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TREATMENT TO THE THEME OF IMMIGRATION IN THE NOVELS OF INDIAN  
DIASPORA

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**Abstract:**

Diasporic writing brings into focus, as a matter of fact, not merely the role of the intellectual or the relationship of teaching to the evolution of democracy, but also the intellectual's need to move away from a mere language of critique for a redefinition as part of a language of transformation and hope. It is only on this premise that the struggle against racism, class structures, sexism, and other forms of oppression would gather new momentum. This necessary and inevitable shift indicates that literary writers and critics combine with other cultural activists for inventing languages and providing critical spaces that offer new opportunities for a coming together of different social movements. Though writing of the diasporic Indians is not new, it has of late raised complicated issues which are the in-word or talking point in postcolonial cultural and literary discourses. The formation of Indian diaspora is one the most significant demographic dislocations of modern times.

**Keywords:** Diasporas, democracy, transformation, racism, oppression, India and postcolonial.

The phenomenon of multi-culturalism, responsible for the

production of diasporic writings, is itself an aspect of post-modernism, which proclaims multicultural and multi-ethnic societies, promoting the politics of difference. In this condition, identity is no longer unitary or essential; rather, it is fluid and shifting, shaped by multiple sources and assuming multiple forms. In other words, there is no such thing as woman or Asian. However curious it may sound, the post-modern condition typically connects the local and the global. We notice today a new, or renewed, importance attached to place, leading to a sort of re-discovery of territorial identities, local traditions, and local histories. The tendencies stretch to the creation of imagined or even invented communities and nationalities.

Diasporic writing draws our attention to an important aspect of our era in which responsibilities of citizens go across national boundaries. The earlier modernist notions of centre and margin, home and exile, and familiar and strange are falling apart. The borders defined in terms of geography, culture and ethnicity are being replaced by configurations of power, community, space, and time. Citizenship cannot any longer ground itself in forms of Eurocentricism and the

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language of colonialism. In our time, new spaces and identities and relationships have to be created which permit people to move across boundaries, to engage difference and otherness as part of a discourse of justice, social engagement, and democratic struggle. Derived from the Greek word *diaspirein*, meaning to disperse, the term 'diaspora' since the nineteenth century, has been widely applied to the dispersal of the Jews throughout the Gentile nations and to the Jewish community that lives outside the frontiers of biblical Israel. The term now has been extended to include other displaced populations due to slavery, colonialism, or forced migrations. After the Jewish diaspora, there followed the black or African diaspora to describe the history and experience of black people living outside Africa, especially those in America. We in India now have drawn attention to the experience of the dispersed Indian in America, England, Canada, or elsewhere. A sizeable stock of the Indian diasporic creative and critical writings has piled up over the years to merit serious critical attention, at least in our own country.

The most illuminating mode of theoretical inquiry in our era has, of course, been the demystification of the established canon and its critical credo. All those who promote the new cultural politics of difference must perforce adopt the demystificatory mode of critical enquiry and interpretation. The stable springboards for the most desirable forms

of critical practice which take history seriously include political and social analysis of empire, determinism, class, race, gender, nation, and region. This mode attempts to trace the complex dynamics of institutional and other related power structures for disclosing options and alternatives in the service of transformational praxis. It also tries to grasp the manner in which representational strategies become creative responses to changing circumstances and conditions. No doubt, this method is partisan, partial, engaged, and crisis centered. But it also keeps open a sceptical eye so that it can avoid dogmatic traps, formulaic formulations, or rigid conclusions. It is decidedly anti-canonist and anti-essentialist. It is, however, not without attendant dangers or traps, the most formidable of which is reductionism, be it sociological, psychological, or historical sort.

One way to avoid this trap is to stay attuned to the best of what the mainstream has to offer in terms of its paradigms, viewpoints, and methods, and yet to maintain an orientation in affirming and enabling subcultures of criticism. The demystified critics must be models of what it means to be intellectual freedom fighters, striking their position within or alongside the mainstream critics while clearly aligning with those who vow to offer resistance to the homogenizing discourse of globalization and the like. However, after we have said all this, it seems equally necessary to emphasize

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here that literatures like the diasporic are not perforce anti-universal or anti-value. Any art, if it is great and good, would transcend the transient and rise to whatever is universal and valuable in man and life.

What is being insisted upon here is the fact that despite our cultural concerns and political polemics in the study of literature, more so the diasporic, the aspect of literariness or artness of literary work would always remain a relevant and valuable consideration. Equally relevant and valuable will remain the concept of good and great art as against bad and frivolous art. No amount of deconstruction can demolish the difference between a Shakespeare and Shobha De.

The problem with theory is that even though high sounding, higher than even philosophy, it has confined literary criticism to the surface of whatever is expressed in art. The questions being addressed today by theory of difference and deferring, of otherness and orientalism, of politics and ideology, are not, in fact, new; they have always been addressed by creative writers as well as critics from the time of Homer and Plato to our own time. The only difference is that while earlier than the advent of theory literary criticism was inclusive of all questions arising out of literary work, including the political, moral, and aesthetic, the theory prefers to remain confined only to the political and ideological, disdainfully excluding the

moral and aesthetic. We need, therefore, to restore to our reading or criticism of literature the earlier comprehensiveness of concerns, subjecting them finally to the moral and aesthetic. To do this, we have to admit that literature, including the diasporic is an art, not journalism or politics, nor sociology or psychology, nor linguistics or anthropology, but a combination of all these, brought under the laws of poetic beauty and poetic truth, as Arnold puts it.

