GLOBAL ISSUES AND THEMATIC CONCERNS IN THE NOVELS
OF KIRAN DESAI: RESPONSE TO COLONIALISM

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Abstract

Of the two novels, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), that Kiran Desai has written so far, the first, from the point of view of its themes and global issues whatsoever, is of little concern to response to colonialism. However, the themes of this novel, as every work of fiction has some theme(s) or the other, are the themes concerning the purpose of adult life, that the author deals with, using the elements of humour and irony. Among the main themes of the novel are superstition and lethargy reigning dominantly still in the Indian society. Among the main themes of Desai’s second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, providing main thrust of this article are migration, alienation, separatism, hybridity – human, literary and cultural, multiculturalism, globalization etc. This Man-Booker award winning novel is a unique mingling or rather a jumble of a number of themes that are taking shape in the real world of the new postcolonial era of globalization too. The themes pertaining to living in two worlds, in between two worlds and in between past and present have been delineated with brimming beauty and grandeur of fiction. Through some characters, especially through the character of Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a retired judge of colonial times, living a disenchanted life in Kalimpong, a hill station in the North-Eastern part of India, Desai presents the theme of alienation with adequate irony and humour, through Biju, the issues and problems of N.R.I.s and through the Gorkha Movement in the Kanchenjunga Hills, she raises the
problems of separatism and also the genuine grievance of the Gorkha people perhaps. The theme of ‘loss’, the gross inheritance of the postcolonial era, among other themes, runs throughout the novel.

**Keywords:** alienation, globalization, hybridity, migration, multiculturalism,

**Introduction**

Kiran Desai (born 3rd September, 1971), daughter of the noted Indian English author Anita Desai, is a diaspora Indian author permanently settled in the United States. Of her two novels published so far, the first ‘Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard’ 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. This novel is set in the Indian village of Shahkot (State of Punjab, India) and follows the exploits of a young boy trying to avoid the responsibilities of adult life. Among The Main Themes of the novel superstition and lethargy in Indian society. Dr. K.K. Bhatt makes a comparative study of the novel:

> “Kiran Desai’s delirious tale of love, faith and family relationship is funny, smartly written and reminiscent of other works of Indian authors writing in English such as Salman Rushdie’s Moor’s Last Sigh, Divakaruni Banerjee’s The Mistress of Spices and Sashi Tharoor’s Show Business.”

Amazon.com sums up the novel thus:

> “Pity the poor Chawla family of of Shahkot, India – their son, Sampath causes all kinds of trouble for his family culminating in a hullabaloo in the guava orchard” but in a village like Shahkot, hullabaloo in a way of life. Kiran Desai begins her first novel with
Sampath’s birth at the tail-end of a terrible drought. His mother Kulfi, half-maddened by heat and hunger, can think of nothing but food. Mr. Chawla, the head of the family, finds his ambitions thwarted and frustration overcoming him when his son, later in life, grows up to become a young man possessed of a great deal of feeling and very little common sense or ambitions. Mr. Chawla’s frustration comes to a head when Sampath Chawla loses his menial job at the post office after performing an impromptu cross-dressing striptease at the wedding of his boss’s daughter. Confined to the house in disgrace, Sampath runs away from home and takes refuge in the branches of a guava tree in an abandoned orchard outside the town. At first, family and the townsfolk think he is mad, but in an inspired moment of self preservation, Sampath, who had spent his time in the post office reading other people’s mail, reveals some choice secrets about his persecutors and convinces them that he is, in fact, a holy man. Mr. Chawla a refined and ambitions man, too hard to believe that he had a holy man in the family and began to see commercial possibilities in him. Soon the guava orchard becomes the latest stop along the spiritual tourism trial with alcoholic monkeys loitering at the place, Sampath Chawla is now known as Monkey Baba. Dr. Bhatt finds more:

“A journalist determined to expose Sampath as a fraud, an unholy trio of hypochondriac district medical officers, army general and University Professor, all determined to solve the monkey problem, and you’ve got a real hullabaloo.”

