

# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

In this introductory chapter, an attempt is made to scrutinize the conceptual meaning and origin of the term “diaspora” and the classifications of diaspora according to the nature of the dispersal. The crossover of the term from the singular meaning to the composite connotations of the term in the deterritorialized world will untangle the intricacies connected with it. Furthermore, it discusses meticulously some of the common features that every diasporic community has collectively faced from the time when they set out from home and during their relocating stage. The discussion comprehends the concept of diaspora in general from the ancient meaning to the extension of importance in the consolidated phase of migration. Furthermore, it will give a brief outline of the other chapters that follow in this proposed research work.

### I

While defining the term “diaspora”, the banishment of a group of people from their homeland in the ancient times has been taken as the only form of migration. In the primeval time, another meaning of banishment is ‘exile’ and the concept of diaspora as a discipline has never been debated or discussed. According to Martin Baumann exile is a derivative of the Latin words, *exilium* and *exul* that connotes “a temporary banishment, at times also asylum”. It invokes the “ideas of forced emigration, displacement, social and political marginalization of an individual or a group of refugees”. It brings forth the “experiences of loneliness, foreignness, homesickness and an enduring longing to migrate to the place of origin”. The mass migration of groups has been done “as a means of punishment and exercise of power, forcing entire nations to leave home and to move into exile” (2010: 19). Thus, exile is

assumed to be a temporary arrangement which is done to avoid a persecution and untoward calamities by groups. Deviating from the term exile, “diaspora” is derived from the Greek words *dia* (through or over) and *speirein* which mean ‘to scatter’, ‘to spread’, ‘to disperse’ or ‘be separated’. The term diaspora was used to designate the Jewish existence far from the “Promised Land”. The Hebrew words like *gôlá* and *galút* were also referred to “exile”, “banishment”, and “deportation”. These two words signify the unique notions for the Babylonian captivity that involves the ‘movement under force’ and ‘captivity’ as a result of war (*ibid.*21). Besides the Jewish migration, the ancient notions of diaspora also include the African migration due to the slave trade, the Armenian diaspora in the sixth century A. D. which involved in trade and commerce and later on the forced migration due to the massacres, the Irish migration due to famine, among others. Despite its diverse definitions which carried different historical events, the Greek term diaspora is used to connote “all expression covering sin, scattering, emigration and the possibilities of repentance and return” (Cohen 2010: 21).

Robin Cohen defines the term “diaspora” as “a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile”. He avers that people who are living abroad and maintain “strong collective identities” are also called diaporas although they were “neither active agents of colonization nor passive victims of persecution”. Earlier the dispersal of Jews was considered the only form of diaspora. However, the term itself has undergone numerous changes in the changing times as it addresses the diffusion and scattering of countless people due to several factors in the postcolonial period. Despite the variations in the notion of diaspora, Cohen further maintained that, “all diasporic communities settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories, acknowledge that ‘the old country’– a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their

loyalty and emotions.” He also adds that the claim on their loyalty towards their homeland might be audaciously or submissively expressed in a given situation of history. Nevertheless, “a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background” (1997: ix).

The old notion of diaspora, which is the forcible dispersal of people or groups from their original homeland due to some disasters or misfortunes but not primary to establish a new life, has become a significant and quite contesting term in academia with the publication of the journal *Diaspora: Journal of Transnational Studies* (1991) edited by Khachig Tötölyan. This journal enhances the importance, it renders, as a powerful instrument for analyzing the mass migration of people and also the new definition it gives to the culture and the concept of nation. This journal gives a larger semantic significance to the diaspora which was previously referred only to the Jewish, Greek, African, and Armenian dispersion. The word “diaspora” thus includes “words like immigrants, expatriates, refugees, expellees, guest-workers, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community”. This connotation gives a sense of transnationalism and treats this term in a wider perspective. He has called the diasporas as “the exemplary communities of the transitional moment” (Tötölyan Vol I: 2007: 23-25).