The term 'diaspora', from the Greek, meaning dispersal, distribution, or spreading has been applied for many years to the worldwide scattering of the Jews; in more recent times it has been applied to a number of ethnic and racial groups living distant from their traditional homelands; and it has been used with particular application to people from the former British India result of the colonization, though of late one occasionally hears or reads of the African Diaspora. When we speak of the Indian diasporas, writers generally refer to persons of Indian birth or ethnicity living abroad (in earlier times often as a result of induced emigration or indenture but in more recent decades usually by free choice and often for economic, artistic, or social advantage). Emmanuel S. Nelson defines the Indian diaspora as the "historical and contemporary presence of people of Indian sub continental origin in other areas of the world." Many are first generation expatriates who continue to consider India their true home, the place

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of their nurture, values, and extended families as well as their deepest sympathies and attachments. However, this is not universally the case; accommodated to overseas lifestyles, many members of the diaspora experience a distinct dissonance when reintroduced to their former sub-continental culture.

Generally speaking, the literature of the Indian diaspora is considered to be that body of writing in English produced by persons who identify themselves as of Indian heritage who are living outside the nation state of India or Mother India in such places as Australia, Fiji, Trinidad, Guyana and Mauritius, Malaysia and East Africa, or in Western countries such as Canada, the United States and Great Britain.

This classification is termed by other critics as forced diaspora and voluntary diaspora. Another critic and scholar Vinay Lal calls it 'diaspora of labour' versus 'diaspora of longing'. For most of the older diasporas writers there is an unease of the dislocated and the deracinated who either by choice or by compulsion have abandoned house/home in the country of their birth for housing/lodging in their adopted country. For instance, Naipaul, originally a third generation immigrant from a 'branch of Dubes' of a Brahmin village of Uttar Pradesh, who moved to Trinidad expresses a sense of unease on the question of inheritance. In *A Way in the World*, the narrator comments on the

ancestry of the British immigrant mortician Leonard Side/ Sayed's inheritance:

'I might say that an ancestor of Leonard Side's came from the dancing groups of Lucknow, the lewd men who painted their faces and tried to live like women. But that would be only a fragment of his inheritance, a fragment of the truth. We cannot understand all the traits we have inherited. Sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves.'

This quote applies to all the first/second/third generation writers who were migrants by compulsion, usually descendants of indentured labourers from India sent to work in various British colonial plantations. For the migrants by choice, the situation is totally different. Usually upper-middle class and cosmopolitan, these first and second generation writers live in a kind of cosmopolitan, globalized world where the markers of their borderless state have often to be invented. Apart from fictional example of Thamma who is confused between going and coming home in Dhaka,

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, I am also reminded of a recent experience in an international flight where in between the movie scenes, the screen in front of me showed the image of the plane with an arrow over it that was constantly pointing towards Mecca with the mileage noted in bold below it. This attempt at mooring oneself within

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the concept of a 'meta-home' in a borderless state of existence at about thirty thousand feet height above sea level, according to my analysis is an important feature of contemporary diasporic thought. I am also reminded of the wedding cards that I often receive in Kolkata where the bride's and groom's addresses are often mentioned along with their original 'home town' in parenthesis. What is interesting is that for most of the time, this 'meta-home' is located in erstwhile East Pakistan, or present Bangladesh, places where their fathers, grandfathers, or ancestors hailed from, and which the bride or the groom have never ever visited. These two instances therefore serve to emphasize the desire for roots and belonging in all diasporic sensibilities.

The idea of home as an ambivalent location shows that identities are not fixed but stay in transition, drawing on different cultural traditions at the same time. It may be tempting to think of identity as destined to end up in one place or another, either returning to its roots or disappearing through partial assimilation in a hermeneutic 'fusion' that is possible because of the supposed translatability and commensurability of different cultures. Caught between a nativist traditionalism and a postcolonial metropolitan assimilations, the migrant culture of the 'in-between' according to Homi Bhabha, dramatizes precisely the activity of cultural untranslatability.

These hybrid identities are metaphorically located on borders and boundaries where the world of capitals and of universalistic assumptions is subverted by interpenetration and reversals of different cultures, where subjectivities are shifting, epistemologies are questioned, and homogeneity is replaced by heterogeneity.