Among the main themes of Kiran Desai’s second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, meant for the main thrust of this article, are alienation, separatism, migration and living in two worlds and between past and present, yielding negative and disheartening response to colonialism. The themes of multiculturalism, cultural hybridity and globalization on the other hand evince positive, encouraging and optimistic response to colonialism. Growing neocolonialism stands jerked and befittingly responded to by rapidly spreading brotherhood and cultural multiplicity on the global level. The post-independence Indian English fiction has seen quite a large crop of new and interesting writers whose works are firmly
based on social realism, established earlier during the Gandhian era. Writers like Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgaonkar and Khushwant Singh etc. appeared on the scene in the fifties of the last century. Quite a number of women writers of fiction also emerged, notable among whom being Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Kamala Markandeya. Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai and this development continued ever since, and one can discover many new voices. The most striking one among them is Kiran Desai, the daughter of Anita Desai. For all such current human and social issues in her novel ‘The Inheritance of Loss’, she justly won the prestigious Man Booker Prize.

Regarding her mother’s impact on Kiran Desai, Our Karnatakam.com HSK opines thus:

“Kiran walked in the footsteps of her mother. Anita was more interested ‘in the interior landscape of the mind than in political and social realities.'”

About the very purpose of her writing, the website discovers:

“Writing for her was an effort to discover and then to underline, and finally to convey the true significance of things; her novels dealt with the terror of facing, single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence.”

About her characters, the website finds:

“Her characters were those for whom aloneness alone is the natural condition.”

Though Kiran walks on the path paved by her mother Anita, yet an apparent difference in the approaches of the two can be marked importantly well. Whereas Anita Desai is patriotically global, Kiran goes globally global, exploring deeper and discovering more brilliant colours of humanity, and why not?! After all, she is born and brought up in the new age of global advancements:
Main Thrust:

Realistically depicting the lethargic and superstitious approach to life the novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, introduces the sleepy town of Shahkot, which becomes alive when Sampath Chawla, a middle-class purposeless post office clerk, tries to escape his repeated failures by climbing a guava tree and gaining recognition as a hermit. Although Sampath may be a failure at his work place, he gains name and fame through a nonsensical trick and becomes the centre of interest for the people. As reviewed by Sonoo Singh:

“*The guava orchard becomes the epicenter of all the characters. The ‘Hullabaloo’ starts when everyone – from his family to the people of Shahkot town, to the monkeys – tries to make an eventful performance out of the hermit perched atop the guava tree!*”

Sonoo Singh studies the situation more critically and analytically when she says that the eventful performance:

“*Reminds one of Shakespeare’s Hamlet*: ‘Though this be madness, yet there is method in it’.”

On the thematic aspect of the novel, ‘*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*,’ Miss Sonoo Singh picks up threads from the novel to make a comparison with an excerpt from Anita Desai’s ‘*Where Shall We Go This Summer*?’:

“*But Kulfi stretched out farther and farther until the rain took up all the space inside her head. It seized her brain, massaged and incorporated her into the watery sounds, until she felt that. She herself might turn to storm and disappear in this blowing, this growling this lightning flutter quick as moth’s wing.*”
Miss Sonoo Singh continues:

“And from Anita Desai’s ‘Where Shall We Go This Summer, ‘How long would it continue like this. She wondered ...... if it stayed like this long enough without a disturbance, without an interruption, perhaps the slowness, the monotony of the regular tides would enter one’s very veins, one’s blood would begin to flow to their measure and one would adjust to a life in which there was never any change but the expected one of the tide receding and the tide advancing.”

Through the fictitious character of Sampath Chawla in Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard’, and of course, another fun-creating characters of the novel, such as his mother and the townspeople, Kiran Desai brings out one more theme-making aspect of the Indian middle class society that religious superstitions also serve the purpose of commercial gains:

“Once Sampath Chawla settles down in the guava tree, he is joined by a horde of followers, including his family who try to commercialize his presence atop the tree. And then follows a horde of businessmen who endeavour to sell their wares ranging from tooth paste to mosquito repellers to the ‘trustful tourist of the orchard. After the dreaded monkeys of the town also join him in the tree. Sampath Chawla is then rechristened as Monkey Baba’.”

