

ABSTRACT

On

**DIASPORA AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN THE
FICTIONAL WORKS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI AND KIRAN DESAI**

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Abstract

Diaspora and the Question of Identity in the Fictional Works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai

The thesis entitled **Diaspora and the Question of Identity in the Fictional Works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai** is a research work which aims at analyzing the diasporic elements and the vexations that intrude upon women's existence in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai. The writers taken up for this proposed thesis come under the Indian diasporic community so the subject that is being discussed or studied will be focused on the perplexity faced by the Indian diasporic people.

Although Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri are the voices of diaspora, their approach to the premise of immigration and their delineation of women in their texts are relatively poles apart. The thesis is not to carry out a comparative study as such but rather will make an inquiry into the thematic contents of their works on the framework of how the immigration process (past and present) has created a profound impact on the life of the characters they have shaped. The crux of this research includes to examine different topics that spread over the social milieu to which these writers belong, female subjects both in diaspora and in India, shifting spaces, diaspora and its related core issues and the perceptible changes that have been evoked by the hyphenated lives of migrants. The new space which comes up due to the interaction of opposing cultures also affects the status quo of women. The women in their texts are located both in India and beyond boundaries. As far as female subjects are concerned, Lahiri's women are predominantly from the diaspora both antecedents and descendents who are/were migrated, born, raised and settled in the hostlands whereas the women in Desai's novels are from diversified backgrounds and she has shown women as they should be in the Indian framework—stereotyped and suppressed women.

This research work will consist of five chapters.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The prefatory section of the thesis will touch upon the conceptual meanings of diaspora and offers insight into the wide-ranging meanings of diaspora as given by different proponents on the origins of diaspora—the old and the new diasporas along with the changing meanings of the diaspora in the transnational space.

Chapter 2

Locating Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai as Indian Diasporic Writers

The second chapter entitled “Locating Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai as Indian Diasporic Writers” will attempt to locate Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai as Indian diasporic writers and will deliberate on the politics of locations of many diasporic writers to expose the intricate relationships that they have shared with their ancestry and with the ideologically powerful western literature. While discussing the politics of location, it will engage in the discourse of representation that is enshrined in literature, language, culture, and media, etc.

Moreover, this chapter will talk about the arrival of diasporic writers in the Indian Writing in English and numerous excruciating encounters which they have had for writing about India from the immigrant approach. The debate will be generated on the contentious positions of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai as diasporic, transcultural, and postcolonial writers. Furthermore, it will bring forth the biographical backgrounds, the discomfitures, and challenges of belonging to an international fraternity of diasporic Indians. The chapter will probe into the personal

feelings of displacement and dislocation in the adopted culture which in turn enhance their creative productions. It focuses on the aspects of migrant literature, as to how the migrant writers write for the western audience, and how they attempt to align to the European aesthetics, language, and styles that reinforce the European culture thereby leading to mimicry and ambivalence. This section will further throw light on the emergence of new breed of writers belonging to the Indian diaspora that has changed the appearance of the Indian Writing in English (IWE). The two women diasporic Indian writers—Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai—will be addressed in the chapter keeping in mind the contested positions they have occupied as the prominent voices of the Indian diaspora. The diaspora studies has addressed a new field that constructs an inventive space of expression for the people who juggle or torn apart between two worlds.

Chapter 3

Complexity of Indian Diasporic Conditions in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai

The third chapter entitled “Complexity of Indian Diasporic Conditions in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai” will delve into the Indian diaspora and varied problems that emerge from the diasporic space with special references to the characteristics of diaspora that are found in the writings of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai. This chapter will deal mostly with the problems coming out from the act of migration with reference to the male characters in the texts of both authors. Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) has captured the lives during and after colonialism and the repercussion of following an American dream. *The Inheritance of Loss* explores the migration during the British colonialism to become the intelligent few who migrated to England to be part of the English culture and learning. It unravels the journey of a person, whose inability to adjust to his own

culture and people, makes him an object of disdain. It talks about the price of upholding the European ideology. It exposes the loss of trust and faith in the colonial culture which makes an individual, a mere mimic and facsimile of English values. It exposes the ambivalence of postcolonial society which is marked by the loss of identity and home, the class structure, and many resistant movements from the minority groups. Above that, it discusses the excruciating voyage of illegal migrants from third world countries who migrate to the United States and become the victims of false hope which the so-called American dream has offered. It dwells on the rapid progression of modernity that coerce the individuals to renegotiate their identities, finding new connotation of life which compels them to live a life of dejection, isolation, and alienation mentally, socially and physically. Through the migrants like Jemubhai and Biju, the writer will expose the harsh truth of returning migrants. The story runs simultaneously with the Gorkha movement that unmask the breaking down of the multicultural society. Predominantly, the novel will investigate wide-ranging forms of migration and its related issues that intrude upon the existence of numerous characters.

Jhumpa Lahiri's fictions—*Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008)—come under the canopy of immigrant writings as they emerge from the migrant experiences that the writer and her own imaginary characters have endured while on their route to make a truce with the desolating consequences of migrant lives. Despite the disparaging genres (two short stories and one novel), she attempts to put her every work under one theme that is the immigrant lives entwined collectively to make it a holistic documentary on the lives of the hybrid people. Through her works, one could easily envisage the laborious lives of the migrants and a strenuous process of incorporation that perseveres until death. Lahiri's migrant characters both the antecedent and the subsequent generations in her works are mostly accomplished Bengali itinerants.

Her breed of people includes the expedition of first generation and the impact of cultural hybridity on the second generation.

Chapter 4

Women and Negotiation of Identity: Positioning Multiple Female Subjects

The fourth chapter entitled “Women and Negotiation of Identity: Positioning Multiple Female Subjects” will discuss the exploration of varied female subjects as found in the texts of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai. This chapter will focus on how Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai situate the female subjects in their fictions. Though both the writers whom the researcher has taken up in the thesis locate abroad, they have rendered a much needed gender perception. They have intensely dissected the women in different environments and successfully brought out the commonality of women’s sufferings, marginalization, search for identity, and roots. Despite being a writer brought up in a foreign country Kiran Desai’s first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), reveals the state of affairs of women in the normal set-up of family in the Indian society. There is nothing extraordinary about this novel in the characterization of women but Kulfi occupies the reader’s mind with her eccentric nature. Her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* captures the mentality of numerous female characters—some of them (Sai, Lola, and Noni) are educated anglophile women. The narrative also dwells on one innocent woman, Nimi Patel, who is wedded to an English educated husband (Jemubhai Patel) and later succumbs to the tyrannical behavior of her husband who attempts to educate her as he admonishes her for being an unkempt Indian woman.

As far as the fictions of Jhumpa Lahiri—*Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth* —are concerned, the concentration will be on

the inquisition of whether the individuality of diasporic women really changes when they come into contact with the new culture. The new culture is considered more advanced than the culture in which they were born or brought up but it also confines them within the cultural inscriptions of two cultures (old and new) or sometimes within varied cultures. Normally they have migrated along with their husbands and have often been seen as wives rather than their real selves. The argument will also focalize the succeeding generations who are compelled to accept the concept of Indian femininity which their mothers instill in them thereby disorienting their lives leading them to schizophrenic identities. This chapter will further elaborate on the trials and tribulations of women in India and abroad with the themes of marriage, foodways, isolation, alienation, assimilation, identity in-between cultures, loneliness, the generational differences, mother-daughter relationships, seclusion, and numerous predicaments. This section will manage the impasse of female characters who are obligated to negotiate their subject positions.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This final chapter will constitute the conclusion of the thesis which will shed light on the brief perspective on what the researcher has discussed in the previous chapters. It is the abridgment of the findings after the extensive analysis of many troubles related to diaspora and its interrelated concerns that influence the creative production of both the authors and the characters that they have portrayed in their fictions.