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## **Confronting the Immigrant Identity of Post-Colonial Immigrants in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss***

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### **Abstract:**

The flow of a major population to other nations since time immemorial for various reasons brought out expatriate literature with it. It captures all their experiences, and their dual nature of existence. It can be known as a universal concept as there are people constantly moving around countries all over the world. Kiran Desai negotiates the identity of immigrants with different social status in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. The topic of identity in the immediate post-colonial phase of immigration is examined in this study. When a person migrates, he carries along all the values and belief of the previous society to the country of migration, the concept which is named in the apt phrase of sociologist N. Jayaram as, the “socio-cultural baggage”, carried by an immigrant with the hope to fit in. After landing in the foreign land, they develop a defense mechanism due to the insecurities faced by them from the threat against their cultural identity in the foreign land. The immigrants try to stick to their home and identity. This leads to the formation of ethnic identity of the diasporic community.

**Keywords:** Immigrants, Identity, Cultural Identity, Post-Colonial, Diaspora.

### **Introduction**

The Oxford Dictionary defines Diaspora as ‘the dispersion of the Jews beyond Israel’ or ‘the dispersion of any people from their homeland’. If we track back the history of diaspora, we can see that the word ‘Diaspora’ in Greek means dispersal or scattering of seeds. The persecution and expulsion of Jews led to the dispersal of Jews away from their homeland. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, it used the term to refer to the Jews exiled from Israel. The term was widely assimilated in English language by the mid-1950s. The word diaspora carries a sense

of displacement, people separated from their homelands for numerous reasons but holding hopes to return to their roots someday.

Among the early Post-Colonial immigrants, migration develops the feelings of alienation, nostalgia of the past and rootlessness at the place of migration as he or she is still clinging to the cultural beliefs, practices, norms, of the homeland, there is a clinging to the old identity and a resistance to making a transition. Again, it is the sense of loss or alienation caused by the displacement or dislocation which creates a position of 'live in between' or 'living on the border' which Homi Bhabha discusses in his *The Location of Culture*. The displacement also gives rise to the issues of double consciousness and unhomeliness which mark the diasporic identity. The idea of home, nation and cultural identity of belongingness to the place of ones' roots does not remain the same from individual to individual. The characters in the novels assigned belong to different classes of society and their dealing with the whole process of immigration is different. Biju in *The Inheritance of Loss* struggles with his illegal immigrant life in America and returns back.

The Man Booker prize winning book *The Inheritance of Loss* came out eight years after Kiran Desai's first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. With colonialism, love, regret, hope, and notion of family as the backdrop the book deal with the first generation of immigrants and the mythical idea of both India and America. Kiran Desai has used an Indian perspective to portray the immigrant experience. She has tactfully blended the immigrant and diasporic writing for on the one hand she depicts the problems confronted by illegal immigrant like Biju in the United States meanwhile, she delineates the heart rending pangs of remaining away from one's homeland and being discriminated against for having settled in a geographical area one does not belong. *The Inheritance of Loss* opens with a teenage Indian girl, an orphan called Sai, living with her Cambridge-educated Anglophile grandfather, a retired judge, in the town of Kalimpong on the Indian side of the Himalayas. The story spirals around the colonial house Cho Oyu while shifting the characters to the past to various places. The anglophile sisters dreaming about European living, Gyan under the spell of the recent political turmoil struggles to maintain his temperament towards his beloved Sai, and the under-privileged Biju dwindling between two countries as an illegal immigrant. All of their identities are at odds with their situation and few of them grope for their assertion through various means. Each character has a different story

brewing at the hindsight, their personal stories enables a protrusion in widening the scope of the story. With a law degree from the Cambridge University, Jemu Bhai Pate tries to stick to European ideals and way of living. This Englishness is quite contradictory to the estrangement he underwent during his stay in Cambridge. It is a façade to hide his inexpressible pain and shame he experienced there. The backdrop of Gorkhaland agitation is a catalyst in driving the love story on the opposite side of the globe, Biju is trying hard to make a living in America as an illegal immigrant grubbing for low wages jobs in cheap restaurants, while his father, the cook cannot contain his pride of his son's pseudo success.

The novel tells the story of two different kind diasporas in parallel- one is of Bjiu's undocumented, and thereby exploited, blue collared illegal immigration in New York City and the other of Jemu bhai who is an aging, elitist Indian professionals settled in a remote Gurkha hills station after his return from London. One thing in common between in both diasporas is that the majority of immigrant in the migrated land; however they are related to the different levels of the society. These Diasporas face the challenges of belonging to a nominally globalized society that is ironically loaded with increasingly exclusivist, separatist, and nationalistic ideals.

