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Revisiting Diasporic Space in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract:

Both Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai belong to the second generation expatriate writers and deal with the manifestations and consequences of different aspects of diaspora. Jhumpa Lahiri, the 2000 Pulitzer Prize winner for her collection of short stories entitled the *Interpreter of Maladies* has created a specific niche for herself in the literary arena of Indian English fiction with her debut novel *The Namesake*. This novel is diasporic in consciousness and deals with the issues of adaptation, adjustment and accommodation in a world where the boundaries are thinned or often blurred. Her novel brings to the fore many of the issues that Indians, settled in the promising land of opportunities, face in America. The narrative revolves round the problems faced by a couple (i.e. Ashoke and Ashima) in a different country—the clash of cultures, the relationship between parents and children, the generation gap and identity crisis etc. Kiran Desai being a modern expatriate Indian novelist, had herself experienced displacement, dislocation and cultural clash. In her novel she writes of the cultural hybridity of the Post-Colonial migrant and the expatriate condition of hybridity. Her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* which won the 2006 Man Booker prize, deals with her own situation of migrancy, expatriation and alienation from the mother country. The paper is divided into two parts, the first part deals with *The Namesake* in the light of diasporic consciousness and the second part seeks to critically examine Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* in terms of representation of individual and cultural identity of Indians with reference to their diasporic situatedness.

Keywords: Diaspora, Culture, Identity, Space.

Prevailing complexities and diversities of the 'human reality' have compelled contemporary thinking to interrogate and deconstruct given concepts like 'home,' 'abroad', 'nation', 'culture', and others in both 'worldly' and 'textual' contexts. In postcolonial studies diaspora culture in all its potency of migrancy, hybridity and cross-cultural ambivalence has come to acquire a vital significance since it demonstrates that culture need not remain a temporally or spatially closed and fixed notion but can well be fluid and mobile. Stuart Hall explains that diasporan culture demonstrates that identity is not a thing given, but something always in the process of being asserted. The interaction and commingling of various cultures certainly open new routes and modes of thinking about the individual and group identities of Diasporas, and help them to outgrow the stereotyped experiences of uprootedness, displacement and marginalization(236).

As a diasporic writer, Jhumpa Lahiri deals with multi-cultural society—partly from ‘inside’ and partly from ‘outside’. She strives for her native identity and simultaneously endeavours to evolve a new identity in adopted Anglo-American cultural landscape. However, in this clash of cultures, she faces an immigrant’s dislocation and displacement. She regards dislocation as a permanent condition of human existence. Hence her sense of belonging to a particular place and culture and at the same time being an ‘outsider’ to it creates an inner tension in her characters. Lahiri in her novel, *The Namesake* acts as a dispassionate narrator visiting the private limited spaces of Bengali immigrants in America, a world which is without an axis, collapsible, deceptive, where the state of exile is a cultural as well as an emotional denial. Familiar diasporic themes--the uneasy status of the developed world and India and tension between family tradition and individual freedom form part of her novel. Its theme centres round the story of Gogol, named after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. Struggling to come to terms with his expatriate situation, Gogol experiences all the ambivalence of his parents (Ashoke and Ashima) who have not yet been able to be assimilated into the new land. A constant combination of distance and intimacy binds them to their native city of Calcutta which of Lahiri seems to be a vast, unruly, fascinating city. They have no home at Calcutta, yet they insist on calling that city their home. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli and their world are constantly juggling past, present and future. Their experiences are different and so are their reactions as well as expectations. After the death of her husband, Ashima decides to spend six months of the year in the America and six in India. In spite of her feeling of displacement, marginality and a crisis of identity, this move is directed towards finding new ways of adaptation into a new country. And after divorce from Gogol, Moushmi goes to live with Dimitri and plans to leave for Paris “immersing herself in a third language, a third culture” (214). In an extended sense it reveals the emergence of the multicultural and global identity of the second generation immigrants. Thus Jhumpa can be categorized as a multi-cultural, diasporic, post-colonial, marginal, South-Asian woman writer. As a second generation expatriate, Jhumpa stands at an interesting border as well as the cross-roads of culture. As a part of the margin, she is a force that has in the US always broadened the mainstream. The home that the parents left behind is no longer the home for the second generation and hence she faces a greater problem with fixity in space hardly possible, and an identity which seems elusive, with attempts to transcend marginalization by bridging the gap between the centre and margin. Like most expatriate writers she realizes that she can portray only what she has experienced. As said by Subhendu Mund,