Kiran Desai's diasporic novel makes a probing study of Westernised Indian cultures within the vast campus of diasporic fiction. Kiran Desai's second novel explores contemporary international issues such as globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism, terrorist violence, immigration, racial-discrimination, post-colonialism, alienation, exile and Westernization. Like Naipaul, Desai bears witness to the sufferings of the poor and the powerless by holding up an unflinching mirror to their lives. As a gifted writer, Desai keenly observes the existing social values, political issues, and ideologies and depicts them through the people of her fictional world with exceptional creative imagination and deep analytical insight. Unlike her mother, Anita Desai, whose, 'Preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than outer world of action' and who 'has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters'. Being a product of intercultural forces Desai's personal,

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social, and I have argued that Kiran Desai's diasporic novel makes a probing study of Westernised Indian cultures within the vast campus of diasporic fiction. Kiran Desai's second novel explores contemporary international issues such as globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism, terrorist violence, immigration, racial-discrimination, post-colonialism, alienation, exile and westernization. Like Naipaul, Desai bears witness to the sufferings of the poor and the powerless by holding up an unflinching mirror to their lives. As a gifted writer, Desai keenly observes the existing social values, political issues, and ideologies and depicts them through the people of her fictional world with exceptional creative imagination and deep analytical insight. Unlike her mother, Anita Desai, whose, 'Preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than outer world of action' and who has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters. Being a product of intercultural forces Desai's personal, social, and cultural sides of her personality are very much influenced by her expatriate sensibility. Her profound sense of involvement in the cultural, social and political life of India, her studious observation combined with great judiciousness and feminine sensibility and perception set her apart from other writers. Occupying a vast

prominent place in post-colonial Diaspora literature, Kiran's *The Inheritance of Loss* portrays the Westernized Indian culture by depicting the lives of a few Indians with fractured identities. The probing analysis of the Anglicized Indian culture in her fiction shows the larger perspective of a globalised world.

*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. Sai is romantically involved with her math tutor, Gyan, the descendent of a Nepali Gurkha mercenary, but he eventually recoils from her obvious privilege and falls in with a group of ethnic Nepalese insurgents. In a parallel narrative, we are shown the life of Biju, the son of Sai's grandfather's cook, who belongs to the 'Shadow class' of illegal immigrants in New York and spends much of his time dodging the authorities, moving from one ill-paid job to another. Almost all of Desai's characters have been stunted by their encounters with the West.

Justice Jemubhai Patel is educated in the Bishop Cotton School and admired the portrait of Queen Victoria at the entrance of the school building. She looks so plain but is powerful; from that time, his respect for her and the English grows by leaps and bounds. After graduating from Bishop's College, Jemubhai goes to Cambridge for higher studies. Bose, his friend corrects his mistakes in English

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pronunciation: Jeelee not Giggly, Yorkshire, Edinburgh, John Aae, Jane Aiyer etc. They both read a lot of text books like *A Brief History of Western Art*, *A Brief History of Philosophy*, *A Brief History of France* etc. While studying, he grows strange to others and himself. He finds his skin tanned and his accent very awkward. He forgets how to laugh or smile. Even if he smiles, he holds his hand over his mouth; he does not want anybody to look at his gums or teeth. He works at 'being English' with fear and hatred, but he wants to maintain the false pride throughout his life by ignoring his real identity at all. Nimi, his young wife whom he barely knew, became the embodiment of everything Indian that he despised.

The judge's granddaughter, Sai, also becomes a Westernised Indian growing up in the bicultural household. She grows in a Christian convent in Dehradun with a lot of contradictions. She has the English accents and manners. She speaks English, celebrates Western holidays like Christmas, eats English food, and lives in Cho Oyo, which is a fairly nice home, with some modern conveniences. Desai presents the feelings of western culture as:

'Cake was better than laddoos; fork, spoon, knife better than hands; sipping the blood of Christ and consuming a wafer of his body was more civilised than garlanding a

phallic symbol with marigolds.

English was better than Hindi.'

Just as Nimi was the representation of an idea larger than herself for the Judge, Sai also becomes the embodiment of colonialism and racism for Gyan. The judge saw Nimi as part of the 'thieving ignorant' Indian class, while Gyan sees Sai as part of the upper Westernised Indian class that is responsible for the mistreatment of the Nepalese. Sai and Gyan fight and appear above the parting clouds. The reality is that the world is full of racism, segregation, and cultural divisions, but it does not mean that hope does not also exist. Happiness is possible, the world is not always submerged in fog and rain. In the end 'the five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it.'

*The Inheritance of Loss* is truly a powerful post-colonial novel in which Kiran Desai clearly presents the ideas of cultural identity, race, and ethnicity; focusing mainly on Indian culture and how it has both integrated with and influenced Western cultures. Being an expatriate Desai can very well understand the kind of mental agony and physical sufferings one has to undergo when one settles down in an alien land. She is quite certain that people should not be discriminated against one another based on their race, skin-colour and culture. With great futuristic vision Desai

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strongly suggests in the novel that tolerance and mutual respect for one another will lead to the abolition of racial prejudice and discrimination. This novel highlights basic human values such as love, compassion, tolerance, selflessness and respect for one another which surpass all social, political, cultural and religious barriers and limitations.

The Westernised Indian culture finds expression in most of the novelists who are caught in a diasporic situation. But Kiran Desai's variety, abundance, and creating of theme and style blend in a new kind of synthesis. She has a firm grasp of the socio-cultural situation in the West and the East. This strength of her insightful portrayals reflects her experiences and narrative perspective. Indeed, that is the major achievement of Kiran Desai.

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