The setting of the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is of 1980s. The migration thus takes place in the Post-Colonial phase. The Post-colonial phase of immigration was very different from the earlier two phases. After the independence there was a massive flow of people. The period saw trends of 'brain-drain', where the migrants are from middle-class with western education, and are skilled. The main reason for the migration to the other countries was due to the unemployment crisis in India. The prospective immigrants were attracted by the availability of employment opportunities abroad. For a greater proportion of these migrants, the USA, Canada and the U.K, are the destinations, the possible reason could be accounted as the common colonial ties with the English language. Unlike the educated skilled lot Biju belongs to the lower class of the society who harbours the same dream of migrating to America in the hope of making a better living. Biju is the stereotype of the Indian Diaspora in the post colonial and post modern western world, chasing a pipedream of gaining wealth and becoming a non-residential Indian. Acquiring a tourist visa with the motive to gain a green card in near future he sets off to New York, the trouble for such immigrants start after the expiry of their visas as they are treated as illegal immigrants. Amidst all this they cannot live like honourable migrants nor relinquish their

aspirations and go back to their native country. They can be termed as fugitives. Biju is shown juggling one job to another for his survival and making frequent contact with his father, Panna Lal, the cook through letters and phone calls. After six years of drudging around, suffering in the foreign land, he could not contain the feeling of home sickness, a green card chaser in the US, Biju finally returns to India beaten by fate to meet his father with all his foreign bought utilities packed in a trunk. But all his American earned fortune is robbed by the GNLFF men in Silliguri and Biju is only left with his pitiable self.

The post-modern era gave rise to ideals of globalization of which the integral characteristics are the flow of people, trade, capital, information, technology and opportunities across border. The hope for economic equality, better living and education stimulates the pull from the west. Biju's migration to New York is the result of the impact of globalization of the once colonized nation. Biju is the figure for the South-Asian immigrants who leave their countries to make money in the melting pot of the world, the United States of America. There was a large scale immigration of unskilled workers. In the ill-paid cafes and hotels they form a group of their own. Friendship does not survive in the tough life of an illegal immigrant. Within no time one witness the disappearance of people, changing jobs or getting deported.

The realization of irony of this American Dream hits Biju while he is standing in the queue for processing his visa in the American embassy, he empathizes the pitiable conditions of the applicants and undergoes feelings of disgrace and humiliations. Biju considers himself the luckiest boy in the world until he lands in America. While dodging the authorities and changing jobs just to make ends meet he comes face to face with social and cultural hostilities of the West.

The incident where Biju falls on rotten spinach and hurts himself gives us a clear view of the degraded life he lives in New York. His boss Harry refuses to take him to the doctor as it would cost him too much. Thus people like Biju and others are exploited. Biju's failure encompasses the overall failure of the downtrodden in the land of plenty. His struggle for survival in the grimy conditions of the restaurants in New York comes down to mere disappointments. His dreams of economic security and opportunities are destroyed. Prompted by his father, Biju came to United States to achieve the American dream, but the reality is quite different, he is exploited, discriminated, poor, lonely and homesick. Everybody wanted the green card regardless of the fact that they were happy with their lives or not. Desai portrays the journey

of the illegal immigrants in New York brilliantly. Lying in his basement bed Biju dreams of his home. He forgets the harsh village life and loses himself in the sounds of his village. When he talks to his father over the phone he can almost feel his home. His father is not aware of the circumstances Biju lives in America. Being oblivious of the drabness of life, he generously recommends to him the names of fellow local boys inspiring to go to America and also asked him to find jobs for them. To everyone he met he proudly announced, how his son manages a restaurant in New York City.

Another obstacle that the immigrants are subjected to is racial discrimination. The racists divide a gap between people by their colour, religion, etc. There is contempt for the people of the third world. In one instance Biju had to leave his job in an Italian restaurant because his race and colour was appalling for the wife of the proprietor. Kiran Desai also shows the line drawn between the legal and illegal immigrants in America. Biju callously rebuffed with a cold shoulder by his father's friend Nandu who suggests him to return back to India. Unless the formalization and the legal sanction of the migration are not done one has to live in the dregs of the society, overlooked and discriminated even by one's own people. Thus the immigrants are positioned in a vulnerable state which hampers them emotionally and mentally.