“For various reasons, the present diaspora tends to alienate the immigrants from their roots in spite of themselves, compelling them to live between two worlds: the imaginary and the real, the past and the present, and the virtual and the material.” (108)

Diasporic Indian is like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the only way he has increasingly come to

feel at home in the world. It is not that the centre has shifted; only the margins have expanded to push the home culture further to outer space. Children of Indian families born in US seem to adapt more easily to western society, despite resistance from parents. This, of course, causes an inevitable gap between parents and children. Gogol does not accept his father's choice of his name. He thinks that "names die over time, that they perish just as people do" (70). He keeps his relationship with Ruth and Maxine and flirts with them knowing that his parents do not support this cultural deviation. While Ashima takes long to recover after her husband's death, Gogol's girlfriend Maxine does not understand the intensity of her shock; she rather laughs at her as Gogol in his childhood had laughed at the sight of his father's shaving off his hair with a grief-stricken heart after his grandfather's death in India. When we fail to understand the motive and emotion that a culture carries, it appears strange and hence incites laughter. This results in a certain type of ambivalence among parents about how to cope with and continuously modify their traditional value systems. Immigrant parents perceive the real pressure of westernization in some sensitive areas such as their children's associations with the opposite sex, and the issues of dating and marriage, which conflict with the traditional Indian method of match-making. Lahiri precisely portrays the children of Ashoke and Ashima as perfectly American. Gogol dates with one after the other girl and Sonia dates with an American. Ashoke and Ashima have no choice but to be quiet. Gogol enjoys premarital sex with Ruth. But his parents have not expressed any curiosity about his girl friend. Theirs is a kind of lukewarm response, and indifferent attitude towards that incident as the text shows, "His relationship with her is one accomplishment in his life about which they are not in the least proud or pleased" (116). When at last Ashoke and Ashima do give a piece of their mind to Gogol, the latter says that "marriage is the last thing on his mind" (117). Thus their "adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history" (ix), says Robert Cohen. It also reveals that migrant Bengalis carry with them their "beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviors, and values" along with their "possessions and belongings to new places" (211) as remarked by John McLeod.

The confrontation between the East and the West, the strange Love-Hate relationship that exists between the two, the cultural alienation and the loss of identity faced by the expatriates and immigrants are some of the aspects that are presented with a deep psychological insight. The novel projects Ashima and Ashoke as cultural survivors in America's multicultural milieu. They demonstrate the lives of hybridity, inbetweenness and liminality. It is difficult for them to maintain cultural insularity, and like millions of immigrant Indians they essentialise their life in cultural milieu of America. But finally it is their contra-acculturation and rooting for India that allows them peace and consolation in moments of catharsis. Lahiri seems to say that more than a mere metaphorical twist, dislocation has now become an inescapable physical and geographical reality. The indigenous Indian values and western concept of morality, despite conflicting discordant element seems to mingle and reconcile in a peculiar way. Lahiri investigates the life situations of Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol when they are in a state of cross-cultural shock; they feel suffocated and pinned on the wall. In their efforts to know the self, they examine their inner

altitudes, analyze their divided being inherited and acquired. Confrontation with other culture means discovery of one's own nation, roots and identity. It is a search for one's reality, an attempt to regain belongingness, in order to get confirmed their affirmation and adaptation towards the ancestry and the identity of their own. Gogol reimagines the locus of his Indian identity whose marriage with Moushmi ends in divorce.

Poornima rightly suggests that “the salvation in the diaspora's disquiet journey in an alien land lies in adopting the assimilationist approach, in unearthing the realities of American way of life while maintaining bonds with his homeland to replenish his emotional bankruptcy that has come to be his lot(25).” The immigrants always suffer from feelings that there is no single place to which they belong, and it is in this sense Lahiri tries to give a tongue to the feelings of immigrants through the character of Gogol. The identity crisis and what Homi K. Bhabha calls the feeling of “in-betweenness”(1) and belonging “nowhere” is experienced by Gogol who straddles two cultures and suffers from the loss of roots and social dislocation.

