

Received: 22 March 2023, Accepted: 27 April 2023

Navigating Displacement and Identity through Magic Realism in the Novels of Kiran Desai

Sujendrakumari J,
Guest faculty in the Dept of English ,
PG Centre , Mangasandra. Bangalore North University

Abstract

This study compares and critically analyses the complexities of diasporic consciousness, post-colonial anxiety, and cultural dislocation in the age of globalization as articulated by Kiran Desai in his two works *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss*. The book explores the interior psychological conflict of characters dealing with divided identity and a searching for belonging in fragmented multicultural societies by a nuanced comparative approach. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is Desai's first novel, a witty and inventive satire and magic realism that reveals the absurdities of middle-class Indian life, inefficiency in the bureaucracy, and the commercialization of religion. The psychoanalytical regression and the metaphor of the individual's desperate attempt to regain agency from suffocating societal expectations that guava tree represents in Sampath Chawla's whimsical escape is a psychoanalytical piece in itself. In contrast, *The Inheritance of Loss* takes a much more serious tone, as it delves into the effects of colonialism, the trauma of undocumented immigration and the devastating consequences of economic disparities. The paper considers such characters as the anglicized judge who has been alienated and the exploited illegal immigrant Biju, to show the psychological impotence and "inheritance of loss" which is a feature of modern displacement. This study proves that Desai's range of storytelling skills, from cultural realism to linguistic experimentation, is a powerful way of capturing the existential dilemmas of the marginalized people and how they navigate between tradition, modernity and a sense of home.

Introduction

Kiran Desai is a deep voice in modern postcolonial literature who dissects the complexities of migration, globalization and hybrid identity. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) are two critically acclaimed novels authored by Desai that take a broad sweep of modern civilization, in which subjects are haunted by cultural dislocation, postcolonial anxiety and the dilemmas of diaspora. Although *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is a whimsical tale of magic realism and satire that points out the absurdities of the bureaucracy

and the middle-class life in India, the second novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, is a deeply serious and politically themed novel that takes on the psychological plight of undocumented immigrants and the lingering effects of colonialism. This study looks at the similarities and differences between the two stories and analyses how Desai employs literary methods to deal with the internal psychological conflicts of the characters who are seeking to define themselves in a world of increasing multiplicity and multiculturalism.

Diasporic Consciousness and the Impacts of Globalization *Diaspora* is not only a spatial phenomenon, it also contains powerful aspects of identity, memory, and desire for home that are a result of diasporic displace. *The Inheritance of Loss* chronicles the quintessential diasporic experience in characters who are caught between their homelands and host countries. The novel offers two parallel stories of displacement: internal alienation of the anglicized elite in India and external exploitation of illegal immigrants in the west.

Biju, an undocumented Indian immigrant in the basement kitchens of NYC restaurants is a stark example of globalization's realities. Biju leaves India with the American Dream in mind but becomes caught up in a cycle of exploitation, invisibility and very strong homesickness. Desai's diasporic awareness is manifested in his strong sense of longing, remembering, and indulging in the nostalgic pastimes of his village life, earthen lamps on Diwali and fresh milk, all of which are in stark contrast to his miserable existence abroad. Biju's linguistic inability to express himself in the English speaking world makes him silent and marginalized, a reflection of the fact that globalization frequently uses cheap labour and at the same time takes away the identity and dignity of the immigrants.

On the other hand, in Desai's work one can find the theme of "internal exile" as the retired judge Jemubhai Patel lives in Kalimpong. Jemubhai studied in England and embodies the colonial neurosis of a man who has been indoctrinated into the Western culture and despises his own India. He is not just a "Westernized native," an outsider in his own country, but a "cultural exile" who is physically displaced and uprooted. His character is a living memory of what it means to live after loss, the psychological legacy of colonialism: devastation of the self, a split consciousness.

To voice a yearning to break away from these constraining societal and cultural structures, Desai deftly uses magic realism and satire, especially in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. The novel follows Sampath Chawla, a dull, unimaginative post office clerk, who does not fit the

strict mould of his opportunistic father and society. Sampath hides in a guava tree to try to escape the heat of Shahkot and feel the relief of a tree that is far from the tight confines of his boring existence. Instead, Sampath finds himself in a guava tree, where he finds a respite from the pressure of his narrow existence and the heat of Shahkot.

Desai skillfully incorporates the elements of the fantastical and magical into the story, elevating an ordinary act of escapism to a magical one. The locals don't see Sampath's trip up the tree as a mental breakdown, but rather as his silence and accidental profound sounding comments as spiritual enlightenment. He is named as the "Monkey Baba" or "Tree-baba" and pilgrims flock to him, businessmen come to him and an army of drunken monkeys surround him. In this bizarre elevation of an aimless boy, Desai mocks the deep-rooted superstitions, blind hero-worship and commercialization of religion in the society.