Besides Biju's story of illegal immigration the novel tells the story of Judge Jemu Bhai Popat Patel in flashbacks. He is the embodiment of the colonial immigration with its after effect in the post colonial times. Although born in a poor Gujrati family Jemubhai got a full pledged English education and turned out to be a brilliant student. As a small child he was fascinated by the statue of the Queen, often wondered how a plain looking woman could wield so much power. He was married off to a very rich merchant's daughter; the huge dowry from the marriage supplemented the expenses for his further education in Cambridge, England. In 1939, Jemubhai was among the few immigrants in the colonial phase whose motive of migrating was education. The colonial phase of Indian immigration was profoundly based on labour recruitment for different plantations. London was a different world for Jemubhai and like any other aspirant for a better education. There were great expectations but London fails him. The extravagance he conjured up in his mind toppled down as soon as he boarded the ship. His timidity and low self esteem established as strong sense of aloofness in the foreign land. Jemubhai could not make any

friends as he was too conscious of his pronunciation. His only companion was his work, working twelve hours at a stretch most days.

Jemubhai reflects the perpetual consciousness of a first generation expatriate among the people of the new nation, the brown colour, accents, pronunciations and the discriminatory racial looks. He is unable to resurrect from the cross-culture shock that he goes through. He is the figure of the suppressed psyche among the Whites. He gradually distances himself from the human world and lives alone with his solitude. The dehumanized behavior exposes the ill treatment the west shows towards the immigrants. In some cases the aftermath of such plight leaves the person bereft of normal emotions. Due to this rejection and humiliation, Jemubhai surrenders to numerous ills of being an immigrant. The feeling of rootlessness, homesickness, alienation, etc always lingers. Like him other immigrants become victims as well. They are entrapped in a world where there is constant reminder from the Whites sidelines them. As a result in the spur of holding on to ones identity and the attempt to assimilate themselves the immigrants lands on the dismal space, that leaves them dwindling between two cultures and nations. Their mind shuttles between two nations with varied social and cultural attributes resting under neither. This experience in the foreign land as immigrants largely affected the personality of Jemubhai, the humiliation forced him to feel inferior in front of others. His return to India was another phase of hardship for him. He grew stranger to himself and to people around him. He forgot to smile and picked up strange habits. He did not belong to England when he was there, nor he belonged to India when he returned back. He stared imitating the English life. He became a brooding old man working in the British-run Indian Civil Service all his life. His self hatred and hatred for Indian heritage often made him feel inferior and forced himself to live like a minority with the English.

## **Conclusion**

Kiran Desai has presented the stories of few powerless individuals in their pitiful states, in the meanwhile she dealt with contemporary international matters of globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism, and terrorist violence. The story of the novel grapples with the Post-Colonial phase of migration. There is a discussion about V.S Naipaul's Bend in the River between the two sisters. They do not identify themselves with

Naipaul's tome of exile and for them the recurring tone of subjection of the colonized in his works is over imposing.

The confrontation with immigration is partly based on the type of person an individual is and partly the situation they are out under. Biju and Jemubhai is the picture of hopelessness. Their encounter with immigration did not run smoothly. They could not adapt themselves to the Western culture, the feeling rootlessness and alienation perpetually haunted them. They always remained at the residual layer of the society and failed to emerge from the shell of their Indian identities. Their state of being treated as second class citizens kept them from surfacing from their Indianness. A group of immigrants oppose the idea of assimilation, they cherish their homelands and carry with them their cultural identity and try to ground them in the foreign land thus making it hard for them to cut off their umbilical cord that connects them to their homelands. Despite the travailed conditions of the immigrants there is a constant flow of immigrants from all sections of the society coming from the third world who are pursuing the dream of making a life in the melting pot of America in New York. Life for the illegal immigrants like Biju is harder; they get stuck between the harsh conditions of an immigrant life and the longing to move back to one's homeland following the expiration of the tourist's visas. On the other hand immigration experience made Jemubhai a brooding old man for the rest of his life. The humiliation he went through affected his personality and he learned to hate himself and his Indian identity. Jemubhai neither held on to his Indianness nor could he accommodate himself in England. *The Inheritance of Loss* is the portrayal of colonial and immediate post-colonial phase of immigration. The reason behind a greater incompetency of assimilation may be the limited exposure to the western culture and education, which comparatively increased in the later years in the post-colonial times.

The question always remains that the effort to retain ones' own cultural identity is of paramount importance or the amalgamation with the host culture a better option. The lives of the expatriates are under the pressure of the dual identities they carry along. They grapple with the loss and gain of different cultures and dwindle with their segregated consciousness. Their origin and past life cannot be erased so the feeling of rootlessness and dislocation lingers perpetually.

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