Ashoke and Ashima caught between two worlds, one which is dead as they have left it behind and the other which is not yet born as they have not yet accepted it. As Lahiri had herself experienced and it is the common experience of most of the children of expatriate parents it is difficult for them to answer the question like ‘where are you from?’-which are both troubling and enigmatic. As they were born in the US, the answer should be a place in the US (New Jersey, for example) but that does not satisfy the questioner. And the question is repeated ‘but, where are you from?’ The second-generation expatriate like Lahiri or Gogol in the novel find it difficult, almost impossible, to say 'from India' as they know that country only from occasional visits or from the memories of their parents and the tales constantly recounted by them. They find themselves isolated and insulated (in two separate cultures)-one impregnable culture at home and a totally different one outside. Lahiri's use of two names and hence two identities for the protagonist becomes the perfect metaphor for the diasporic experiences.

The Inheritance of Loss has portrayed the various experiences of the diasporas in New York and Kalimpong. Desai's characters confront hardship and despair in an unforgiving world. After being orphaned at a young age, Sai a teenage girl, is living with her retired judge and anglophile grandfather, Jemubhai, and her grandfather's cook. The mid-1980 finds Sai experiencing her first crush, her grandfather feeling tormented by past injustices, and the cook swelling with pride for Biju, a son he misses dearly. The backdrop to the story is the soaring Himalayan peak of Kanchenjunga, so rich in Tibetan mythology. The mountain, viewed from Kalimpong where ‘India blurred into Bhutan and Sikkim’(9)-- is a constant presence in the novel, unchanging throughout the political turmoil of the Nepalese uprising in the late 1980s that forms the context in which Desai constructs her powerful tale of the most enduring legacy of colonialism -- loss in all its guises. The other prominent place in the novel is New York City, not the glamorous New York of the movies, but the underbelly of the city, inhabited by illegal immigrants trying to eke out a living in sordid kitchens of dodgy restaurants, always at the mercy of ruthless employers and always on the move, one step in front of the immigration authorities.

Relationships in the novel are shaped by reluctantly held family ties, economic imperatives, political upheaval and most significantly, the hybridity and displacement that are key markers of what are frequently termed as the postcolonial condition. The book rejoices the intermingling of cultures: “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” (281). Desai describes *The Inheritance of Loss* as a book that, ‘tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant,’ and, ‘what happens when a Western element is introduced into a country that is not of the West’. Desai aims to describe, ‘what happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one. How does the imbalance between these two worlds change a person's thinking and feeling? How do these changes manifest themselves in a personal sphere, a political sphere, over time?’ As Desai notes, ‘these are old themes that continue to be relevant in today’s world’. (www.bookbrowse.com.)

Sai’s maternal grandfather Jemubhai, a retired judge, travels as a young student from India to Cambridge to study law. On the strength of being the first boy in the district to go to an English university and assured of a powerful career on his return, he acquires both a large debt from local moneylenders and a 14-year-old bride. His father-in-law arranges for members of a military band to serenade his departure at the Bombay docks. His arrival in England is met with less pomp – he struggles to find a room to let, and when he does find one mile away from the university, his landlady is unwelcoming and insists on calling him “James”. Jemu spends his entire time at Cambridge locked in his room, studying fourteen hours a day, eating his landlady’s inadequate food and not making any friends. He suffered seriously from loneliness, longing and difference from others in a foreign country:

For entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things, and elderly ladies, even the hapless – blue-haired, spotted, faces like collapsing pumpkins – moved over when he sat next to them in the bus, so he knew that whatever they had, they were secure in their conviction that it wasn’t even remotely as bad as what he had. (39)

He scrapes through his exams, makes it into the Indian Civil Service, and returns to India to serve his Majesty as a magistrate. Having experienced awful dislocation in England, he now finds that he can’t make a place for himself in India – he is too English. He is sent back to India equipped with a snake-bite kit, a twelve-bore shotgun and a tennis racket. Despite a glorious reception, Jemu finds his wife grotesque and his people alien. He rejects her, the baby he just manages to father, his family, their ways and becomes more English than the English – trying and failing to hunt animals with his gun, eating toast for breakfast and crumpets for tea, and pouring all his love into his relationship with his dog. He is a tragic and lonely figure. Damaged unalterably by the experience of being a young man during the British raj is Jemu, the retired judge, now living in a rambling run-down mansion called Cho Oyu built for a Scotsman with romantic notions of Himalayan life in Kalimpong. Sent to England as a young boy by his

ambitious father to complete his law degree which he passed only because of the quota system, Jemu wanted nothing more than to be English and, after his return to India, he found himself unable to reconcile himself to being Indian. Robert Cohen describes Diaspora as the communities of people living together in one country who “acknowledge that the old country – a nation often buried in deep in languages, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions”(ix). Diasporas thus live in one country as community but look across time and space to another. The migrant Diasporas and their descendents experience displacement, fragmentation, marginalization and discontinuity in the cultural ‘discourse’ of the subject countries and the respective land.

