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The Concept of Diaspora in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006)

Abstract:

The core of the theory of hybridity has been emphasized throughout the merged relation between hybridity and diaspora categorizing the considerations and restrictions of social, cultural and political effects and transformations. Diaspora and hybridity have been one of the most arguable and integrated trends in universal debates. Diaspora presents the essence and the spirit of hybrid experiences and circumstances reflecting the wrestling divergent postcolonial cultural, social and political schemes. In fact, diaspora permits new social forms of cultural differences which analyze the strategies of hybrid cultural articulations suggesting different reconfiguration between the dominant and subordinate cultures and concentrating on the diasporic immigrants who never fully equalized in any of the configurations of the host societies. The issue of diasporic identity becomes more complicated because it is extremely influenced by the practices, fears, concerns, expectations and frustrations of the diasporic immigrants. Diasporic life involves complex ambivalences which encounter with the integration of the immigrants in the host societies. In fact, diaspora generates the 'in-between' space or 'borderline' which makes a shift in the clarification of the colonial-postcolonial world order creating new identities and providing the minimum transparent assimilation of cross-cultural meanings including conditions, rituals and customs in the host societies. Thus, the diasporic cultural identity is the result of the mutual relation between postcolonial repercussions and hybridization deepening the perceptions of the relation between the process of hybridization itself and the ideological, political, social, cultural and economic challenges in postcolonial arena. Still, the central concern is to recognize how diasporic identities are converted, intertwined, interweaved to be hybrid, merged and conversant.

The aim of this paper is to examine the concept of diaspora in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Diaspora is shown within the cultural conversions which expand the recognition of the spheres of cultural experiences and social diversities. It also reflects complex connections of social categories, hybrid practices and new cultural forms which have emerged as the sign of cultural mimics. Sunil Bhatia explains the different diaspora features of immigrants saying: "Diasporas consciously attempt to maintain (real and/or imagined) connections and commitments to their homeland as well as to recognize themselves and act as a collective community" (31). In other words, the diaspora immigrants suffer from their dislocation experiencing pains and frustrations of being displaced in their new host communities.

Essentially, diaspora functions as an analytical strategy to understand the new forms of identity of the diaspora immigrants in their journey in host societies. The internal dynamics of diaspora can be manifested by coping with cultural difference to overcome certain emotional and spiritual discomfort. The atmosphere of displacement explains the plight of fear and distress which constitute the dominant response towards diaspora. Vijay Mishra explores the several cultural, social and linguistic conversions which haunt the diasporas in their host countries commenting: "Diasporas also remind settler nation-states in particular about their own past, about their own earlier migration patterns, about their traumatic moments, about their memories, their own repressed pain and wounds, about their own prior and prioritized enjoyment of the nation" (20).

The diaspora experiences entail the loss of identity as a severe response to the alienation and spiritual defeat which increase through generations. The fatal consequences of moving between East and West are clearly manifested within different categories where some diaspora-immigrants fail to assimilate into new cultures while other types surrender entirely and become fully westerners abandoning their original and native culture. All types of diaspora personalities suffer from the pressures of belonging to the new societies adapting and adjusting to new languages, cultural identities, environments and customs. They need a huge effort to balance their thoughts, feelings and tormented souls. Sunaina Maira shows how the cultural and legal status formulate their connotation of diaspora affecting their experiences and opportunities in their host countries: "Diaspora has

been used to acknowledge the experience of displacement and the ideological force of 'homeland' for immigrant communities" (133). The total conversion process of diaspora immigrants into westernized personalities is heavily influenced by their inner challenges of merging two distinct cultures and choosing between their native culture and the foreign one. They create their new identity according to their response to the social and cultural challenges in the host lands.

Broadly speaking, the concept of diaspora involves the consequences of historical forces of the previous British colonialism and the current American imperialism which exemplify the Indian diaspora communities in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Ashcroft and Griffiths define diaspora as, "the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions, is a central historical fact of colonization" (81). In fact, most of the diaspora Indian immigrants, who manage to assimilate into new cultures, stand in the middle of an endless psychological turmoil challenging being diaspora immigrants. They are penalized through their diaspora displacement as they are caught between two cultures and they are obliged to negotiate their new and different social space. In other words, they have been torn between two cultures of which one seems to be superior to the other failing ultimately to decide their real identity. Sarma and Sarma-Debnath crystalize how diaspora shapes the cultural confusions of the diaspora immigrants in host societies saying: "Indian diaspora refers to all people of Indian origin living outside India and who, for the most part, preserve at least some major Indian ethno- cultural characteristics and beliefs"(172).

