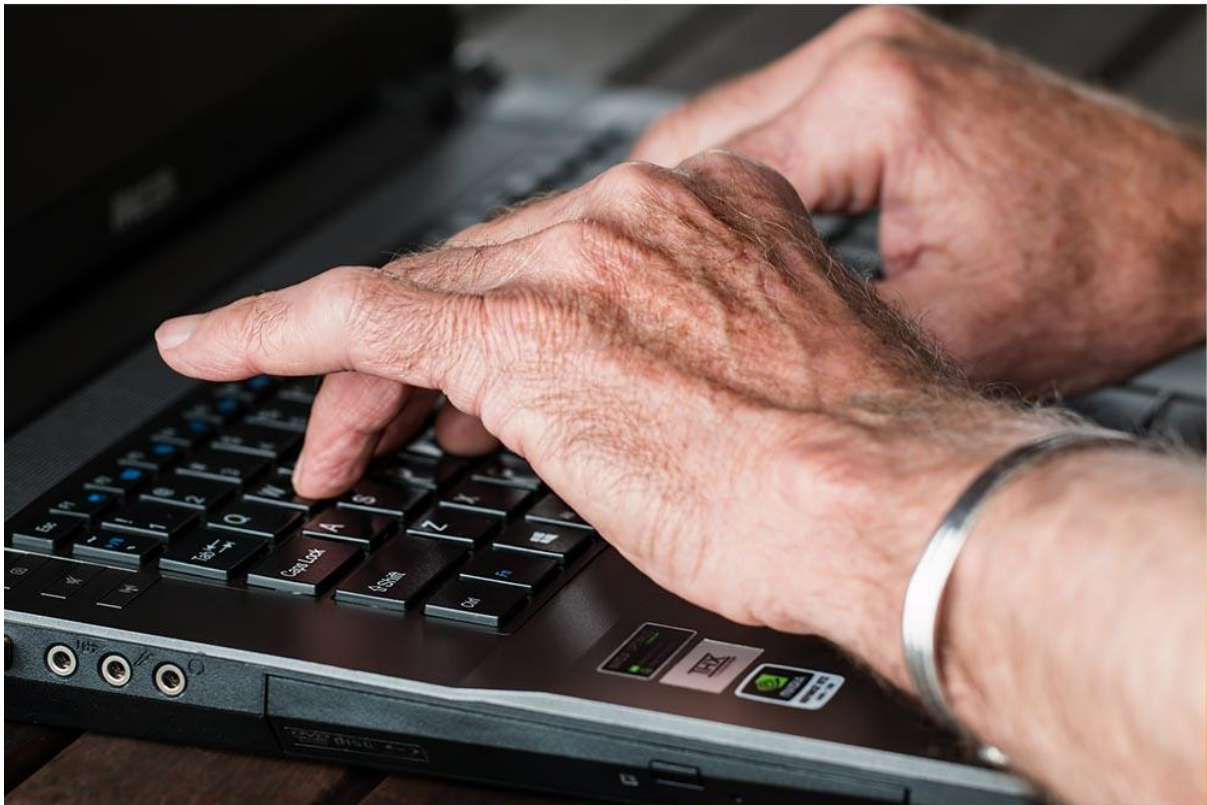
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A Study of Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss' as A Novel of Exile and Isolation

Abstract

Diaspora refers to mass dispersions of a population from its indigenous territories. There are different kinds of Diaspora based on its causes such as imperialism, trade, labour migration etc. The literature of Diaspora deals with the various issues relating to migration especially the identity crisis, alienation, displacement and the process of assimilation undergone by the migrant. It also deals with the cultural clash. This paper aims to analyze the diasporic elements in the novel 'The Inheritance of Loss' by Kiran Desai. As a second generation diasporic writer, Kiran Desai skillfully portrays the pain of exile and isolation. The post colonial ambiguities are well represented in this novel. This study focuses on the major characters Jemubai and Biju and how their 'blinding desire for a better life' led to their ultimate isolation. It explores the factors that led to their migration; their encounter with the

foreign culture and their struggles to survive in an alien land. It examines the variation in responses of the major characters to their Diaspora. Another concern of the study is the encounter of Eastern and Western culture that brings complications in the life of characters like Sai and Gyan. The identity crisis which arises as a result of this cultural clash is also focused in the study.