Moreover, magic realism is beautifully expressed in the case of Sampath's mother, Kulfi, whose psychological dislocation manifests as a compulsion, almost a hallucination, towards food. As she's carrying Sampath in her womb during a major drought, she imagines rich, fantastic delights, and her internal psychological space becomes a land of strange herbs, spices and flavors. They provide Desai with the opportunity to show how bizarre and eccentric humans can be, and to condemn a society that rejects individualism, leading characters to find a place of shelter in the bizarre or the supernatural.

Internal Psychological Struggles and Search for Belonging Desai's characters are psychological, and show the trauma that is inherent in navigating multicultural identities. Analyzing her characters with a psychoanalytical perspective, it is clear that their behavior is the result of inner turmoil. Sampath's hiding in the guava tree is a subconscious attempt to assert himself in a world that doesn't recognize him. His bond with the tree reflects a return to a safe, prenatal-like space—a step back to a pre-symbolic world, free from constraints and laws of society. His safe haven turns into a prison, however, as the anxieties of society are shone on him, revealing that there is no full freedom of societal structures.

The Inheritance of Loss explores the issues of belonging in a way that is marred by postcolonial tension and geopolitical uncertainty. The novel takes place in the context of the Gorkhaland movement in 1980's of Indian Nepalese citizens who demand for the state of Gorkhaland, feeling as slaves and minority in a majority land. This political insurgency has a macrocosmic effect on the characters' life in general and a microcosmic effect on the internal identity crises

they have. Sai (the judge's granddaughter) is an orphan, a younger, more fluid, hybrid consciousness. She was educated in the west but lives in India, and finds herself between two entirely different cultures. As her love story with her Nepali math tutor, Gyan, goes awry due to his involvement in the nationalist movement, conflicts on the macro level ultimately tear apart personal and individual relationships on the micro level.

The psychological depth of Kiran Desai's characters can't be fully understood without a psychoanalytical approach and analysis of their internal landscapes and escapes. Desai does not depict individual consciousness as one, but as fractured, a space in which memory, guilt, desire and historical trauma violently collide. "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard" is a farce more than just a cute quirk of Sampath Chawla's life as a post office clerk, a place where he feels powerless and unseen. In a Freudian analysis, Sampath's flight represents a retraction to the pleasure principle, which is the world of his fantasies, a world where he finds the solace he is looking for from the strictures of society. Is his bond with the tree an attempt to regress to the womb-like pre-Oedipal period, where he is temporarily outside the constraints of society and language? Does the tree represent a Lacanian pre-symbolic order in which he is allowed to temporarily escape the oppressive laws of society and language? Yet Desai shows that it is impossible for a society to remain conscious, and the townspeople put their own spiritual fears on Sampath, who ends up trapped in the very myth he unwittingly enacted—of the "Monkey Baba."

The Inheritance of Loss is a study in consciousness that is focused on the residual pain of colonialism. The most striking example of a divided and displaced consciousness is the retired judge Jemubhai Patel. The judge has been indoctrinated with British colonial values in his schooling in England and is deeply ashamed of and alienated from his own Indian culture. He is so alienated that it is evident in both his physical and psychological condition, in a sense of Lacanian alienation, because the exterior ideologies imposed upon him by the imperialism are distorting him. This psychological legacy of loss shows the ongoing effects of colonialism on the mind and how the "Third Space" of hybridity is always being fractured as an authentic selfhood is continually denied.

Desai's fiction is widely acclaimed for its 'cultural verisimilitude' and representation of 'Indianness' referring to the unique cultural values, customs, superstitions and realities of Indian society. She has captured the essence of Indian culture through the details of dress, food and family hierarchy. Traditional clothing such as saris, dhotis, salwar kameez and pyjama

kurtas are often featured in her stories as emblematic of the country's multicultural identity. Additionally, food serves as a very strong symbolic and psychological indicator. Kulfi's desperate need to prepare dazzling food – fish curries, parathas and gulab jamun – is almost hallucinatory, an escape for her unfulfilled desires in Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard. The sensory elements of the rich gravies, chicken tikka masala and chapatis vividly contrast the poor lives of the characters with the rich heritage of their culture in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

But Desai doesn't hesitate to reveal the more stringent, dark sides to Indian traditions. She condemns the prevailing religious dogma and superstitions in rural life. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, the cook, for example, has misinterpreted that the snakes are offended, and he carries out a puja with a clay cobra in order to ask forgiveness, thus showing that the thoughts of the uneducated masses are irrational. Likewise, patriarchy and male chauvinism are severely attacked by Desai. Mr Chawla in Hullabaloo despises his wife, Kulfi for her oddities and always tries to rule over her. Oppression of women is vividly illustrated in the Judge's inhuman treatment of his fourteen year old bride, whose name is changed from Bela to Nimi Patel after her marriage, a reminder of the women's place of silent submission in male dominated society in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Desai's female characters sometimes represent subaltern voices in a world dominated by men. As critics have pointed out Desai's women are not the ones who are neatly tamed and passive, instead they're deeply rebellious, indifferent to the rules set by the male world, often turning to their inner selves as a way of asserting their independence. Kulfi, for instance, has a different idea of what a traditional wife ought to be; her haven and expression is in the maddening, magical world of spices and herbs.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai's Lola and Noni are cosmopolitan women as illustrations of a spectrum of women's independence. These ladies talk about news on BBC, read literature from international sources and stand out from the stereotype of a "sitting target" of idleness that is expected of a widow or spinster in India. Noni's most important piece of advice for the young protagonist, Sai, is that he should move forward in time: "Time should move. Don't go in for a life where time doesn't move the way I did, that is the single biggest bit of advice I give you". Desai presents a moderate but firm search for female identity through these characters, to break out of the traditionality and to encourage women to make an identity in a very modernising world. In a more humorous way, the rebellious Pinky -- who has an unhealthy obsession with herself and her ragtag crush on the "Hungry Hop Boy" (the ice cream man) --