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, the question of diasporic identity is triggered by Biju's journey as a diaspora immigrant who belongs to the shadow class reflecting the model of the poor, illiterate, unfortunate Indian young man. In India, he lives poor and has been satisfied for being just alive. Biju embodies the image of younger immigrants who range all over the American estates to overcome their poverty achieving their dreams of being rich. He believes that America is the dream land, "a country where people from everywhere journeyed to work" (22). He is proud of being a civilized man who deserves to get a tourist visa to the United States of America escaping the traumatic and dreadful scene of a gathering of Indians fighting to reach the visa counter at the United States Embassy. In fact, Biju

considers this tourist visa as the most delightful dream and the only good thing in his life which revives his hopes in the future. He appreciates his father advice to, "Stay there as long as you can... Make money. Don't come back here" (191).

Actually, Biju reflects the experiences of diaspora immigrants who work hard to attain more secured and comfortable life in host countries. He has a clear vision towards the costs of his relocation and diaspora in the American society expecting all kinds of social confusions and cultural duality which may threaten his national and cultural belongings. Oana Sabo adds: "Since the 1990s, diaspora has been theorized as the displacement of individuals and groups from their homeland through exile and migration and their re-anchoring in their host countries" (376). Thus, Biju is obliged to rethink profoundly about his displacement in the American society which examines his challenge of his authentic social and cultural barriers and the certainty of diaspora as an accepted path to create adjustment to his diaspora circumstances.

Biju prepares himself to accept all kinds of jobs and swallow up his deep sense of disappointments in order to be rich and secured. Preeti Puri explains the realistic repercussions of diaspora saying: "Diasporic Consciousness is a complex term as it encompasses ideas including exilic existence, a sense of loss, consciousness of being an outsider, yearning for home, burden of exile, dispossession and relocation" (190). Biju determines to uplift the social standard of his family promising his father that he will stand any sort of torment or annoyance to afford him the dream of owning a sofa, TV, and a bank account. So, he lies to his father and hides the truth about his suffering in America exaggerating his happiness about how life is marvelous in America and how successful he is in his work. Biju wants to give himself a high credit among his neighbors, family and friends in India offering his father a chance to boast about Biju's prestigious status asking him to send relatives to America and guaranteeing the required help from his successful son.

Biju's dreams are very simple and lawful but they depend on his imagined valuation of how much America is an ideal and fabulous host land. Biju's shift between the third world and the first one reveals his dislocation and aggravates both his ambivalences and humiliations. In other words, Biju discovers that his inner disturbance

is due to many diasporic stories which lurk behind his first initiation towards his diaspora in America. In fact, Biju is shocked because life in America is not as comfortable and fascinating as he has imagined. He portrays the Indian diaspora in the United States saying: “It was horrible what happened to Indians abroad and nobody knew but other Indians abroad. It was a dirty little rodent secret” (138). Biju experiences the most awful and terrible circumstances as an illegal immigrant in the United States enduring humiliations and the worst life conditions for the sake of surviving. Johanna Lessinger comments on the sufferings and distresses of the illegal diasporic immigrants which broaden the gap between the poor immigrants as shadow classes and the rich ones who are protected by their wealthy social status saying: “Although the successful and fabulously wealthy Indian-American immigrant entrepreneur is currently the figure of popular imagination, admiration, and envy in India, the actual population of Indian migrants in the US is far more diverse and less uniformly privileged” (167).

Unexpectedly, Biju cannot entirely assimilate into the culture of the American society as his new host country, nor can he hold all features of his Indian native culture. He fails to rearrange his thoughts and restyle his life in into a new identity which crystalizes his diaspora and soothes his soul. In fact, the hard living conditions in America increase Biju’s sense of frustration and depression shattering his blind desire for a better life. Constantly, Biju struggles to find work, shelter and food escaping from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) as an illegal immigrant: “Biju changed jobs so often, like a fugitive on the run” (3). He tries to cope with his new life in America moving from one ill-paid restaurant job to another working more than seventeen hours a day and delivering food late at night to the customers in very cold weather. He has no choice but to accept his pathetic life in New York City sleeping sometimes in shifts on the floor with rats and cockroaches in the basements where he works.

