From pain to gain: A study of diasporic dislocation in Kiran Desai’s

The Inheritance of Loss.

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Diasporic dislocation due to transcending boundaries and its consequences is a much focused issue in present day literature. This paper intends to explore the implicit optimism in diasporic dislocation in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*. In this novel, Desai portrays such characters who are dislocated in one way or another. Some characters are experiencing the pain of exile in America when few persons are enjoying the pleasure of being immigrants in the subcontinent. In both cases they face identity crisis after a certain period in their life in exile. Desai competently explores these crises and the disorientation in the formation of cultural, national and linguistic identity. Both Western and Eastern immigrants go through the constant psychological endeavor to construct a new identity in dislocated place whether in America or in India. They are always in a quest to overcome the vacuum feeling which is resulted from diasporic dislocation. Throughout the novel, it is conveyed that experiences in exile always welcome multi leveled losses in life. Though the title of the novel connotes a vacuum feeling with the word “loss” but the novel ends with the glimpse of hope. This study attempts to show how diasporic dislocation can contribute to the reinforcement of the national and cultural identity in the age of globalization in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*.

**Keyword:** Diaspora, Transcending boundaries, Identity crisis.
In a contemporary world, where technology makes it effortless to transcend boundaries and minimizes the distance, people all over the world are fascinated to accept this opportunity. Moving from one place to another, leaving homeland behind and coping with the new circumstances is a very well known practice now-a-days. As a consequence, diasporic dislocation is a much focused issue in present day literature. Since the very term ‘diaspora’ connotes displacement-a journey, it always invites a sense of loss with whom one way or another identity crisis is associated. So, it can be devised that diaspora is a misfortune. Writers who have experienced this agonizing experience emphasize on the configuration of identity as well as ideology of an individual in a foreign land. As this paper deals with the experience of Indian diaspora, depicted in The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai so an introduction to Indian diaspora is required here.

In Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin assert, “Diaspora is the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands to new regions.” (68). According to Amitav Ghosh the Indian Diaspora is one of the most important demographic dislocation of present day which is growing and assuming the form of representative of a significant force in global culture. In an article, titled Indian Diaspora, the writer classifies overseas emigration of Indians in terms of three phases:
(a) The ancient and the medieval,
(b) The colonial and
(c) The post-colonial phases
Among these three phases of migration, the post-colonial phase is more relevant to the subject of this paper. In order to give a comprehensible introduction to the purpose of diaspora or migration in post-colonial period, the writer goes on:

The migration in the post-colonial period was entirely different when compared with the earlier forms of migration in the ancient-medieval and the colonial phases. Here the migrants are from the middle-class, with Instruction in English, and were skilled. The educational system in the post Independent India was patterned after the British and American educational systems. The system produced professionals who outnumbered the availability of jobs that can absorb
them. In a situation dominated by underemployment and unemployment, the prospective migrants were attracted with the available opportunities abroad. This led to a kind of professional migration, often termed as 'brain drain', facilitated with the rapid transformations in the transportation and communication. The migration was mainly to the developed nations of the West- the U.S., the U.K., and some in the Europe and Australia. (7-8)

Undoubtedly, it can be concluded that the present day diaspora is nothing but of man's choice which has a preference towards the material gains, professional and business interests. It is particularly the representation of advantage and access to contemporary advanced technology and communication. Here, no deficiency of money or means is visible rather economic and lifestyle advantages are facilitated by the multiple visas and frequent flyer utilities.

The experiences of migrancy and living in a diaspora are eminent observable facts which have been animated much recent postcolonial literature, theory and criticism. The literature produced by diaspora writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, has proved immensely popular in Western literary criticism. Diaspora Literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives journeys undertaken on account of economic compulsions of harsh. Writers who have diasporic experiences try to share their miscellaneous emotions in exiles with the readers through literature. The diasporian authors engage in cultural transmission that is equitably exchanged in the manner of translating a map of reality for multiple readerships. Besides, they are equipped with bundles of memories and articulate an amalgam of global and national strands that embody real and imagined experience.