Fascinating antics of a post office clerk, frenzied acts of his sister Pinky who finds delight in biting the cheeks or tweaking the bottoms of men she fancies and their mother Kulfi’s enormous cravings for food are quite engaging. “All these characters of the novel”, as Dr. Bhatt finds:

“Exhale the air of thematic substance and realistically exhibit the life pattern of Indian middle-class society.”
Reminiscent of Shakespeare’s ‘Much Ado About Nothing,’ Desai’s *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* ends into nothing substantial. All is not well, once the man and the animals start living together. Attracted to the taste of liquor, the monkeys create uproar in and around the orchard in their hunt for more liquor. It is then that the hullabaloo begins with everybody – from common civilian to the upright militarywallahs, to the paunchy police – trying to get rid of the money menace.

Desai’s second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* raises several important questions with regard to the advantages of globalization, the celebration of hybridity, the global citizen and the development of new ideas. At what point does colonialism become an excuse for corrupt government? Desai answers all such questions in a very matured way. Set in 1980s, the novel tells the story of Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a retired judge of British times living a disenchanted life in Kalimpong and his granddaughter Sai and of course, Sai’s love affair with her tutor Gyan. Another issue in the novel is the encroachment on their lives by a band of Nepali insurgents. Yet another concern of the novel is the life of Biju, the son of Mr. Patel’s cook, an illegal immigrant in New York. Dr. Bhatt’s compilation sums up the novel thus:

“In a generous vision, sometimes funny, sometimes sad, Desai presents the human quandaries facing a panoply of characters. This majestic novel of a busy, grasping time – every moment holding out the possibility of hope or betrayal – illumines the consequences of colonialism and global conflicts of religion, race and nationality.”

In the novel, the embittered judge is a living testimony to the consequences of colonialism, reflecting unbecoming response to colonialism. Born into a middle-class Patel family, he sails for England in 1939. Feeling lost and scorned for his skin colour and smell, he returns as an ICS officer serving the British. Full of self-hate as well as hate
for his family, community and everyone for not being British, which includes his wife, the judge falls victim to alienation. He remains in the dreams of English beauty:

“He saw nothing of the English countryside, missed the beauty of carved colleges and churches painted with gold leaf and angels, didn't hear the choir boys with voices of girls and didn’t see the green river trembling with replications of the gardens......”

Characters like Sai, Gyan and the cook’s son, Biju also experience the pangs of alienation – Sai and Gyan due to Gorkha Movement and Biju due to being an illegal American immigrant. Alienation contributes as one of the chief constituents to the thematic aspect of the novel. The theme of alienation remains all pervasive throughout the novel. To quote Sophie Kalkreuth:

“Desai spoke of her own hybrid identity as one that contains both extraordinary richness and a terribly difficult perspective: ‘It teaches you to clarify your place in the world. You are forced to see yourself from the outside.’”

On his return to India from the racist England, the judge turns an alienation personified. He finds himself despising his culture, family and inadvertently attempting to colonise his backward wife, Nimi:

“Take those absurd trinkets off, he instructed her; riled by the tinkle-tonk of her bangles. ‘Why do you have to dress in such a gaudy manner? Yellow and pink? Are you mad?’ He threw the hair oil bottles away and her long hair escaped no matter how tidily she made her bun.”

Under the impact of alienation and complete estrangement, he called her names also:

“Stupid bitch, dirty bitch.”
Jemubhai, thus, a victim to alienation under the long colonial experience, evinces quite dismally, unpleasant response to colonialism.

