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Diasporic Consciousness: A Comparative Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract:

Over the last few years there has been a proliferation of literature over the notion of Diaspora. The creation of Earth after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden is the opening façade in history, when this great odyssey of diaspora began. The experience of exile, the tendency to remember the past may induce an ambivalence, which in turn determines a kind of writing that transcends geographical and national literature. An expatriate writer at every step is called upon to create and reconstruct imaginatively his/her roots. Such 'return to the beginning' is symbolic representation of desire, memory, myth, search and discovery which cultivates the sense of 'cultural identity' in the Diasporic writers. Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai are no exceptions to the set norm, but what ranks them above other writers of exile is their metaphysical union with the concept. A modest attempt is being made in this paper to delve deep into the issue of migration and to present the pain, problems and trauma faced by the immigrants by comparing the theme of diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Keywords: Acculturation, Consciousness, Diaspora, Identity, Quest

Diasporic Consciousness is a complex term as it encompasses ideas including exilic existence, a sense of loss, consciousness of being an outsider, yearning for home, burden of exile, dispossession and relocation. The lives of immigrants do not have straight lines. They live centuries of history in a life lifetime and have several lives and roles. They experience a sense of alienation in the host countries. In spite of their attempts of acculturation, they do remain at the periphery and are treated as others. "Migrants," says Salman Rushdie, "...straddle two cultures ... fall between two stools" and they suffer "a triple disruption" comprising the loss of roots, the linguistic and social dislocation." (279) Trishanku, the character from the Indian epic Ramayana, who went embodied to heaven but had to settle at a place midway between the earth and the paradise, serves as metaphor for the modern expatriate inhabiting the contested global local space.

For a comparative study, on the treatment of the theme of Diasporic Consciousness in both these novels, the paper portrays the differences present in the novels regarding the setting and background, types and phases of migration and the techniques employed by the novelists.

“Boast of Quietness”, a poem by Jorge Luis Borges serves as a fitting epigraph for *The Inheritance of Loss*. The poem speaks of loss, of universal human feelings and of the difficulties in achieving contentment. The novel also meditates on loss as an emotional location. A retired, reclusive Judge, Jemubhai Patel lives with his orphaned granddaughter Sai, his beloved dog Mutt and his cook Panna Lal in Cho Oyu, a crumbling house in Kalimpong. Lack of human warmth, love of family is the loss in the Jemu’s life due to the ills of colonization. Sai waits in the shadow of the house, hungrily reading old issues of National Geographic longing to get out and see the world. The poem speaks of the ambitious whose day is greedy, as a lariat in the air and in the novel it stands for the cook and Gyan’s parents who want their children to achieve what they haven’t gained in their life due to poverty. Biju in other part of globe leads the life an immigrant to fulfill his father’s dream and Gyan after deserting Sai in love tries to search his cultural identity in the Gorkhaland Movement without realizing that they are all voices of the same poverty. Biju on reaching Kalimpong is robbed of all his possessions and hard and money in America by the G.N.L.F. boys and as the epigraph mentions he walks slowly like one who comes from so far away he doesn’t expect to arrive.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* being with a date, 1968, to be precise, this takes the reader back in time to examine the tension between past and present. The novel spans more than thirty years in the life of a fictional family, the Gangulis. The parents Ashima and Ashoke, each born in Calcutta, immigrated to the United States as young adults. Their children, Gogol and Sonia, grow up in the United States and the novel examines the nuances involved without being caught between two conflicting cultures with their highly distinct religious, social and ideological differences. The novel uses Gogol’s struggle over his name as a jumping off point to explore large issues of integration, assimilation and cultural identity.

The Namesake deals with only international migration moving between the events in Calcutta, Boston and New York City. Kiran Desi’s creation deals with both internal and international migration. Geographically the novel oscillates between the kitchen of New York, where Biju is a migrant worker, and the Gorkha insurgency in Kalimpong in 1986, capturing the nativist spirit of both the regions. *The Namesake* examines only one phase of Indian migration to European countries, the professional Indians, who left in the early sixties. In the novel Ashoke Ganguli leaves Calcutta and reaches America in pursuit of higher studies to do research in the field of fiber optics. After staying two years in the U.S.A. he comes back to Calcutta and marries Ashima. The diaspora depicted in this novel shows that voluntary migration induced in them the feeling of the other in the host country mainly due to cultural disorientation. Jhumpa Lahiri has used food, clothing, language and rituals to explore cultural diversification of Ashima and Ashoke.