Keywords-Diaspora, Exile, Isolation, Alienation, Identity Crisis, Cultural Conflict

I. Introduction

The major themes of diasporic writers are isolation, alienation, cultural conflict, identity crisis and class struggle. Kiran Desai belongs to the second generation of diasporic writers. In her novel 'The Inheritance of Loss', she portrayed the various issues relating to diaspora. The novel was set in New York and Kalimpong. The story moves between the pathetic life of illegal immigrants in New York and the growing unrest in Kalimpong.

The novel skillfully portrays the struggles of various characters to exist in an alien world. The existential crisis they faced as a result of their encounter with the western culture is very well depicted in the novel. They were torn apart by the east-west cultural conflict. As a result of this, they could not be a part of neither of them. They were forced to create their own isolated world. Whenever someone tried to enter into this world, complications arose. The stagnation in the life of major characters arises as a result of their encounter with the western culture. Though they struggle to overcome this stagnation, they made little progress.

II. Jemubhai and Biju as Metaphors of Exile and Isolation

“From the beginnings of literature, poets and writers have based their narratives on crossing borders, on wandering, on exile, on encounters beyond the familiar. The stranger is an archetype in epic poetry, in novels. The tension between alienation and assimilation has always been a basic theme” [3].

Here in ‘The Inheritance of Loss’ through the characters of Jemubhai and Biju, Kiran Desai portrayed the exile, isolation, alienation and the process of assimilation undergone by the immigrants. But they did not respond to their exile and isolation in the same manner. A detailed analysis of their characters revealed the similarities and contradictions in their diaspora.

“Jemu watched his father disappear. He didn't throw the coconut and he didn't cry. Never again would he know love for another human being that wasn't adulterated by another, contradictory emotion.” [1]. These lines aptly explained the diaspora of Jemubhai. His journey was the end of a phase of his life that he really feels at home. Jemubhai denounced the Indian traditions and practices while his journey to England. For example, when he was asked to throw away the coconut which was given by his mother for his safe journey, he refused to do so. His mother had packed some bananas for him to eat during the journey. As it was crushed and produced some foul smell, he even hated his mother for this. Even though he tried hard to assimilate the British culture, he was neglected by the British people. Even his teachers mocked him for his Gujarati slang. This kind of negligence forced him to withdraw to his own isolated world. His lonely life made him unable to accept or love anyone.

“...exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge which gives rise to profound uncertainties that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of

reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India's of the mind." [5].

These words are well explained the situation of Jemubhai. After his exile, when he returned to India, never feels at home. For him, India is not at all his homeland that he longed for. It could not provide him any comforts. He could not accept his family's way of life. His bitter experience made him so hard that he could not love even his wife. He treated her very badly. He could not accept her traditional way of life. His Diaspora created an identity crisis in him. He was not accepted by the Westerners as one among them and at the same time, he could not identify himself with his native people. That's why he decided to spend his rest of life in Cho Oyu, where he created his own imaginary homeland.

"I am from there. I am from here.

I am not there and I am not here.

I have two names, which meet and part,
and I have two languages.

I forget which of them I dream in" [4].

This is the kind of existence that Jemubhai had which led to his alienation and isolation.

The character of Biju represents thousands of immigrants who were forced to plant their lives in a new soil in the prospect of a better life. He migrated to America with lots of hopes and dreams. When he obtained a visiting visa to America, one of the applicants commented that he was the luckiest boy in the whole world. When he reached America, he had to wander restaurant after restaurant to obtain a job. As an illegal immigrant, he did not get any facilities there. He had to live in a basement in very poor circumstances. He was exploited by his employers and even deprived of his basic human rights. Even the established Indian immigrants there were not ready to help him.

Biju was always dragged back by his mother country. It is very difficult for him to get rid of his native culture and traditions. That's why he refused to work in restaurants those who serve dishes with beef. He could not accept when other Indians eat beef. It showed his hesitation to assimilate with the foreign culture. The result is his isolation in an alien culture. He always felt nostalgia about his mother land.