Through the life of Biju, Desai presents the status of the illegal immigrants and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates. Desai being an Indian might have experienced the same anxiety as a foreigner. In her novel there is constant effort to establish identity. Carole Boyce Davies writes: “Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Home sickness or homelessness, the rejection of home or the longing for home becomes motivating factors in this rewriting. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it” (113).

During the analysis of immigration and its associated problems it must be understood that new immigrants come from a society where they had been part of the whole community. Once these people leave their original homelands, they experience the pangs of alienation. The outcome of their deliberate choice is dispossession and displacement. Biju finds himself a foreigner in a world that is constantly in a flux and is devoid of any settled convention, where native rootedness is viewed as backwardness and any allegiance to communal customs is dismissed as superstition. With his poor adaptability and inhibitions inherited from his native culture, Biju continues his search for an elusive home while leading the wretched life of an illegal immigrant in the precarious anonymity of New York’s restaurants and basement kitchens: “There was a whole world in the basement kitchens of New York, but Biju was ill-equipped for it”(22). The immigrant has to deal with various types of people who face unfamiliar problems in the foreign country.

As the fulfillment of his father's long-cherished dream Biju, “At 4:25: A.M. made his way to Queen of Tarts bakery” (75). “My son works in New York”, the cook boasted to everyone he met. “He is the manager of a restaurant business” (84). Biju worked at various restaurants. There were many problems continually faced by Indians in the US. The protagonist is engaged in an effort to get acquainted with the American way of life. Biju hates the people who give up Indian style for hybridized habits. After a long period of pain and humiliation Biju books his return ticket “tired of the greatest loss the can come out from one's family.” “Biju stepped out of the airport into the Calcutta night, warm, mammalian. His feet sank into dust winnowed to softness at his feet, and he felt an unbearable feeling, sad and tender, old and sweet like the memory of falling asleep, a baby on his mother's lap”(300). Biju's never ending tale of pain continues; a gang of robbers reaches there and offers a lift in their jeep, they strip him of all

his material possession and even his dignity. “Darkness fell and he sat right in the middle of the path without his baggage, without his savings, worst of all without his pride, Back from America with far less than he'd ever had” (317). He reaches the Judge's house as a figure in a night gown, a symbol of the dispossessed. Desai asserts that India is a land of multiculturalism. She writes about terrorism and introduces the operation of the Gorkha National Liberation Front as a subplot. Gyan, Sai's tutor and lover, is a member of the GNLF. Sai is a product of multiculturalism. She fails to keep the relationship with Gyan who hates western style. The uprooted life of the Judge ends with the fruitless search for his pet dog Mutt. As he has virtually lost his Indian heritage, he fails to find happiness in life. Sai, torn between cultures, remains a dispossessed soul. And Biju finally reaches the home land as the sad metaphor of the Indian diaspora.

Hybridity is definitely a very important subject in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. The term signifying key concept of cultural diversity in Desai's novel, which stretches from India to New York, analyses the post-colonial and post-modern set up of the expatriate Indian. Mala Pandurang in her article “Loss and Longing” remarks: “This is a story as much of loss as it is of bitter longing for a world that eludes each of the characters, as a consequence of their class backgrounds and postmodern legacies. They thereby become the inheritors of loss” (32). Set in Postcolonial India, Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* vividly highlights a number of issues like globalization, economic inequality, multiculturalism, immigration, racism, terrorism, nationalism and its resulting consequences.

Henceforth the diasporic space of Desai is by all accounts extremely wide as she is almost managing each part of diaspora in her novel. Lahiri then again is fundamentally worried with the issues that are being confronted by the Bengali migrants in America. Both novelists have a place with the second era of diasporic writing and both have made huge commitment to the development of fiction writing in the field of Indian diasporic space.

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