The Inheritance of Loss examines different phases of Indian migration. The first wave of migrants reaches European countries for higher studies. Jemubhai Patel leaves for Cambridge in 1939, but his dilemma is different from Ashima’s or Ashoke’s as he had stepped in an England where Victorian values still lingered. His identity crisis is mainly due to his color and he becomes the victim of colonization. Even after spending a lifetime in the host country Ashima and Ashok respect their culture and Indian heritage but Jemubhai Patel returns with

hatred for Indian culture. After banishing love, human earth and every relationship from his life, he live in a dilapidated house (Cho Oyu) and considers himself more British than Indian. The second wave of immigrants in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, leave their homeland in the quest of better living. They are further divided into Green card holders and illegal immigrants; tourist visa facilitates the immigrants to reach their dreamland easily. Kiran Desai has used humor and satire in the episode where Biju succeeds in attaining the tourist visa. He asked the watchman, “Is this the American embassy?” ... “Amreeka nehi ... This is U.S. embassy!” ... “Where is the American embassy?” “It is there.” The man pointed back at the same building. “That is U.S.” “it is the same thing,” (182) said the man impatiently. But Biju, the luckiest boy in the whole world, lived in a miserable condition in America. He is not only exploited by Americans but by Harish Harry an Indian in the guise of free housing.

Thus Kiran Desai has explored the pain of an immigrant and the unfairness of a world in which one side travels to be a servant and the other side travels to be treated like a king. Jhumpa Lahiri, on the other hand, has completely neglected the trauma of illegal immigrants, their efforts to acquire Green Card and the exploitation of Indian in the host country.

Though the question of identity and homelessness are raised throughout in these novels, their treatment is marked by striking contrasts. The dilemma of second generation immigrants has been portrayed by Jhumpa Lahiri very elegantly by grouping them under the tag of ABCD (American Born Confused Deshi). Gogol, Sonia and Moushmi never considered India as, Sare Jahan Se Acha Hindustan Hamara. They are fascinated by American culture and try to adopt it, which compels them to make a frantic search for their personal and psychological identity. Sonia overcomes her divided identity by embracing American culture. Moushmi immersed herself in the third culture and language, French. Gogol tries to search his roots by connecting himself with his father after his sudden death away from home. A glimpse of such fascination for West is also found in the characters of *The Inheritance of Loss*. Lola and Noni stuff their suitcases with Marks and Spencer panties, eat jam and read Jane Austen. Sai preferred cake and English, but they do not fall under the label of ABCD; they are rather Anglophiles.

Food is used as metaphor of identity in both these novels. In *The Namesake*, its focus is mainly to depict cultural disorientation. Kiran Desai, on the other hand has used food to depict class difference and as measuring standard of religious identity. For Biju and Gyan food is a basic necessity but for the Judge, Lola, Noni and Sai it is an indication of their appreciation for England. Verses of Rig- Veda refer to the cow as Devi, identified with Aditi (the mother of Gods) herself. To kill a cow is equal to kill a Brahmin. Beef eating is a major issue in the novel.

Harish Harry is a mammon worshipper but he is against serving beef. The ironic laugh of Odessa and the remark “nobody eats beef in India and just look at it – it’s the shape of a big T- bone” (Desai 135) reveals the duality of Indians who in India worship cow but in the host country eat it. Biju leaves his job at Brigitte’s when made to choose between serving beef or to work by killing his religious consciousness. But in *The Namesake* it is not represented as a major issue as Ashima makes sandwich with bologna or roast beef for Gogol. Thus Kiran

Desai's creation clearly reflects that identity refers to the various ways we position ourselves. A mere possession of the Green card places a mortal equivalent to God. If Indians are treated as others in the host country due to their color then the same Indians consider Nepalese inferior who are also a part of India.

