

## **Post Colonialism and Identity : An Exploration of Kiran Desai's Writings in the Context of Indian Literature**

**RINKI KUMARI**

**Abstract.** Using a comparative analysis of the selected works of Kiran Desai, this paper discusses how the characters face the complexities of their identity and of discovering themselves. Kiran Desai is a well-known Indian-American author who has broken new literary ground in publishing with her notable novels. Desai's fiction frequently addresses thick emotional terrain related to identity in a fleeting world. The notion of loss serves as the vehicle to piece together the personal and the political crises into narratives of dislocation, culture, migration, and struggle. Desai's characters are vividly rendered, and her prose is rich and intelligent. From her novels, Kiran Desai demonstrates that she prompts readers to ponder self-exploration which involves exploration of, heritage, belonging, and meaning in a modern globalized society. By exhibiting a narrative style that pushes readers to engage in thinking about the themes she presents, Desai is revising traditional methods of storytelling, giving her a distinct voice as a writer, and enjoyably entertaining readers worldwide with her talent as a writer. The cultural and social context in which any piece of literature or art is produced is an important factor in the ways that its themes, characters, and stories are produced. It is the situation in which an exhibition or this book is built; the context from which authors and artists make choices that seek to reflect, comment on, or even contest the norming, value, and issues of its time.

**Keywords :** Exploration; cultural identity; postcolonial identity; post-exploration.

In the post-colonial period, diasporic fiction in English has not only been exhilarating and plentiful, but also underwent some serious changes of theme and technique. Indeed, the Indian writers of this period internalize the qualities of versatility, variety and multiplicity inherent in a globalized society. In addition, the novelists of this period reflect and refract the multi-cultural ethos of India in their journey of finding national and cultural identity. In this context one must bear in mind that Kiran Desai's literary works feature themes of multi-culturalism where the hopes, dreams

and aspirations of men and women in a globalized society are contextualized in order to make sense of contemporary reality. Desai's novels reveal the complex and subtle intricacies of fictional art that encapsulate her growth and development as a key voice in the literature of Indian Diaspora. Her facility with the English language is due in part to her cosmopolitan perspective, training and disciplined reading of creative literature. As Ashcroft, Bill, et al. (2008) assert :

Postcolonialism deals with the impacts of colonization on cultures and societies. When used by historians after the Second World War in terms such as the postcolonial state, 'post-colonial' had a clearly chronological meaning, denoting the period after independence. However, from the late 1970s the term has been adopted by literary critics as they sought to address the various cultural impacts of colonization. (186)

Since the rise of postcolonialism since the late 1980s, a wide diversity of scholars have started to examine postcolonial literatures from varying aspects of 'race', 'identity', 'diaspora', and other concepts that often relate to postcolonialism. These literatures are multicultural in their production that can be observed through the tangled state of two cultures or more. Voluntarily, or involuntarily, most of the postcolonial writers have the experience of 'diaspora', the experience of cultural diaspora includes the concept 'hybridity' of cultural identity, the loss of belonging to a culture and the confusion of national identity. The research of cultural identities within postcolonialism provides an insightful acute view of perspectives and methodology for understanding postcolonial literatures.

The etymology of the word 'Diaspora' derived from the Greek word 'diaspeirein' - meaning "to scatter about, disperse", from 'Dia' means 'about, across', 'speiren' means 'to scatter'. I have carefully dissected that diaspora is the displacement of people or culture in another geographical or cultural region for livelihood, education, business or for acquiring higher skills from the many branches of human knowledge. The phenomenon of globalization and the internet superhighway, coupled with political and economic liberalization, allows people worldwide to embrace diasporic life in greater numbers everyday from the days of old! The

implications of diasporic life and being displaced or separated from their homeland have been successfully captured and articulated in Kiran Desai's novels. Kiran Desai's innovations and new methods of fiction bring depth and dimension to the diasporic landscape in the twenty-first century.

