

**The Fictional Art of Kiran Desai: An Evaluation**

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**Abstract**

*The popularity of any novelist rests on the way of the theme, setting and characterization in the novel. Kiran Desai is no exception for this. She came up with three novels and several prizes became popular among the contemporary English novelists.*

*Literature is a creation of three factors: The race, the milieu and the moment. A study on the race, the milieu and the moment of Kiran Desai's writing will help to interpret her works in depth. It helps to understand the background in which she has grown up and living. It also helps to understand the conditions controlling her mind and the environment influencing her thoughts.*

*With regard to Indian English fiction, the "Race" is the mixed Indian race. Indian English literature is thus a creation of the Indian race in the Indian climate responding to the western impact. It is expected to make an appeal both to the Indians and the English.*

*The contemporary writers of Indian English Literature have overcome the above problem with their creative genius. Kiran Desai is the best example for this. She has varied experiences of both east and west. This can be aptly felt in her novels. With her craft of narration, themes of global citizenship with Indian background, her novels are owned both by East and West. The Conditions of the Indian writer's milieu is changing fast. It's milieu is multicolored. But our Indian English; novelists with their modern themes and master craft are accepted not only by the Indians but also by the western readers. The present paper aims at fictional art of Kiran Desai's fictional world.*

**Key Words:** *Indian consciousness, poverty, hunger, rural life, tradition and modernity, East-West encounter.*

Kiran Desai is the daughter of Anita Desai, herself short-listed for the Booker Prize on three occasions. She was born in Chandigarh on the 3rd of September, and spent the early years of her life in Pune and Mumbai. She studied in the Cathedral and John Connon School. She left India at 14, and she and her mother then lived in England for a year, and then moved to the United States, where she studied creative writing at Bennington College, Hollins University, and Columbia University.

Her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, was published in 1998 and received accolades from such notable figures as Salman Rushdie. It won the Betty Trask Award, a prize given by the Society of Authors for the best new novels by citizens of the Commonwealth of Nations under the age of 35. Her second book, *The Inheritance of Loss*, (2006) was widely praised by critics throughout Asia, Europe and the United States. It won the 2006 Man Booker Prize, as well as the 2006 National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award. She was awarded a 2013 Berlin Prize Fellowship at the American Academy in Berlin.

The popularity of any novelist rests on the way of the theme, setting and characterization in the novel. Kiran Desai is no exception for this. Though she came up with very few novels and several prizes became popular among the contemporary English novelists.

The French literary historian N.Taine said that “Literature is a creation of three factors: the race, the milieu and the moment”.<sup>1</sup> A study on the race, the milieu and the moment of Kiran Desai’s writing will help to interpret her works in depth. It helps to understand the background in which she has grown up and is living. It also helps to understand the conditions controlling her mind and the environment influencing her thoughts.

With regard to Indian English fiction, the “Race” is the mixed Indian race. Indian English literature is thus a creation of the Indian race in the Indian climate responding to the western impact. It is expected to make an appeal both to the Indians and the English. Here the Indian English writers face two problems. About these problems Shrada Iyer rightly said “Condemned by Indians as a ‘misdirected effort and a miscarriage of creative talent’ and the English men laughing at the very idea and viewing it as ‘Mathew Arnod in a saree’. Indo Anglian Literature has to negotiate, had to between the Indian diffidence and English men’s indifference”.<sup>2</sup>

The contemporary writers of Indian English Literature have overcome the above problem with their creative genius. Kiran Desai is the best example for this. She was born in India. She, along with her mother, left India when she was fourteen and stayed in London for a year. Then she left to United States of America, where she is staying now. She has varied experiences of both east and west. This can be aptly felt in her novels. With her craft of

narration, themes of global citizenship with Indian background, her novels are owned both by East and West.

The Conditions of the writer's milieu is changing fast. The modern writer, since he is not working in isolation, responds to the movements in his milieu which is made up of a number of impacts, inland and foreign and is definitely prove to imbibe a wider consciousness than merely regional air. In India the writer's milieu is variegated.

The Indian writing in English has not alienated itself from the Indian social, religious and political milieu. But while dealing the theme of global world, Indian writers have used the Indian scene, tradition, philosophy, and cultural heritage. To write and to get accepted by the world wide readers is a big challenging task for the writers of the present era. But our Indian English; novelists with their modern themes and master craft are accepted not only by the Indians but also by the western readers.

Kiran Desai set both her novels in Indian atmosphere, but the themes dealt in these novels are addressed to the world wide readers. Kiran Desai with her novels truly represents the milieu of the new millennium in which she is living.

Coming to the "Moment", the present moment is meeting of the West and India. The contemporary writers of India have to address themselves to the heterogeneous readers of the West and India. They are successful by choosing the themes and situations that have more or less the same validity all over the world. They attempt at the portrayal of the cultural identity of modern India, the true Indian consciousness by dealing with the themes like poverty, hunger, rural life, tradition and modernity, and East – West encounter.