*The Inheritance of Loss* is full of such complex dualities. Biju’s Indian boss Harish- Harry, the owner of Gandhi Café in New York is also completely in oblivion about his own identity, as Desai defines him:

“The himself couldn’t tell which one of his slaves was the most authentic, if any.”\(^\text{17}\)

The cook is tremendously proud of his son, Biju whom he imagines to be immensely successful in America. In fact, Biju suffers a series of humiliations and trials as he tries to survive in New York, hopscotching for menial jobs in the restaurants in the city. Harish-Harry wife, an Indian herself, doesn’t like an Indian servant like Biju. Kiran Desai, through these anglophile characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, very realistically, presents the theme of alienation, a byproduct of colonialism, yielding an anticlimactic response to colonialism.

Another concern of the novel is Indian Nepali insurgency in the mountain of Kalimpong, strengthening Gorkha Movement, a separatist issue. Desai takes up this issue in the novel as another theme and presents this very serious issue of India under Subhash Ghissing’s Gorkha Movement–GNLF, which is at present led by Bimal Gurung’s GJM. The making of Gorkhaland, still stuck I the bottleneck of neocolonialism, is victimizing so many and so much, causing loss of love, talent and values such as Sai-Gyan’s love and Gyan’s talent in Maths. To quote J.C. Hall:

“Ourphaned as a young child, Sai is sent to Cho Oyu, a crumbling mansion in Kalimpong in the foothills of the Himalayas to live with her grandfather, a retired Indian judge. The cook, the judge’s retainer, looks out for Sai as best as he can while worrying incessantly about his son, Biju who has travelled to the United States where he works as an illegal
immigrant in a series of restaurant kitchens. As Sai grows to adulthood, she falls in love with her tutor Gyan, a Nepalese boy who, though at first, infatuated with her, becomes increasingly caught up in the postcolonial Nepalese political movement.”

*The Inheritance of Loss*, a tale of losses, presents the stark reality of losses that a country suffers when such separatist movements are at work. They affect all progress, peace, normalcy and even everyday life pattern. Here is an excerpt from the novel in respect of the Gorkha Movement:

“A seventy-two-hour strike in May. No national celebrations. No Republic Day, Independence Day, or Gandhi’s birthday. Boycott of elections with the slogan, ‘We will not stay in other people’s state of West Bengal.’”

Amidst all losses and so many undesirable responses to colonialism from the fictionalized realities or the realities fictionalized in her novel, Kiran Desai, a skilled novelist, wonderfully depicts a festive multicultural global society in *The Inheritance of Loss*. An example of such a society, leading to cultural hybridity, from the novel:

“Biju at Baby Bistro,

Above the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian. And when a Paki was hired, it was Mexican, Indian and Pakistani.”

Multiculturalism is a buzzword of the postcolonial era. To quote John Theme:

“Multiculturalism is a term variously used to describe the demographic makeup of a country’s population, as an expression of an ideal of cross-cultural-inter-ethnic and inter-communal harmony and to describe public policy initiatives that promote such an ideal. Multicultural policies were
Conclusion

In *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, amidst the themes of lethargy and superstition, Desai handles the ‘big-time dreams of a middle-class family with a keen sense of humour and in her *The Inheritance of Loss*, she like a skilled fiction architect, has woven very current themes of this postcolonial advanced world in the fabric of her highly praised Booker winning novel and has comically and sympathetically presented this new era of new ever advancement in which ruthlessness of colonial mindset can still be felt. *The Inheritance of Loss* as a whole, is a wonderful depiction of multicultural global society. The fabric of its themes is uniquely woven from the threads of globally mingled cultures and races challenging all colonial/neocolonial traits of cultural and racial discrimination. Though, having pangs of its own, migration has played wonders mitigating the pangs of such discrimination from the face of the globe. With the issues and episodes related to human and cultural hybridity, global multiculturalism, global fraternity, consciousness and wisdom of the masses of this era, Desai presents a wonderful, happy and positive response to colonialism/neocolonialism. By spreading the message of multiculturalism through her *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai is an Indian by blood and spirit, is spreading the message of ‘Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam’ (the whole Earth is a family), the age-old concept of Indian philosophy and a universal value established by our ancestors. Desai writes the saga of the losses of decades, amidst wonderful and globally shining gains of humanity at large, and creates encouraging response to colonialism.
REFERENCES


2. Ibid, p. 157