Currently, Indian English literature is light-years from its former identity of being 'derivative' and 'imitative'. With its once separate and distinct identity it lacks clarity. Especially with the advent of migrant writers asserting to be Indians or considered part of the Indian English literature presence, settled somewhere else from their homeland or want to unconsciously be delinked from their ancestry, and yet their works are more connected to their roots. Indian writers that can be grouped as, 'expatriate', and 'diasporic' writers represent a select particular set of trends altogether different from the major stay-at-home writers. In that aspect the historical meanings of these terms; 'expatriate', or 'diaspora', have had their literal meanings diluted with its expectation and reinterpretation as what is now known as a 'common phenomenon' across the globe. Accordingly, the notion of evolution has also changed drastically with rise in the psychological make up of traditional man, and modern man, today. It indicates an entirely different state of transiting from a familiar frame of reference and relationship, and requiring the redefinition of the whole social organism. The reasons given for such extreme alienation and dramatic calling is as varied as, freedom from political oppression, angst, loneliness, state of alienation, dissatisfaction, and an unnecessarily lengthy search for identity.

Diasporic writing questions the definitions of 'home' and 'nation'. These writers often have the double preoccupations of schizophrenia and/or nostalgia as they struggle to redefine themselves "in new cultures". The most prominent writers of the Indian diasporic fiction, as noted earlier, are Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Kamala Markandaya, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, and Rohinton Mistry. They have not only examined their identity crisis, racial and cultural conflicts, ethnicity, and remorse of their condition as displaced individuals, but they have done so through the perspective of a narrative lens of new loneliness about alienation from the experiences of the migrants. Thus the history of migration is the history of alienation and its implication. For any freedom won, one loses a tradition. For every anticipating second

generation who is assimilated, there lies an original first generation person who, for one reason or another, was not.

Consequently, diasporic writers have moral obligations to be true to the facts and the truths when using fact with a twist of fiction in their writing, they will be, in some ways, the interpreters in history of their time. It is important to highlight that most of them write about their own experiences, the challenges of living in a space, once called a new country.

Physical removal from the motherland presents socio-cultural and psychosomatic identity issues. Within this context cultural cross-currents have created a hybrid culture and a new process of cultural assimilation. In a mixed cultural climate there are new horizons of communication and dialogue in this cosmopolitan world. Consequently, the diasporic exchange has become one of the frequent themes of post-colonial world literature. In particular, the authors of the Indian diaspora, as William Saffron observes that continue to relate personally or vicariously, to the homeland in some way, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of this relationship. One of the primary concerns in the Indian diaspora has to do with the successful preservation of Indian cultural identity. It is notable that Indian diasporic woman writers convey the psychological disquietude and emotional trauma resultant from increasing migration and multiculturalism.

It is a little-known fact that Kiran Desai (1971- ), an American writer born in India, was awarded the Man Booker Prize for fiction in 2006 and the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award for her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. It along with her other novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) was widely and universally acclaimed all around the world. She won the Betty Trask Award for the first novel in 1998 as well. Desai spent much of her childhood in India, a colony of the British Empire for approximately two hundred years. Desai moved to England at fourteen, and a year later moved to America where she became a permanent resident of the United States. Desai was educated in India, England, and the United States. The socio-cultural backgrounds of the places where she was educated contributed to her in terms of shaping and developing the plots of her novels and characters. Therefore, it is appropriate to claim that Kiran Desai entered the world of literature as a

conventional diasporic writer in her peculiar multi-cultural educational background. Kiran Desai is a permanent resident of the United States of America with deep and intimate connections with the historical and culturally rich associations with her birthplace India. From this vantage point, *The Inheritance of Loss* exhibits a group of “lost” writers and condition of their interpretation of lostness from a cultural identity and in the entire realm of process of globalisation. This complicated context/associations are important to the multitude of diasporic writers who still have strong desires and are struggling to articulate cultural identity. Kiran Desai's fictional world unearths a sensitive engagement with the prospect of diasporic experiences. Further, she is both an intelligent and learned novelist who acts as a middle dragon, taming the cross currents of her multi-cultural coordinates. She represents a global constituency, reflecting on the past, the art of fiction, the voices and visions of a new generation of world citizens possessing a set of values of reference in an age of globalisation and in pursuit of their ambitious aspirations in the present set of life challenges.

