

Biju's anxious plight in *The Inheritance of Loss*: Kiran Desai's assessment of diasporic Culture

Dr Chhavi Sharma

S.B.S.E.C, University of Delhi

Abstract:

Kiran Desai's assessment of diasporic culture has been distinct from her contemporaries. She does not celebrate the "third space" cosmopolitan culture. However, she looks at the underdogs' crisis in adjusting to their adopted land. Her protagonist Biju fails to do so and at last returns to Darjeeling amidst local tensions. The paper "Biju's anxious plight in *The Inheritance of Loss*: Kiran Desai's assessment of diasporic culture" explores Biju's journey to the US to better his life, and his miserable failure, which can be ascribed to his lower-class status for whom all roads lead to exploitations of all kinds and life becomes not anything more than a sad tale of suffering.

Keywords:

Biju, class, diasporic culture, , maladjustment, Postcolonial, *The Inheritance of Loss (IOL)*, the painful process of adjustment.

Diasporic writers often champion their adopted nation (the notion of "third space" as elaborated on by Bhaba and Hall) or speak of the painful process of their getting accustomed to the diasporic context and the attached nostalgia for the nation left behind. When we look at the characters of Jhumpa Lahiri, they are primarily from the upper-middle class trying to adjust and celebrate the diasporic setting and cosmopolitan culture. However, in Kiran Desai's literary creation *The Inheritance of Loss*, a lower-class young man, Biju, finds it difficult to earn a living in the US and has to make compromises with his dreams. Kiran Desai delves into the diasporic existence of one of her protagonists Biju, though instead of doing the above, she presents how Biju cannot get himself to live in the land of dreams, the US and has to get back to his hometown, Darjeeling. The paper "Biju's anxious plight in *The Inheritance of Loss*: Kiran Desai's assessment of diasporic culture" critically reflects on the character of Biju to manifest how Desai is assessing the diasporic situation from the lower-class perspective; and how the lower-class people are not just alienated in the land of the dreams, but also in their supposed own nation.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Biju flies to New York to make his fortune in the land that abounds in wealth and to realise the dreams of his father. Biju comes across challenges of all sorts in America. He shifts from one job to another and always sends false letters to his father about his well-being. America, though having a multi-cultural ambience, the plight of immigrants frustrates Biju's dreams. While he struggles for his livelihood, the concern for his father's welfare makes him further sick. The reports in the newspaper about the discontent in Darjeeling also worry him. There are discussions about fighting for one's land, and Biju and the likes often feel insecure. Having no news from his father makes him anxious. Desai writes:

“They should kick the bastards back to Nepal” (IOL, 228), continued My. Iype, “Bangladesh to Bangladesh, Afghans to Afghanistan, all Muslims to Pakistan, Tibetans, Bhutanese, why are they sitting in our country?” (IOL, 228). This troubles Biju, and a pall of gloom surrounds him. He feels alienated and threatened. What makes him worried is that even his father’s friend, Nandu, did not answer his phone. He tries to hide when Biju arrives and discourages Biju saying:

“No jobs here anymore,” ... “If I were a young man, I would go back to India, more opportunities there now, too late for me to make a change, but you should listen to what I am saying. Everyone says you have to stay; this is where you’ll make a good life, but much better for you to go back.” (IOL, 98).

Biju’s suffering and identity crisis do not end here. Still trying hard to survive in the US, his travails continue. He sticks to his faith that things may change, but he repeatedly feels betrayed. He realises that he is working for a country that is not ready to recognise his services. The green card is another impediment in his way; he sometimes undergoes an inner conflict and thinks that others were right in suggesting him that he should go back to India. He feels nauseated at times, oscillating between his love for work and his own country, his people. The diasporic individuals often suffer from a sense of nostalgia for the nation and its culture and people left behind as they find it difficult to adjust to their new circumstances.

Hall and Bhaba speak of celebration of the “third space and hybridity and that is true for professionally successful people who have got a green card and now look at the sunny side of life. But for Biju, nothing like that happens as he is a low-key figure constantly adjusting and maladjusting to his new circumstances and thus fighting a lone battle with many others like him all around him. The desperateness of the state of affairs is such that it breaks his spirit, and at last, he has to decide to return. It is substantial to comprehend here that the celebration of the third space cosmopolitanism, as well as the ambivalence of hybrid existence of the diasporic beings (having a contrapuntal amalgamation of both the cultures of the land left behind and that the land taken up), are but a myth which has been constructed in mythical terms. In the representation of these myths, the reality is constructed, which often becomes a guide to understand the diasporic context and the means through which diasporic life is being led. The postmodernist theorisations make it so that the images become more accurate than the real. In those images, people tend to find the meaning of life. Biju also had dreamt of that image of himself in the land of the US. However, when he reaches there, the thud of reality makes him come to know and realise the mistake that he had committed to sighing for the American shores. It is true that being a cook’s son in Darjeeling, Biju had no life there. However, being an illegal immigrant in the US, he too is unfit in the US and is not welcomed in any way.