Biju’s ideal dream about America vanishes when he is humiliated and alienated. He is even despised by Pakistanis whom Biju personally considers are below his status. Naseem Choudhary explains the clashes of being a diasporic immigrant saying: “Desai carefully exposes the contradiction between surface appearances of luxury and grandeur and the behind-the-scene reality of exploitation,

particularly migrant workers—the lower class one” (300). Therefore, Biju hates the first-world culture and comprehends the disturbing, ugly and confused state of the West. He is abused and mistreated by many people from different countries in many restaurants and basement where he works only because of his Indian nationality. For example, Biju is psychologically insulted when the owner’s wife in a restaurant condemns him by giving him toiletries explaining: “I think I’m allergic to his hair oil” (48). As a result, Biju is irritated by antagonism and discrimination from the civilized American culture realizing how severe is the working class conditions in America: “Biju knew not to expect anything else. It was a decoy, an old Indian trick of master to servant... offering slave wages, but now and then a box of sweets, a lavish gift” (189).

Literally, citizenship deletes the theoretical meaning of diaspora as a concept, converting it to a practical formal path of belonging particularly if the diasporic immigrant desires a secure and stable future for himself and his future family. Sunaina Maira clarifies the importance of citizenship saying: “Citizenship has become an increasingly prominent lens through which to discuss questions of globalisation, immigration, social movements, cultural pluralism, democracy and the shifting nature of the state” (132). Therefore, Biju insists to challenge his daily hardships trying to cope with the American society achieving his dreams to get a green card and settle in the United States legally. In fact, he is terrified to go on with his life as a fugitive of an illegal residency "who lived and died illegal in America and never saw their families, not for ten years, twenty, thirty, never again” (99). He cannot resist the fantasy of being a legalized immigrant who can shop at: "discount stores for the miraculous, expandable third-world suitcase” (99).

Accordingly, Biju has to think of all possible and impossible means to convert his status and become a legal immigrant. He adopts the idea of marrying an American woman even if she is disabled or mentally retarded but a green card holder. However, Biju changes his mind when his fellow Malaysian worker Omer’s advises him: “White women, they look good when they’re young, but wait, they fall apart fast, by forty they look so ugly, hair falling out, lines everywhere” (101). Moreover, Biju believes that he has no chance to marry a hybrid American Indian girl because he is completely aware of how hybrid American Indian girls detest illegal Indian immigrant men.

The hybrid American Indian girl is cultured, educated and liberated, but refuses to love and marry a native ignorant Indian man with no legal residency: “who’s grown up chatting with his aunties in the kitchen... She wants the Marlboro man with a PhD” (50).

Biju’s diaspora increases his contradictions to the extent that he doubts his identity and affiliations. He is lost between the two cultures suffering from a persistent psychological turmoil of which one culture seems to be superior to the other. He becomes uncertain about all his authentic notions: “The love was gone; for affection was only a habit after all, and people, they forgot, or they became accustomed to its absence” (233). In fact, Biju cannot suppress his Indian cultural peculiarities by coping with different cultures. For example, he rejects to negotiate his Indian original morals and values when he is trapped between the dilemmas of a holy or an unholy cow. He has been forced to serve beef to the clients against his morality and religious ethics believing that he betrays his conscience every time he serves beef because “one should not give up one’s religion, the principles of one’s parents and their parents before them... You had to live according to something”(143).

Biju admits that America is the perfect model of multi-ethnic societies but he cannot convince himself to cope with the necessities of being a diasporic immigrant accepting the diversities of the American society as a decisive solution to the dilemma of religious and cultural convictions. He cannot overcome his doubts about the basic religious principles of his Indian culture. Therefore, he decides to leave his work in *Brigitte’s* restaurant in spite of his bad need of money searching for a better way of living. Biju cannot sustain the price of adaptation and integration into the American culture because it shakes his own established cultural order of life.

Clearly, Biju does not only fail to create a cultural harmony in the American community as a multi-ethnic society but he also resists to obtain a flexible access to the American culture asserting his authentic cultural norms and Indian identity, declaring his disgust of the moral decadence of the American society. Prija Nair confirms the effects of diaspora saying: “The diasporic people have influence of their native cultures even in their adopted lands. They cannot completely assimilate themselves into the culture of their adopted homeland, nor can they embrace all aspects of their native

culture”(6). He cannot adjust himself to the American society and culture: "it WAS so hard and YET there were so many here. It was terribly, terribly hard. Millions risked death, were humiliated, hated, lost their families-YET there were so many here” (189). Biju soon discovers that America has its own particularities of cultural, social and political confinements which basically rely on how far illegal immigrants are clever to coexist in the American society.