“...he remembered that as a child he'd been part of a pack of boys who played so hard they'd come home exhausted. They'd thrown stones and slippers into trees to bring down *ber* and *jamun*; chased lizards until their tails fell off and tossed the leaping bits on little girls...He remembered bathing in the river, feeling his body against cool firm river muscle”.[1]

His childhood memories and concern for his father never gave him any content of mind which restricted him from assimilating the alien culture. His efforts to obtain a green card became fruitless. Even amidst these difficult situations, he worked very hard for a better future, but in vain. At the end, despite of the advice of his father and his friends; he decided to return to India. When he reached India, he was landed into chaos. He was attacked and robbed by some hooligans. He lost all his savings including his clothes. He was only left with a night gown to cover his nakedness. It is in this terrible situation, he met his father. It was the ultimate end of Biju and his father's blinding desire for a better future. Even amidst all his difficulties, the comment of that man echoed in his mind “you are the luckiest boy in the whole world” [1].

When we consider the Diasporas of Biju and Jemubhai, there are lot of similarities and contradictions. Both of them migrated to an alien land for a better future. But they had to undergo many bitter experiences there. But they responded to it very differently. Jemubhai was ready to denounce his native culture and practices in order to get assimilated in the foreign culture. His only aim was to pass the ICS examination. Because of the neglect and

isolation, he led a secluded life. His double identity made Jemubhai incapable to adjust with the foreign culture as well as the native one. In both countries, he felt as a fish out of water. But Biju's failure was that he refused to adopt and assimilate the foreign culture. He could not avoid the call of his native land. His childhood memories and his loving father always attracted him. That's why; he forced to end his Diaspora. In his case, his isolation in the foreign country made him more attracted to his native land. It created an intense longing to reunite with his father.

III. The Post Colonial Ambiguity In 'The Inheritance Of Loss' -The Encounter Of Eastern And Western Culture

As a diasporic writer, Kiran Desai very well portrayed the east-west cultural conflict. We can see various complexities developed in the life of major characters as a result of their encounter with the Western culture. For example, we can take the character of Sai. She was the granddaughter of Jemubhai. Her parents were died in an accident in Moscow. She had her early education in a convent school. After the death of her parents, she was brought into the house of Jemubhai. As a convent school product, Sai was very much westernized. After her return to the judge, most of her acquaintances including Noni her tutor, Lola, Mr.Potti, Fr.Booty etc were also lived in a westernized manner. Her life flowed very peacefully until the arrival of her new tutor Gyan. Complexities began to develop. Gyan and Sai fell in love with each other. The initial days in their life were very peaceful. But later, Gyan was attracted by the Goorkhaland movement. He began to hate the western manners of Sai and Jemubhai. When Sai talked about her preparations for celebrating Christmas, he became very furious.

"I am not interested in Christmas!" he shouted. "Why do you celebrate Christmas? You're Hindus and you don't celebrate Id or Guru Nanak's birthday or even Durga

Puja.....You are like slaves, that's what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself. It's because of people like you we never get anywhere"[1].

Gyan became frustrated by her westernized manners. "Don't you have any pride? Trying to be so Westernized. They don't want you!!!!Go there and see if they will welcome you with open arms. You will be trying to clean their toilets and even then they won't want you" [1]. He felt shame in her lack of Indianness. She could not speak no language but English and pidgin Hindi. She could not eat with her hands. She never chewed a paan. She could not enjoy a Bollywood film because of its thick emotional content. She liked English vegetables, snap peas, French beans and Spring onion. When Sai and Gyan were eating together, both of them were embarrassed. He, "unsettled by her finickiness and her curbed enjoyment and she revolted by his energy and fingers working the dal, his slurps and smacks" [1].

Sai could not understand Gyan's reactions. She felt a kind of superiority over Gyan because of her westernized way of life. That's why she said "My dignity is worth a thousand of you" [1]. The western culture played a major role in determining the class of major characters. This class difference also brought complications in Sai and Gyan's love affair. Sai felt very much disappointed when she first met Gyan's family. They were lived in very poor circumstances. She felt cheated by Gyan because he concealed the truth about his family.

V. Conclusion

Through the experiences of individual characters, Kiran Desai highlights the issues of immigrant community in 'The Inheritance of Loss'-the pains of their exile and isolation, their longing for home, love and dignity, their shattering dreams and their split identity. Through this novel, she depicted the post colonial dilemma, the people who torn apart by

Eastern and Western culture, the people who forced to wear a white mask over their black skin. Her deep concern for humanity is well reflected in the novel.

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