plays a jocular romp with the docile image of the Indian maiden in order to replace it with hilarious, unabridged female desire.

Desai's use of numerous linguistic devices and narrative methods can only reflect the dizzying complexity of postcolonial and diasporic realities. Her storytelling is lyrical, sometimes poetic, and at other times satirical. She often creates a non-linear narrative which uses flashbacks and multiple points of view to develop backstories and uncover the disremembering memories of her protagonists.

Desai's examination of globalization is a biting attack on the economic differences and demoralizations experienced by Third World immigrants. The Inheritance of Loss is Biju's desperate fight as an undocumented worker in New York, where the façade of the "American Dream" is peeled away. Biju swirls between different places of entertainment: Le Colonial to the Brittany restaurant, constantly in fear of deportation and exploitation by the employers who are taking advantage of cheap and unlawful workers.

Desai exposes the cultural tensions and conflicts of these immigrant spaces, demonstrating how diverse marginalized communities are brought together. In one touching moment Biju is working with a man from Canterbury who is furious about the hypocrisy of the western history: "Your father came here and stole my bread, now I have come here to get my bread back". Desai portrays the psychological impotence of the diaspora through Biju's linguistic isolation, which is his inability to assert himself in English. In the struggle of transferring emotions from the land of her birth to the land of her exile, Biju is beset by homesickness, yearning for the earthen lamps of Diwali and the fresh milk of her village, highlighting the emotional divide between her homeland and the land of her exile. Finally, Biju's return to India, stripped of his dignity with no money, is a sign of the failure of the globalized system to treat human beings as commodities.

Her thematic virtuosity is extensively augmented by the use of landscape and environment, as not only passive settings, but as active symbols of cultural and political turbulence. The majestic but imposing Mount Kanchenjunga and the misty valleys of Kalimpong form a metaphor for the precariousness of human borders in The Inheritance of Loss. Desai says that the Himalayas are a land where "India merged into Bhutan Sikkim... a jumbled map," implying that nature turns the arbitrary geopolitical lines imposed by colonizers and politicians on its

head. The Gorkhaland insurgency, which is also brewing in these hills, is like an earthquake in the hills.

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard is also an allegory of a primal, free and wild space that modern 'bureaucracies and capitalisms' invade with vigor. With Sampath in the guava tree, the quiet oasis is soon shattered by businessmen who have arrived to sell toothpaste, mosquito repellent, and other items, signifying the omnipresence of commerce. Finally though, when the alcoholic monkeys invade, the dominance of nature is wild and unpredictable, and the characters forcing themselves to face forces greater than they are able to handle.

Conclusion

Kiran Desai's literary work is a monumental contribution to the body of contemporary postcolonial literature. The dizzying complexities of the modern world are picked up by Desai who seamlessly has managed to include the whimsical escapades of Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard with the melancholic and socio-political gravitas of *The Inheritance of Loss*. Her novel writing can reach a universal level of impact because she has the unique gift of making the psychological trauma of displacement, the scars of colonial history resonate with both the reader and the absurdities of globalization. In a clever mix of satire, language experimentation, and psychoanalytical depth, Desai guarantees the voices of the marginalized, the displaced, and the existentially adrift will be heard. In her novels she invites to a critical examination of the continuing inheritance of empire, the empty slogans about global migration, and the perennial human search for a genuine place to call home in a wonderfully fractured, multi-cultural world.

References

1. Abraham, A. P. "Postcolonial dilemmas in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*." *Int J Online Humanit.*, vol. 3, no. 5, 2017.
2. Adriana, S. V., and I. Rasikawati. "Transculturalism as conveyed in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*." *J Lang Lit.*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2018.
3. Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge, 1998.
4. Banerjee, Charu. "Magical Realism in Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*." *Indian English Literature: Critical Essays*, edited by A. K. Sharma, New Delhi: Atlantic, 2011.
5. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

6. Bhatt, K. K. *Response to Colonialism in the novels of Chinua Achebe and Kiran Desai*. Image India Publishers & Distributors, 2013.
7. Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 1996.
8. Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2008.
9. Desai, Kiran. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. London: Faber & Faber, 1998.
10. Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. New York: Grove Press, 2006.
11. Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990.
12. Sathya, C., and M. Shobana. "The theme of alienation in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*." Semantic Scholar, 2018.
13. Sumathi, R., and M. L. J. "Multiculturalism and aspects of globalisation in Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss*." 2019, pp. 8-11.