Biju’s diaspora threatens his own sense of cultural stability and inner solidarity leading him to detest the constant social challenges and cultural diversities in the American society. Being diasporic is not a reasonable excuse to build new multicultural connections losing his original native identity and adapt a new culture which cannot be preserved in the face of his Indian identity and native culture. Biju discovers that it is impossible to live a double life in which he combines his Indian genuine norms and American culture as well. He comes to recognize that his authentic Indian culture resides deep within his heart and soul constituting his cultural identity even if he is a diasporic immigrant in the American society.

Biju is misled by his initial prospect to be uprooted from his own culture and society, to trust the deceptive American propaganda which seems now a mere depressive and perplexing illusion. He comes to recognize that he is deceived as many of his generation who blindly believes in the fake American culture and idols. They are exploited by the American culture which apparently defends social justice and human rights, but in fact, the American dream turns to be the severe illusion which has shocked Biju. Thus, his deep sense of anguish becomes unbearable because he is deceived and tricked blaming his father for being the main reason behind his diaspora in an illusory world rather than a dream-land: “Biju couldn’t help but feel a flash of anger at his father for sending him alone to this country, but he knew he wouldn’t have forgiven his father for not trying to send him, either” (82).

Lastly, it becomes clear to Biju that he needs to rely more on his original cultural nature from his Indian social practices which help him re-evaluate the fake cultural power of the west. Kiran Golla approves the feelings of diasporic immigrants pointing out: “But, in spite of the backwardness, poverty and illiteracy in one's own land; one can probably derive a sense of belonging and identity in one's

own land only. Uprooting from one's own land and re-rooting in an alien land is a painful process”(91). Actually, Biju’s heart remains in India and his reminiscences cause his suffering to the extent that a homeless chicken revives his homesickness to his native village: “Every now and then Biju saw it scratching in a homey manner in the dirt and felt a pang for village life”(81).

Biju becomes depressed and disappointed when he knows about Jemu’s beating of his father accusing him of being a thief after he spends his whole life working for him. In fact, the lower social class of his family is behind the brutal insults of his father: “Naturally. How are they to know that I am innocent? Most of the time it is the servant that steals” (18-19). This incident increases Biju’s fury recognizing that he is a mere humiliated servant exactly like his father. Likewise, Biju’s life in America is a mere deep sense of loss feeling that he has lost his self-respect, he is confused disrespected, belittled and no longer has a sense of pride. Biju does not enjoy his present life losing more over any hope in future.

Largely, Biju cannot tolerate his sense of displacement and the intolerable anguish of his re-routing in foreign cultural norms, deciding to end his diasporic relocation which condemns immigrants who, "have their hearts always in other places, their minds thinking about people elsewhere; they could never be in a single existence at one time” (342). He has been traumatized re-evaluating his objectives in life and compelling himself to put an end to his diasporic displacement. He is confident that he will never accept any assimilation of any kind to the western culture choosing the peace of his soul and maintaining his original Indian identity which is considered his initiative step towards his final and total self-reconciliation.

Objectively, Biju comes to realize that America and India are two completely different societies and that he will remain on the margin economically and socially either in his host country or homeland. He is misguided when he thinks that New York is the future dream for a poor humble Indian man who comes from a third world country to earn money and become rich. Although America is a First World country and the land of opportunities, India is a much better land for residence because it grants him a chance to preserve his dignity and self-esteem. In other words, Biju will be treated as a

first class citizen only in his homeland India, overcoming thus being an illegal immigrant who is discriminated for his nationality, race, brown colour and accent in America. Najila Faisal argues that “the immigrants are the lowest layer on which the western consumer society is based, noted and prosper” (124).

Biju pleads for his relocation in his own homeland rejecting his diaspora which may affect his real genuine identity believing that his heart will remain in his native country and hoping that his torture and anguish will vanish once he is back again to India. Therefore, Biju decides to return to India after two years living in America with all his savings. He starts to rethink of his future in India deciding to run a taxi service for his living, and to own a good house to secure an acceptable standard of living for his father. Biju abandons gladly his dream to get an American green card preferring to live as a humble poor man in India rather than as a wealthy lonely immigrant and foreigner in the United States.

Biju’s choice to depart to India is not an expected decision approved by everyone around him, not even by the Indian travel agent Mr. Makkar who refuses to book Biju a ticket to India. Mr. Makkar cannot believe that there is a wise man who may decide to leave the United States and goes back to live in India forever. He is surprised how Biju has the courage to take such a fatal decision without thinking of the future of his children and the difficulties that he will face in India after leaving America. Mr. Makkar is certain that Biju will never forgive himself for the horrible mistake: "all those relatives asking for money! Even strangers are asking for money... they will get you; if they won't, the robbers will... some disease will... the heat will" (269).