Writers who are living in distant lands have shared different ideas in their writings that help the readers to identify the positive sides of diaspora. One of the contemporary postcolonial writer, Salman Rushdie presents diaspora as a constructive force. In an essay, titled Imaginary Homeland, Rushdie focuses on the crisis moments that are created by diasporic experiences to the diasporian writers. Here he throws light on the positive side of diaspora. He argues that the displaced position of the migrant is an entirely valuable one. According to Rushdie, to live as a migrant may well evoke a sense of loss but on the other hand, it opens different windows of
possibility to have new knowledge. This diasporic experience can be the source of creativity. Rushdie thinks

..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, Indias of the mind. (10)

This experience can give birth to dignified feelings. The distance between abroad and the motherland may act as a stimulator that makes migrants nostalgic and at the same time sensitive to the respective homeland.

As a diasporic writer, Kiran Desai exposes all of these ideas in her works. She was born in India in 1971; she lived in Delhi until she was 14, and then spent a year in England, before her family moved to the USA. She completed her education in USA. Desai reflects her experiences and realization in her journey from India to USA in her famous novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* which was published in 2006. When talking of the characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, and of her own life, she says, "The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys (of her grandparents) as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is this I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance.

The subject of this novel is the experience of being displaced, of being in exile. How the fact of being unmoored colours our perception of life, and how it heightens the sense of wanting to belong, is at the very heart of this poetic, ambitious novel. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai portrays such characters who are dislocated in one way or another. In this novel there are different types of displaced people. Some characters are experiencing the pain of exile in America when few persons are enjoying the pleasure of being immigrants in the subcontinent. Their achievements and frustrations reside side by side. In both cases they face identity crisis after a certain period of time in their life in exile. Desai competently explores these crises and the disorientation in the formation of cultural, national and linguistic identity. Both Western and
Eastern immigrants go through the constant psychological endeavor to construct a new identity in dislocated place whether in America or in India. They are always in a quest to overcome the vacuum feeling which is resulted from diasporic dislocation. This struggle also gets priority in *The Inheritance of Loss* through the depiction of the life in exiles of the characters.

*The Inheritance of Loss* begins with a teenage Indian girl, an orphan called Sai who lives with her Cambridge-educated Anglophile grandfather, a retired judge, in the town of Kalimpong on the Himalayas. Sai is romantically involved with her math tutor, Gyan, the descendant of a Nepali Gurkha mercenary. Their affair does not see the light of happy ending as Gyan falls in with a group of ethnic Nepalese insurgents. In two parallel strands, the narrative follows Sai’s life in Kalimpong and that of the cook’s son, Biju, who has been sent to America by his father. Biju is an illegal immigrant in New York. These sections of the novel that deal with Biju's life in New York are the most powerful - and the most acutely observed.

Biju is a less educated teenage boy from a poor family. His father is a cook who wants to see his son in the most prosperous part in the world, the United States of America. The cook’s ideology has been influenced by the inferiority of complex as colonised one. He is successful in establishing the idea of ‘otherness’ in his son, Biju. In order to gain cultural and material prosperity Biju fixes up his mind to migrate America.