Saeed also has the same tragic tale, and he, too, is struggling for his identity in an alien land. Though Saeed gets released when he gets a job in a banana republic, Biju loses a well-wisher. Biju gets some moments of relief in the company of people from other countries who also meet the same fate. Despite the tall claims of globalisation that a postcolonial world offers, Biju reveals the qualms of conscience it gives to individuals. Desai clarifies that conflict of class and culture, which may seem to be dissolved by the new wave of globalisation, also has its evil consequences.

Biju's class and culture conflict in America makes him feel sick and nostalgic several times. During his stay in America, he suffers at the hands of the Italian owner of the Restaurant where he works. The wife of the Restaurant owner also dislikes Biju due to his Indian smell. Besides the white man's degrading remarks, Biju is humiliated by the three Indian girls whom he delivers food from the restaurant. Kiran Desai observes the racist feelings and portrays racism and distinctions based on, class, caste and language among Indians abroad. But there is some consolation in his neighbourhood "suffused with Indian femininity in there, an abundant amount of sweet newly washed hair, gold strung Kolhapur slippers lying about. Heavy-weight accounting books sat on the table along with a chunky Ganesha brought from home despite its weight, for interior decoration plus luck in money and exams." (IOL, 49).

Biju's travails take him to the Gandhi Café owned by an Indian, Harish-Harry. The hope that the master of the café would understand his countrymen's troubles is belied when the latter thrashes him for slipping over a rotten egg. Biju realises that the name Gandhi alone is not a solace. In a foreign country, even one's countrymen become alien and behave like foreigners. Biju gets a taste of class conflict as Harsh behaved like the master from whom a worker devoid of any affiliation. Biju is disillusioned when he becomes conscious of his self, of the reality that America is a place where relations or acquaintances mattered have no meaning, where friendship is feigned and where one has no identity of one's own as an immigrant. Biju is again cast into a conflict between himself and his nation and his father waiting far in India. The novelist dexterously marks Biju's efforts to carve his own identity and the alternative to end his conflicts, saying: "Shouldn't he return to a life where he might slice his importance, to where he might relinquish this overrated control over his destiny and perhaps be subtracted from its determination altogether?" (IOL, 268) He manages to get a ticket for his return journey to his country. He comes back with a wish to begin anew. On his return journey, when the plane lands at Calcutta airport, he comes out of the airport into 'Calcutta night' and is thrilled to be at the soil of his country notwithstanding its limitations:

"Sweet drabness of home – he felt everything shifting and clicking into place around him, felt himself slowly shrink back to size, the enormous anxiety of being a foreigner ebbing – that unbearable arrogance and shame of the immigrant. ... He looked about and for the first time in God knows how long, his vision unblurred, and he found that he could see properly." (IOL, 300)

Despite elaborating on class and culture conflict, Kiran Desai clarifies that even in an alien land, conflict is not confined only to the elite class, much like Jhumpa's characters. Conflict arises because of the questions of identity. Our identities change as per the demands of life situations. Identity, whether of an elite or an illiterate, is a delicate and complex issue. This is true not only in India but in America or, for that matter, in any other country too. *The Inheritance of Loss* shows that even in a multi-cultural world like America, the problem of illegal migration is raising its head. Changing places to upgrade human identity has always been a human effort. It is relevant to quote what Sarita Singh says: "Desai does not suffer from elitism but describes the experiences of both the rich and the educated and the poor, the uneducated with equal as whether it is in their love, longing for a better life or the collapse of humans' faith in each other because of their illusions" (Singh, 194).

The conflict of diasporic culture and class is rooted not only in the characters' reaction to the impending challenges of a postcolonial, post-modern and diasporic world where language also plays its role. The poor and illiterate migrants feel unarmed with the language the people of the new world converse in. As a result, they often gnash their teeth and express their anguish, sometimes in slang and abuse. As a diasporic writer who is also acquainted with Hindi, Desai shows at various places how these flawed characters often got relieved to know someone who spoke in their language. There is no denying that Desai as a novelist, might have hinted at these language tactics as a survival strategy to resolve various conflicts that keep plaguing human minds. The ending of the novel with the lines, "The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel if briefly, that truth was apparent" (324) hints at the novelist's tilt towards hope and harmony.

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