Crucially, Biju is certain that his decision to go back to India is his right step towards his real freedom as a human being with dignity and identity. Kamalesh Bhatt comments on the importance of India as a native homeland: “India happens to be a mini world in itself as the various languages, religions, faiths, beliefs, traditions and cultures of the world prosper and flourish here enjoying equal dignity and honour” (37). Therefore, India is Biju’s path to overcome his postcolonial sense of depression and despair in America as a symbol of the supremacy of the west choosing to attain self-assertion and to preserve the essence of his native identity. Biju recognizes that the

economic and political conditions are complicated in India preparing himself to be content under all circumstances.

Biju does not feel regret even after being robbed on his arrival in India by a rebel forces who take away all his savings, family gifts, clothes and even his shoes. In fact, Biju has lost everything he has earned in America to the extent that he steals a lady's bathrobe to wear, and thus he returns "from America with far less than he'd ever had" (317). However, he is content to be back to his cultural roots holding his father: "money wasn't everything. There was that simple happiness of looking after someone and having someone look after you" (86). Biju and his father are still attached to each other even though they have lost everything else.

Unlike Biju, Saeed Saeed copes with his diaspora in the multi-cultural American society. In fact, Saeed's acceptance of his diaspora generates his ability to be adjustable and flexible to cultural diverges as long as they go in accordance with his religious beliefs. Saeed's fusion between religious commands and the American cultural diversities helps him live in line with his moral convictions and religious beliefs without abandoning his native cultural norms and religious ethics. Therefore, Saeed regards pork as a prohibited food saying, "first I am Muslim, then I am Zanzibari, then I will BE American" (Desai *The Inheritance* 136).

Positively, Saeed assimilates into the American culture respecting the American people and appreciating their food habits, customs and traditions. He decides to live forever in America because it is a, "wonderful country" (122). In fact, Saeed is proud of being a Black Muslim valuing the different nationalities, races and religions including Biju and his country India which he talks about affectionately, "Zanzibar full of Indians, man! My grandmother-she is Indian!" (53). He marries an American waitress for the sake of the green card and never thinking to leave America. Saeed does not feel homesickness among the American people whom he believes that they are, "the most delightful in the world" (122). Prachi Priyanka interprets how culture becomes the new power-base of diaspora saying: "Consequently, the culture produced by diaspora cannot but contain so many resonances of the movement, the imagination of their homelands, sense of tradition, the circumstances of their removal, and the reaction to the places they currently live" (47).

Saeed tries to ease Biju's extreme stubbornness towards his Indian native moral values by using logical arguments. Saeed believes that Biju has to learn how to become flexible and find out the best way to survive and cope with the new cultural ethics in western societies. Though Biju admires Saeed's energetic character, simple and charismatic personality, he has always perplexing reactions towards his guidance and advice. David Spielman explains how Saeed revives Biju's conscience to regain the insistence to retain his original cultural integrity: "His success derives primarily from his ability to adapt to the cultural context in which he finds himself. The flexibility Biju finds in Saeed makes Biju question his own rigidity, his comfort with falling back into prejudices" (79-80).

With all his unique merits and experiences in American society, Saeed fails to convince Biju of the tremendous merits of his diaspora in the American society and how the Americans are civilized people and better than the English ones who shout publicly against the immigrants on streets: "Go back to where you came from" (135). Saeed encourages Biju to have the required persistence to assimilate into the American cultural norms because there is no other way before him to make money, and be a respectable man with a promising future. Thus, Saeed advises Biju to take his dishwasher friend; Achootan, as an idol reminding him that Achootan has lived and suffered in England before coming to the United States. In fact, Achootan challenges his severe circumstances bearing his diaspora and whenever a native English citizen oppresses him, he reacts severely: "Your father came to my country and took my bread and now I have come to your country to get my bread back" (135).

The moment Biju recognizes the destructive effects of his diaspora in the American society as a domineering space is his true moment of conversion deciding to preserve his loyalty to his original Indian cultural identity. Biju's response to his diaspora ranges far beyond breaking his chains of the total committing to his displacement in the American divergent cultural atmosphere. He remains sincere to the Indian norms which may be threatened by his diaspora in the American society. Biju has paid the low price for ending his diaspora and choosing his Indian roots and culture which he cannot substitute by the western civilized culture. In fact, Biju is rewarded and honoured for his adherence to his own Indian culture and original norms turning his sense of displacement into a practical

confrontation and revolving the essence of his cultural disturbances into a vibrant path of recovery. Biju has been compensated as the true inheritor of his own culture.

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