The question is whether any form of migration can be categorized under the term diaspora. The different theorists of diaspora studies have laid down certain characteristics associated with the migration which forms a diasporic community. In order to compare diasporas, William Safran and Robin Cohen have listed these basic features of old and contemporary diasporas. They are: (1) dispersal from an original centre often traumatically to at least two peripheral places; (2) alternatively, the expansion from a

homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions; (3) maintenance of a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland; (4) an idealization of the supposed ancestral home; (5) belief that they cannot be fully accepted by their host country, or having a troubled relationship with host societies; (6) longing to return to the ancestral home when the time is right; (7) commitment to the maintenance and/or restoration of the homeland; (8) the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in tolerant host countries, and (9) development/construction of a consciousness and solidarity as a group defined largely around the continued relationship with the homeland (Kadekar *et.al* 2009: 2: Cohen 1997: 180). Thus, any form of migration that possesses the aforementioned characteristics can be regarded as diaspora.

Now, diaspora is no longer the violent movement of people where one dreams of returning to the Promised Land. Keeping with the grounds under which migration takes place, Stanley J. Tambiah categorizes diaspora into two ways. He divides migration as “voluntary” or “involuntary” movement of people, and puts diaspora as “voluntary migration” where people with a “variety of occupational skills and cultural practices” leave “their locations of origin or permanent residences in search of better economic opportunities and life chances” and with the idea of permanent or temporary settlement in the host nation. The “involuntary displacement” involves the people who left their place of origin due to “political turmoil and civil war or by natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, and drought)”. He further emphasizes that people migrated in “search of employment in the more prosperous, industrialized or industrializing countries as guest workers or as immigrants, and as a result of forced displacements of people owing to civil wars and the pogroms of ethnic cleansing and genocide” (163). Their intention is not the permanent settlement but they come as refugees to reposition in camps and safe place of protection as part of refugee camps that are given to the victims. The migrants have to

pass through the three options of relocating themselves to the recipient nations to prove their allegiance. Stanley J. Tambiah further maintains that as part of the relocation process these migrants of various forms have incorporated into the hostlands under three different manners – “assimilation, exclusion, and intergration/multiculturalism”. The assimilation process expects migrants “to take the initiative of adapting themselves to the host society with the aim of becoming indistinguishable from the majority of society” e.g. melting pot. The exclusion “involves the participation in or incorporation of migrants only into selected and marked-off sectors of the host society.” Under this process, migrants are constrained to certain areas under lawful process thereby leading to “discrimination and liminal existence”. The third process that is the integration, involves “positive two-way processes of mutual accommodation between migrants and their host society” (167-168).

The problem that has come in the way to assimilation is that the lives of diasporas have their foundation on “shared symbolic and cultural elements that are firmly anchored in the history of those groups and are still vivid in the minds and memories of their core members”. These characteristics remain unaffected even after their integration into their host countries (Sheffer 2003: 151-152). Thus, the old lineage trails behind the survival of diasporas all the way through the journeys of diasporas generation after generation. Diasporic identities, according to Safran and Anderson, are characterized by a “continuing relationship to the homeland” that may be physical when the immigrants and group members continue to visit the home country. It may be “an imaginary community with the knowledge that they will not, or cannot, return” (Weiner and Richards 2008: 103). And this proclivity on the part of the immigrant community towards the home culture has made it impossible to completely assimilate to the host nations for the assimilation to the recipient nation would mean to lose the accountability and conspicuousness of their existence in the new culture. By virtue of this fact, the optimal acculturation

strategy for immigrants is “integration”. In the words of Berry and Sam, it “appears to be consistent predictor of more positive outcomes than the three alternatives” as it engages in “both the preservation of, and contact with the home culture, or the ‘country of origin’ and an active involvement with the host culture, or the ‘country of settlement’ ” (Bhatia and Ram 2007: 623). As the migrants cannot assimilate entirely, they prefer to integrate into the larger structure of the adoptive culture. Integration is considered the best strategy as it consents to the marginal assorted assemblage to hold on to its traditions, language, and sacred values.