Biju’s journey to America starts from USA Embassy. Each and every step toward America invites Biju with unexpected humiliation. At Embassy Biju joins a crowd of Indians scrambling to reach the visa counter at the United States. Biju’s experience at Embassy goes on “Biggest pusher, first place; how self-contented and smiling he was; he dusted himself off, presenting himself with the exquisite manners of a cat. I'm civilized, sir, ready for the U.S., I'm civilized, mam. Biju noticed that his eyes, so alive to the foreigners and went dead.” (Desai 34). After arriving at New York Biju’s life faces to a series of challenges. He just enters the alienated world as a migrant, as an exile. His dream of a secure future is defeated by the harsh reality. In America Biju is on a restaurant called the Stars and Stripes Diner: "All American flag on top, all Guatemalan flag below. Plus one Indian flag when Biju arrived." (42) Biju’s daily life in America reflects his insight of being an exile. He begins to think himself as an unexpected individual. After his duty in restaurant he crossed to the river and walked to the far end where the
homeless man often slept in a dense chamber of green that seem to grow not so much from soil as from a fertile city crud. A homeless chicken also lived in a park. Every now and then Biju saw it scratching in a homey manner in the dirt and felt a pang for village life. This was his first realization of Biju when he feels that his own country has something special to him than the developed America. He walked to where the green ran out into a tail of pilings and where men like himself often sat on the rocks and looked out onto a dull stretch of New Jersey. Biju couldn’t help but feel a flash of anger at his father for sending him alone to this country, but he would not have forgiven his father for not trying to send him, either. A sense of alienation starts to haunt him continuously just after arriving in America. He changes the restaurants one after another to adapt himself with the cultural and linguistic differences. Inside him he nurtures the very Indianness. He is very much sensitive to his country. He possesses “an awe of white people, who arguably had done India great harm, and a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India.”(77). As an exile, crisis in national identity always haunts him. In New York, Biju dreams of his country, of the peace and comfort of his native village. A profound sense of nationalism inspires Biju to return to India. In the mirror of the bathroom at Damdam airport Biju saluted himself. Desai exposes his feelings “Here he was, on his way home, without name or knowledge of the American president, without the name of the river on whose bank he had lingered, without even hearing about any of the tourist sights – no statue of Liberty, Macy’s Little Italy, Brooklyn bridge, Museum of Immigration; no bialy at Barney Greengrass, soupy dumpling at Jimmy’s Shanghai, no gospel churches of Harlem tour.” (286)

Like Biju, there is another character in this novel who goes through this kind of alienation after a certain period of time in exile. Father Booty, a Swiss national, who has been living at the foot of Kanchanjenga about forty five years with a desire to lead a peaceful life in the rest of his life. He opens a Swiss style dairy and produces cheese, curd and chocolate cigars for the entire locality. He has never thinks himself as none but an Indian. When he has to leave his property and home, shuktara, and back to Switzerland, he one way or another loses his faith and discovers himself as an alien for the first time in his life in a foreign land. It is the crisis moment in Father Booty’s life when his ideology has started to be changed. He becomes nostalgic and strongly feels for his homeland, Switzerland.
People of diasporic experiences always have to face identity crisis at different levels. Immigrants also have to adapt themselves in new culture in new place. In order to be accustomed with the hybrid culture beyond respective geographical boundaries dislocated people engage themselves in diasporic struggle for the sake of their own benefits. People who have been staying in diaspora from generation to generation, after a certain period of time, they start to carry double identity. Living “in between different nations, feeling neither here nor there, migrants and their next generations unable to indulge in sentiments of belonging to either place. New ideology initiates to influence the construction of their respective philosophy of life. As a result the very nationalism and feelings for homeland begins to dissolve gradually. This is one of the prominent problems in transcending boundaries, specifically geographical boundaries. Present day academia exposes diaspora as a process of identity crisis. Because of leaving homeland and being the inhabitants of another country a vacuum sense regarding different levels of identity formation is emerged in the immigrants’ psychology. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai equally describes the positive and negative experiences in exile. As the title of this paper begins with the conversion of pain into gain, it suggests that there lies the optimism in diasporic experiences. In the novel Biju encounters with the sense of humiliation and alienation in America. Gradually this realization helps him to construct a new and strong feeling for India. Before leaving India his mind was occupied with American dream. Biju took India as a sinking ship from where he had to escape. After experiencing the nightmare (diasporic knowledge) attraction to the West is transformed into repulsion. Surprisingly his diasporic experience assists him to originate Indianness in his mind. Throughout the novel, it is conveyed that experiences in exile always welcome multi leveled losses in life. It is a continuous process that is transmitted from one generation to another. Above all the title of the novel confers a sort of pessimism to the readers. Though the title of the novel connotes a vacuum feeling with the word “loss” but the novel ends with the glimpse of hope. “The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it.” (Desai 324). The truth, the constructive force of displacement is there. In order to achieve that one has to go through a series of struggle and at the end he/she will carry static identity in any part of the world beyond his/her respective boundaries. At the end an unanticipated achievement will welcome the
people who have transcended the boundaries. It is not transcending boundaries, rather translocating it.
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