True to what Eliot wrote. "A great poet in writing of himself writes his age". The modern writers have taken upon themselves to experience and transmute human life and suffering and have found themselves compelled to be the prophet of stark they felt in her novels. With her craft of narration, themes of global citizenship with Indian background, her novels are owned both by East and West.

True to what Eliot wrote. "A great poet in writing of himself writes his are". The modern writers have taken upon themselves to experience and transmute human life and suffering and have found themselves compelled to be the prophet of stark truths of an age that has been described as an "Age of Disintegration and Anxiety" by T.S.Eliot.

Regarding Kiran Desai, she was born in India and lived here up to the age of fourteen, then migrated to united states via England. Hence she rightly represents the present moment, the meeting of the West and India.

Contemporary writers of Indian English have wide readership than the Indian writers of the previous generation. The works of the contemporary writers are read world wide. So, while writing thy have to keep both the Indian readers and the Western readers in mind. What is written has to be recognizably Indian to the Indian readers and recognizably English to the

English readers. It is a difficult task. Sharda Iyer rightly said “To express the values, varieties and heart beats of one culture in the languages of another is a difficult one”.<sup>3</sup>

About the difficulties faced by an Indian writer when he writes in English, Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar said “To be Indian in thought and feeling, emotion and experience yet also to court the graces and submit to the discipline of English for expression, is a novel experiment”.<sup>4</sup>

The Modern Indian English writers are triumphant. Between the English and the Indian way a compromise rather a new creative mutation has been achieved. The works of Kiran Desai brings out this truth. She is successful to speak out the Indian heart beat in English. Particularly her second novel “The Inheritance of Loss” shuttles between Kalimpong of India and New York City.

The fictional canvas of Kiran Desai is highly impressive. Both her novels are many sided. They deal with different serious issues at a time. The first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* deals with issues like nature versus civilization, the meaningless her-worship, the failure of officialdom etc. Amanda Thursfield observes, “Like many important works of literature, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* can be read on several levels. It is an inventive, fast moving, delicious tale full of rich descriptions and marvellous comic cartoon like personalities, but also as a deeper study of pathos of familial misunderstanding, the ridiculousness of hero worship, the unpredictability of commercialism and the ineptness of officialdom”.<sup>5</sup>

“*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*’ is a satirical comedy with a non-serious theme. It is a humorous novel with buffoon like characters, colourful words, beautiful descriptions and thought provoking adages. It is fascinating to go through the antics of a post-office clerk who spends his free time reading the mails of the people of Shahkot and after climbing atop the guava tree reveals interesting facets to the same people. They start referring to him as “Baba”, the saint. Pinky his crazy sister; Mr. Chawla the reminiscent of middle class fathers; Kulfi, the egocentric mother; cinema monkey and its followers; the devotees and the events create the clutter in the guava orchard.

Sanoo Singh observes “Daughter of the distinguished Indo-English writer Anita Desai, Kiran does not share the same intensity that her mother weaves in her potent tales, but she does not disappoint in producing a maddeningly entertaining novel. Not that the strains of the umbilical cord is negated totally in Kiran Desai’s writing”.<sup>6</sup> Carret Wilson observes “If Desai’s art imitates life, she does a good job of showing just what a hullabaloo life can sometimes be”.<sup>7</sup>

The Second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with issues like migration, globalization, and multiculturalism. Pankaj Mishra of New York Times observes “Kiran Desai’s extraordinary new novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* manages to explore, with intimacy and insight, just about every contemporary international issue globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism, terrorist violence”.

*"The Inheritance of Loss"* is a modern novel in its' theme and treatment a post-modern novel in its knotting and knitting of narrative threads, manipulation of expensive literary form and creative play with words.

Compared to her debut novel the enjoyable but very light weight "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard" the second novel is a complex work. Though centered on three people-an irascible old judge, his sixteen year old granddaughter, Sai and the house hold cook living together in an ancient house in Kalimpong in the 1980's. The novel moves in time and space to tell stories about different types of immigrant experiences from Judge's youth in Cambridge, decades earlier, to the present day travails of the cook's son in the US. In this novel Desai takes a skeptical view of the west's consumer driven multiculturalism.

While going through the works of Kiran Desai, it is felt that there is little common between her first and second novels. She has chosen different themes, different settings and tried to maintain the variety in her novels. With only two novels it would be a little premature to set a high premium on Kiran Desai, still she appears to be a promising writer.

*"The Inheritance of Loss"* is much more ambitious than Hullabaloo in its spatial breadth and emotional depth. It takes on huge subjects of serious nature where as its predecessor takes in humorous tone. At the heart of Desai's novels is the suffering of the poor and the powerless. She wrote in favor of the underdog of the society. In Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard she wrote about the poverty of Gorkhas, the bitter life of Cooks in the houses of rich people.

Regarding setting in the novels of Kiran Desai, both the novels are set in India. But these two settings are very much contrasting. The first novel is set in Shahkot, a dry and hot area. It is an imaginary setting. The second novel is set in the cool, green, Himalayan town Kalimpong. The story often moves to the streets of New York city. Kalimpong and New York are real settings.