Another prominent aspect of the diasporic discourse is the concept of home and culture that projects different connotations for different generations. For the earlier migrant, home is the original roots but not the place where they have settled now. Home in a valid sense is a thing of the past which is sustained in the present. Memories of home which the generations of immigrant hold are no accurate reflection of the static past. Though they endure the loss of the specific past but their memories are also disorganized and fractured with no fixed image of the thing past. Their loyalties towards the “home” in the hostland and “home” in the homeland are not devoid of complexities. The idea of home is scattered when it comes to the immigrant lives. Re-establishing the involvement with the homeland that is more of a mythical land but not in concrete form creates a hollowness of their associations.

The itinerancy of the migrant has complicated the subject position of the migrants as they do not feel at home anywhere. Martin Heidegger’s oft quoted line that says, “homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world,” comes to be legitimate for the diasporic being. The estrangement of diasporic members is so acute that they realize the actuality of their living. Though they gather around the imagined homelands retaining memories, myths, customs,

and traditions of the native country to feel rooted and closed to the ethnic culture, migrancy in the true sense, is always in transit with no fixed point as “it calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation”. For Iain Chambers, “To come from elsewhere, from ‘there’ and not ‘here’, is to live at the intersections of histories and memories, experiencing both their preliminary dispersal and their subsequent translation into new, more extensive, arrangements along emerging routes”. He said that migration is a drama of stranger. “Cut off from the homelands of tradition, experiencing a constantly challenged identity, the stranger is perpetually required to make herself at home in an interminable discussion between a scattered historical inheritance and a heterogeneous present” (1994: 5-6). This drama of the ‘historical inheritance’ and the ‘heterogeneous present’ are often transrelated and translocated into a diasporic discourse as it alludes to both border-crossing and border-defining in spatial and temporal domains. It not only involves the crossing of geopolitical borders but also the crossing of multiple boundaries and barriers which opens up new spaces for cross-cultural negotiations creating dislocation upon identity articulation (Zhang 2008: 10). In contrast to the older generations, for the offspring the new home is their home and they are attracted to the newness of the hostland with its multicultural and translocal aspect. The relation of diasporas with the homeland is ambiguous both for the first and second generations.

Another key issue in the diasporic identity is the perception on culture. The immigrants are scattered apart but are believed to be linked together by their common cultural identity and their shared relation to their imaginary homelands. According to Stuart Hall, cultural identity is “one shared culture” which is collective in nature in which many others are hidden inside it “more superficial or artificially imposed selves” which people with a shared history

and ancestry hold in common (1996, 2010:110). This collectivism and the pride associated with an ethnic religion, traits, language, and history become complex due to the transrelational activities of the migrants and the cultural interpenetrations. The perspective on culture changes with the displacement, migration, and relocation process. With globalization, culture which is formed within a definite territory is amalgamated and “rather than thinking of culture as *roots*, as peoples belonging to particular places and traditions and practices, we need to think of culture as *routes*, as the movements of peoples, goods, ideas from place to place” (qtd. in Wise 2008: 27). Then, the debate on roots or origins becomes more confounded than before.

With the travelling, migration, and spatial displacements, diaspora as a shared ethnic consciousness suffers from its own slippages with the changing time and space. The discourse on diaspora that has cultural identity as one of its important features appears challenging. Culture itself has undergone many transformations due to the incursions of mass media, influx of varied elements from other cultural contacts, fusion of ethnic materials, cross-cultural establishments, changing food culture, shifting lifestyles, and many others. The culture we have today is the production of synthesis of many elements and to signify one as our own is too difficult. Every ethnic culture has its rituals, beliefs, and traditions. If another culture or tradition is transplanted in the existing culture then it produces another distinctive culture which no one can claim his own. So in the transnational space it is getting harder to identify one as cultural group.