The concept of homelessness has attained new dimensions in the skillful hands of Kiran Desai. The Namesake circumscribes only migration and death as the sole reason for homelessness, but *The Inheritance of Loss* encompasses broader issues ranging from ills of colonization, Gorkhaland agitation, deportation, refugees, to homelessness by choice and death. Jhumpa Lahiri has captured the acute loneliness of Ashima, perseverance of Ashoke and the anguish of Gogol's mind in a very effective, life like manner. Ashima after struggling to make the USA her home for more than thirty years, Ashima in the end decides to divide her time between Calcutta and the USA. Gogol could never free himself from the tag of ABCD but has the desire to have a family. Ashoke and Ghosh leave all the homes behind as death takes them to the other world but others would also follow them at their fixed time. Thus the theme of dislocation gets deeper, more philosophical, and the existential dimension with which the novel remains imbued which reflects Lahiri's philosophical maturity.

Kiran Desai has presented India as a concept, and a land of hope and desire rather than a home like Jhumpa Lahiri. Jemubhai Patel's moral maiming by colonialists made him admire the Whiteman for everything and undervalue India which thwarted him to enjoy the bliss of marital life with Nimi. After banishing every relationship from his life he is homeless due to his own choice. There are people like Sai, Lola and Noni who harbor the vision of India of cheese toast and rum cake but Sai is homeless through no fault of hers, except that of birth. The Bengali sisters see beyond their own concepts of India when they witness the rebellion and when the Gorkhals poach their property and build hutment over it. Gyan and Budhoo are Indians but in their own country they are treated as others under the tag of Nepalese. For both Biju and father Booty India is land of hope and desire. 'Home is where heart is' fits on Father Booty aptly. He gives his whole life to India only to be told that he does not belong here anymore and is sent back to England he does not recognize. For Biju India is the final homecoming. He constructs a notion of home in a foreign land and returns to find that what he claims to be a home is a contested territory. Thus for all these characters home is elsewhere.

There are also striking similarities in the perspective and techniques of both the novelists. Stream of consciousness technique is used by Lahiri to present the painful accident and enchanting return of Ashoke leading to his betrothal with Ashima. Similarly Jemubhai's hideous past, Sai's parents' untimely death is depicted through this technique. The characters in both the novels are so real that one can meet them in every nook and corner of life. We understand each other for what he or she is: their triumphs and frailties, their emotions and convictions, along with their principles and prejudices. But it does not mean that they are stereotypes. Nalini Iyer considers that the strength of Jhumpa Lahiri as a story teller lies in her characterization. "The people she creates are real, alive, complicated, and individual. She never descends into stereotypes nor does she engage in grand generalizations about social and political relationships. Instead, she sweeps her reader through a range of emotions and

experiences and let her characters speak for themselves” (Lahiri [http://www.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries /lahiri_jhumpa.html](http://www.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/lahiri_jhumpa.html) no page). Similarly in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* from Lola and Noni the two anglicized middle aged sisters living at Mon Ami to tipsy Uncle Potty, Kalimpong is populated with a set of highly evolved individuals, with their own complicated histories. In much the same way the people Biju meets in New York are individuals’ not cardboard stereotypes. By dissecting the stereotype she gets right at the heart of the contradictions that riddle modern prejudices. Both the writers have also shown another side of immigrants, as the people who somehow get through. Sonia’s decision to marry Ben, a half – Chinese boy indicates the spirit and optimism of a successful immigrant.

Both these novels have open endings and do not seek a solution, but Jhumpa and Kiran put away their pen with an aura of hope. Gogol’s desire to have a family and rise professionally indicates his quest for the new route which will dawn on him after his reflections in the company of the stories by his namesake, Nikolai Gogol- gifted to him by his father. Similarly the running of the cook Pannalal and Biju into each other’s arms leaves the reader with a smile on the face. Desai conveys to her reader that in spite of the bloodshed, the hypocrisy, the lies, the hatred, the helplessness there still runs in the world a common thread of love, of bonding, of companionship, a softness that no amount of human degradation can abolish.

Thus both these novelists have presented a realistic and touching picture of the palpable life of the Diasporas, who are on a river with a foot each in two different boats, and each boat trying to pull them in separate directions. But every coin has two sides to it. It is an enriching experience if taken in a positive way. Being an immigrant teaches them much about the world and about human beings. It enlarges their consciousness about things which they would never have understood if brought up in one place. It enables them to speak concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal.

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