The fictional canvas of Kiran Desai is crowded with characters, which represent different personalities of human beings. In Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard lazy young man in Sampath, caring mother in Kulfi, loving grandmother in Ammaji, middle class man in Mr.R.K.Chawla, love stricken youth in Pinky and the Hungry Hop Boy are examples for this. In the Inheritance of Loss orphaned girl in Sai, vestiges of colonial era in Jemubhai Patel, a loving father in the cook, illegal immigrant in Bijju, Nepali insurgent in Gyan are example for this observation. The character swinging between the past and the present, the East and the West, good and bad, true and false are found in her novels.

Most of the characters in Desai's novels are made up of bits and pieces she knows and some characters are imaginary. Some other characters may be from the different parts of the writer's personality. Kiran Desai illuminates the pain of exile and the ambiguities of post colonialism with a tapestry of colourful characters.

Against these strong emotions, Desai injects doses of comedy and buffoon like figures like Sampath and Spy, in Hullabaloo, Saeed and the cook in "The Inheritance of Loss".

For a considerably long period, poetry had undoubtedly enjoyed the privilege of inviting linguistic enquiry, and prose had been thought completely outside the purview of any such exploration. Usually, readers are less conscious of a novelist's use of language than that of a poet. The main concern of the novelist is thought to be 'the life' and its various aspects. A novel has to be designed in the form of a ploy, character and various situations as far as they reflect life. David Lodge explains "life, not language, is the novelist's medium, that his language is merely a transparent window through which the reader regards this life-the writer's responsibility being merely to keep the glass clean".<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the language of the novel being a longer stretch than a poem, and the language being as 'most fluid of the mediums', it was not just considered possible to probe into the language of a novel in the past. It does not explain the whole thing. Ushering rightly ;maintains "As a sculptor's medium is stone, a musician's musical notes, a painter's color and brush, similarly language is the only available medium to any literary artist through which he expresses his innermost thoughts, feelings, experiences and his perception of the phenomena of the world around".<sup>10</sup>

Therefore for a fictional writer it becomes more difficult because he has to manipulate two things simultaneously. On the one hand he has to be careful about the visionary world which he or she likes to present to his readers. And secondly, he has to be very particular about the language through which he has to conceptualize and concretise exactly, what he wants to convey. Therefore, a double responsibility lies on the shoulder of the writer, if he wants to be a successful one. Usha Rani said "A novelist's function, as that of a poet, is not to present just a 'pale reflection' of life, but rather to give us a fresh insight into it".<sup>11</sup>

In both the novels the language keeps flowing. They are rich with descriptions Beautiful and colorful words fly all around. Readers get solace in the language of Kiran Desai. Narrative technique of Kiran Desai is highly impressive. In *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* the narration is very much in the tale-telling mould. In "The Inheritance of Loss" Desai followed the tradition of stream of consciousness. So, there is ample scope for memories and flash back technique, which played a significant role in the narration. Because of these techniques, the novelist is successful in bringing out the internal world of the mind of the characters. The way novelist handles the expensive, multilayered story make the novel a unique one.

Stylistics proves very useful in interpretation and analysis of literary works. Stylistics is the study of the style of language used. Pope said "style is the dress of thought". Every work of art contains some stylistic features of art those can be not only marked out, but also can be studied in detail to go deeper into the world of text. Theorists like Mdeenakshi Mukherjee, believes that style is no ornamental cloak; it is simply the 'outer form of the inner quality'. Usharani observes "A Study of the style is actually a journey from the outer symbols of written words towards the inner reality of the writer's perception".<sup>12</sup>



An original and modern aspect of Desai's style is the poet-like use of different print forms. She uses italics for foreign words to emphasize their exoticness and untranslatability. She also used capitals for emphasis when someone is angry surprise or disbelief. The following telephonic conversations between Biju and his father is one among many examples for this observation:

*"Hello? Hello?"*

*"Pitaji, Can You Hear Me?"*

*They retreated from each other again.*

*Beep beep honk honk trr butt ock, the phone went dead (P.232)*

*She also exploits the modern mania for lists.*

*One of the most thought provoking lists is what the world thinks of Indians*

*In china, they hate them.*

*In Hong Kong.*

*In Germany.*

*In Italy.*

*In Japan.*

*In Singapore.*

*In Burma.*

*In South Africa.*

*They don't like them.*

*In Guadeloupe they love us there?*

*No'. - (P.77)*

The built up of word on word, of country on country and the blank white of the space around the words rightly describe the desolation of racial prejudice.

In the perceptive and balanced evaluation of the novels of Kiran Desai, it can be said that they stand out among the Indo-English novels for their polished form and ingenious narrative. All in all the failings of these novels do not detract from the very real virtues of the books.

To conclude, language and style are the two areas where she shows her wonderful talent and skill. In addition to its remarkable stylistic salience, Desai's novels are characterized by a highly complex and sophisticated narrative structure. Kiran Desai's tasty and spicy language and artistic style, modern themes, graphic portrayal of characters have made her novels remarkable and extraordinary acts of imagination in the fictional world.

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