The attributes of diaspora are endless and always in the process of producing the new things to be added to the earlier ones and such production will continue until the end of the existence of diasporic personality. Gradually such ideas or concepts as home, society, and even identity change due to

crossing over borders and intermingling of cultures that make the immigrants vulnerable. Like any other element that comprises the society, diaspora itself seems to be changing with the temporariness of time. However, the new stable identity that the subsequent generation will acquire in the borderless zone has its shortcomings as often the borders are characterized by identities that are shifting and multiple. This transnational age is what Said has expressed is the unluckiest time as this age has “produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, vagrants...” (1994: 402-403). Migration of any form whether a permanent settlement or a short sojourn has become a pertinent issue in the present time.

## II

The writers taken up for this proposed thesis – Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai – 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. The Indian diaspora has occupied the third largest diaspora next to the British and the Chinese. Chronologically, the narrative of the Indian diaspora can be read in two terms “old” and “new” differently. The old Indian diaspora designates the early modern, classic capitalist or, more specifically, nineteenth-century indenture, and the new Indian diaspora applies to the late modern or the late capitalist and these two forms of diaspora move across two distinctive kinds of topography. The old and the new diasporas have been produced under different historical circumstances – colonization, slavery, indentured labourers, illegal migrants, hypermobility, globalization, etc. The migrants in the fictional world of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai can be analysed in terms of the new diasporas. They will embrace the changing pattern of movement and the shifting ideologies regarding home, identity, and

the sieving of old elements to make way for the newness that enters the lives of people who exist in two dissimilar worlds yet suffer the sense of loss in the real term.

The intent of this thesis is to evaluate the diasporic experiences and the vexations that intrude upon the Indian diasporas, both men and women, delineated in the fictions of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai, namely *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). The main thrust of the thesis will be on the multifaceted problems that originate from the time when an immigrant lands on the alien shore and an amalgamation of emotions which he/she undergoes after being transplanted on a culture which neither accepts nor rejects him/her. Although the two writers belong to the Indian diaspora, their approach to the premise of immigration is relatively poles apart. The main interest of all the three fictions of Jhumpa Lahiri is focused on the transnational movement of immigrants. She discusses the manifold problems that come along with the integration process. On the other, Kiran Desai especially in *The Inheritance of Loss* not only engages in the migration of people but also in the multifarious problems that arise in the postcolonial societal framework. She comprehensively discusses the issue of porosity of borders which results in the influx of irregular migrants who in turn affect the political, economic, and societal structure of the host nations. It brings to light the larger canvas of pursuit for national identity that infuses the individual to question the significance of his existential being in the postcolonial anxious state.

The crux of this research will address many divergent issues that spread over the social milieu to which these writers belong with reference to other Indian diasporic writers. It will engage in the perceptible changes that have been evoked by the hyphenated lives of migrants. It will also concentrate

on the postcolonial ambivalence, the emergence of globalization and its impact on the cultural establishment, the hypocrisy of the pluralism of culture, the ironical integration process, the negotiation of both cultural and individual identity, and the loss of self and dream in the labyrinth of global society.

The prefatory section of the thesis has already touched upon the conceptual meanings of diaspora and offers an 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 term in the transnational space. 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.

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 standpoint. 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

making mimicry and ambivalence. This section will further throw light on the emergence of a 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.

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 repercussions arising out 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 contradictions of postcolonial society which is marked by the loss of identity and home, the class structure, and many resistant movements from the minority groups. Over and above, it discusses the excruciating voyage of illegal migrants from the 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 the accomplished Bengali itinerants. Her breed of people includes the expedition of first generation and the impact of cultural hybridity on the second generation.

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 characters 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*, 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.

This final chapter will constitute the conclusion of the thesis which will shed light on the perspective which the researcher has discussed in the previous chapters. It is the abridgment of the findings after the extensive analysis of the varied experiences 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.

For the sake of convenience, this research work is divided into five chapters. They are:

**Chapter 1** : Introduction

**Chapter 2** : Locating Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai as Indian  
Diasporic Writers

**Chapter 3** : Complexity of Indian Diasporic Conditions in the Works  
of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai

**Chapter 4** : Women and Negotiation of Identity: Positioning Multiple  
Female Subjects

**Chapter 5** : Conclusion

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