Kiran Desai illustrates the dreams and ambitions of an Indian middle-class family in Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard, and successfully infuses the storyline with humour. The Guava Orchard is the focal point of all the characters when Sampath Chawla, a middle-class, no-good post office clerk tries to escape his miserable life by climbing a guava tree - thus acquiring the identity of a hermit. He uses his leisure time to read the mails of the citizens of Shahkot, and yes he climbs to the top of a guava tree and presents astonishing and interesting revelations to the citizens of the locality. Given this unique position Sampath is ironically misinterpreted as a great visionary, a religious guru of enormous quality. Sampath soon acquires fame, fortune, and later gets chaos - in the form of bumbling bureaucrats and a gaggle of liquor swilling, unruly monkeys that only Sampath can control - by passing on his wisdom to the people who make the trek to see the Monkey Baba. Mr. Chawla, Sampath's father, appears to be a middle-class opportunist when he advertises for commercial opportunities by making it known that he is the Monkey Baba at the top of the tree. Sampath has little regard for any follow up from the followers who clamber up the tree with him, and perhaps the monkeys, the business men and visitors are unknowingly a large part of this initial adventure. The drunk and diseased monkeys are an expanding part of Sampath's experience at the orchard too. He is semi-re-named as 'Monkey Baba'. The scene turns surreal as monkeys throw every thing upside down

as they become increasingly intoxicated during their hunt for liquor. Real hullabaloo ensues as civilians, military-men and police-men - are all involved to rid society of the monkey problem. The impending chaos is bumping against increasing waves of the irrational throughout the novel. At the same time, foolishly befuddled people are absorbed in listening to Sampath's words of wisdom from the top of the tree. The visitors to Sampath's residence, bring gifts that Mr. Chawla can sell and the family bank account begins to increase. Mr. Chawla soon has ideas for an investment plan. The end completion in the story seems very much like a great magician's final disappearing trick. At the conclusion, Desai recounts how Sampath, the main character, evaporates like a guava over the edge of a high cliff, carried aloft by the monkeys:

Yet monkeys continued to move to higher and higher levels. Like a gust of wind that sprang from nowhere, rustled through the trees, and vanished like a ghost. The crowd stood panting in the orchard....the monkeys continued to melt through treetops, up into the untamed wilderness, up to the ridge of the highest mountain. At this point, the trees at the very peak shimmered for a moment, bowed their heads as if saying goodbye- and then they were gone. Without a trace.  
(*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, 208-209)

This exhilarating story maintains the humor of the story. Sampath's dream-like existence is a journey into the self, to the empty space of emptiness like Buddhist nirvana-the being of nothingness!.

It is significant that *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is a fanciful story which utilizes fable-esque magic and satirical comedy. And Kiran Desai engages her readers through her powerful command of narrative strategy. The novel has several possible interpretations- on one level it is a quick moving comic story full of rich descriptions and comic book characters, but on another level it can be seen as a deeper exploration of the absurdity of family misunderstanding, the absurdity of hero-worship, the uncertainty of commercialism and the ineffectiveness of bureaucracy. Desai provides us a larger space to reflect on the gulf between what people choose to hear and what they need to hear;

*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is grounded in real life experiences familiar in Indian life and culture. In fact, Desai paints the common belief system regarding saints and hermits. She is fascinated by the characters from the expansive landscape of Indian life. As a result, she has crafted her plot around these characters. By doing so, she has accomplished not only a creative expression of the Indian culture but has done so in an engaging manner. The common place backdrops, as well as the characters, have become something that is more than just commonplace; they all carry their own identity and meaning. Desai's wealth of imagination or colour, and her acute sense of humour, make the plot unique and landscape lively and engaging.

This new novel reaffirms the many ventures Kiran Desai has had in diasporic fiction. It seeks to uncover the social, psychological, religious, and spiritual histories that continually shaped Kiran Desai's fiction. More specifically, her advances in the form of magic realism ensured her renown as a major writer of Diasporic English fiction. As such, she has a considerable foothold in the world. From her certain beginnings of writing her own fiction, she has grown to become a strong contender to some of the most prominent prize winners in the twenty-first century. In terms of literate presence, her capture of fiction readers has been remarkably fruitful. At the same time while diasporic fiction can now lay claim to its genre status and concept in order to treasure its success and glory, we may also thoughtfully consider its strengths and weaknesses, its successes and misses, its status and prospects of providing fiction as an art form. This new novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* reveals latent realities of life in Indian fiction.

*The Inheritance of Loss* went on to win the Booker Award in 2006. She also received the National Book Critics Circle Fiction award for her novels, Desai is one unique woman who sees how life is in more ways than one, somebody who understands life in more than one way. Kiran Desai's early life was full of challenge and change. When Kiran Desai's parents were divorced, her mother took her to America. At that time Kiran was 16. After a Kiran was Kiran originally registered at Bennington College in the United States with the intention of becoming a scientist, but she switched her focus to writing. She continued her education at Hollins College in Virginia. After completing the writing programme at Hollins College, she began work on her first book, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. In relation to her education, writing

was her first priority and the most prominent part of her life and that she initially struggled to maintain the writing habit that allowed her to get up and go right to her desk without a second thought.

Kiran Desai, lived in India until the age of 15, when her family moved from India to England, then to the United States. After graduating from Bennington College in 1993, she earned two MFAs, one in Creative Writing from Columbia University, a master's degree, in New York City and the other from Hollins University, a master's degree, in Roanoke, Virginia. In 1998, when *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* was published, Kiran graduated with a MFA in Creative Writing from Columbia University in the United States. She was also a Professor at MIT.

Kiran was crazy about writing. It took her four years to complete her first novel, and she says that she thinks that everything she remembered loving about India, and knew she would ultimately lose, was in her first book. It was more so a work largely inspired by her delight in discovering how much she loved writing. The level of thought that went into her novel speaks volumes about her connectedness to the country and a deep sense of belonging. Her family supported her work in the best way they could. Kiran said her father and her siblings influenced her work. Her father predicted a Booker Award, she said in an interview. She said she remembered meeting her father before she left for the award ceremony in New York and that her father said the same thing to her again. She explained what had transpired.

Kiran Desai rose instantly to fame when her book, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), won the Man Booker Prize; the characters were residents in a town in the north eastern Himalayas. She exercised two years after completing academic study, before the release of her first book, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* in 1998 published by Faber and Faber. She received the Betty Trask Award for her first book, and became one of the youngest female writers to do so. The Betty Trask Award is awarded to authors aged 35 and under for their best new books, by the Society of Authors. The Society of Authors since its inception in 1884 has awarded the Betty Trask Award as a trade union award for professional authors, illustrators and literary translators in the UK.

Kiran Desai was presented with the 'Berlin Prize Fellowship' in 2013 by The American Academy in Berlin, Germany. She was also listed as one of the 20 'most influential' Indian women in the world according

to The Economic Times in January of 2015. In terms of its scope and emotional depth, *The Inheritance of Loss* is much larger than the first book. It talks about important aspects of life including fundamentalism, alienation, globalisation, racial, social and economic inequity, and morality and justice. Kiran received the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award in 2006, the same year she received the Man Booker Award for her book *The Inheritance of Loss*. The book was shortlisted for The 2007 Orange Prize for Fiction, The Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize and The British Book Awards Decibel Writer of the Year. She also won the Betty Trask Award for her first book, 'Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard'

Kiran Desai is a true patriot. Desai, who hails from the U.S., carries her Indian heritage with pride like a badge of honor. Certainly her own lived experiences as well as those experiences she witnesses around her have influenced her. Her varied upbringing clearly gives her a fairly international view with a fundamental Indian sensibility. Kiran uses techniques of magic realism and socio-cultural realism within her work. All this demonstrates how purely Kiran Desai can inspire.

Desai occupies a unique position in the ranks of contemporary Indian writers whose representations of life and society in India and elsewhere have provided the national literary fabric with significant resources. After all, her novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is a delightful, lyrical fable about destiny—a work of whimsical peculiarity, a vigorous and pleasurable relationship with language and life. Kiran's language is fresh and original; she offers something entirely new and original in the literary landscape of the diasporic fiction; while this is the convention, everything she does is fresh and new.

Kiran Desai's engagement with the past and the dialects and idioms of diasporic fiction as she graduated into her interpretation of the specifics of the late twentieth-century continues to provide a rich and fertile quality in the twenty-first century. The depth-dimension of both *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss* broaden and more keenly define the international criteria of the international compulsions of the twenty-first century—its ambitions, dilemmas and artistic possibilities—in a global society riddled with ethnic tensions. The dilemmas of the commitment and artistic resolution of social and cultural issues permeate and underpin the very heart and soul of Kiran Desai's thinking.

RINKI KUMARI

**Rinki Kumari**

Research Scholar, P.G. Dept. of English  
Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya

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