

Ethnic Home - A Dream : Indian Diaspora in The Inheritance of Loss

***Priyanka Singh
*Vipin K. Singh**

Speaking of Indian immigrants in his "Imaginary homelands", Salman Rushdie writes:

(O)ur physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, homelands, Indias of the mind²

There seems to be a conscious effort on the part of almost all the diasporic writers in Indian fiction in English to resist and subvert the Eurocentric ideology by highlighting the experiences of the diasporic communities in a European country. Robin Cohen tentatively describes 'Diaspora' as community of people living together in one country who "acknowledge that the old country - a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore- always has some claim on their liyalty and ernotions"³. He continues that a member's adherence to diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable like with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background."⁴ In fact, distinct Diaspora communities are created, to quote Avtar Brah, out of the "confluence of narratives" of different journeys from 'old country' to the new, which create the sense of a shared history.⁵ This paper aims to show Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* as a novel that displays at length the plight and frustration of the Indian expatriates in England and New York. An attempt has been made to demonstrate how in diaspora communities one's sense of belonging to one's old ethnic home haunts like an unattainable place of desire one's mind, claims for one's loyalty to his/her cultural and ethnic values and captures one's

* Deptt. of English, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak (M.p.)

** Deptt. of English, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak (M.p.)

heart. The paper also tends to depict the way the concept of home performs an important role in the life of the expatriates and acts “as a valuable means of orientation”⁶ by giving them a sense of their place in the world.

As a consequence of globalization, Indians are more frequent in traveling to both indigenous and foreign lands. Economically and technologically advanced European countries offer professional opportunity and financial betterment to the natives of the third world countries. People from the developing countries are lured; they go abroad. But in the New World, there is continuous insistence that the immigrants experience, on assimilation and acculturation, a rejection of old habits and customs, traditions and conditioning, and a merging with the culture of the new context. The immigrants are therefore, in a sense, invited to experience the death of the self, as they have known it. They are asked to despise home culture and all that are related to it and represent it because the New World considers them inferior and less culturally and technologically sophisticated. The expatriates find it humiliating and group together to resist the First World ideology and assert their “traditional values, cuisine, language, (and) religion.”⁷ The new country sees the immigrants as ungrateful, hostile and alien. The immigrant feels unappreciated and alienated. He is torn between old and new world because he can neither attach completely with new world nor wholly detach himself from the old world. Being fed up with the new world, its people and the treatment that he gets there, immigrant starts dreaming of his old ethnic home (its people and culture) as a land of dream where he wants to return. The *Inheritance of Loss* basically deals with two Indian expatriates: one goes England to pursue education and the other goes New York to earn livelihood. Though the novelist has demonstrated other diaspora communities such as Nepali immigrants living in India, Pakistani and South Africans living in America, yet the paper centres its focus on the Indian immigrants. In the novel, Kiran Desai has displayed the biased treatment that the immigrants get in the country they are settled in. She has delineated in detail their experience and emotional crises. Desai has shown how the emotional and mental crises of a native in Europe make him remind of his native land and native culture as more fascinating and desirable. His ethnic home becomes a list dream that he wants to visualize and turn into reality but he finds himself unable to do so. In her *Post-colonial Theory*, Leela Gandhi states that “while ‘diaspora’ is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘migration’ it is generally involved as theoretical device for the interrogation of ethnic identity and cultural nationalism”.⁸ In this paper, ‘diaspora’ includes immigrants and their experience; it focuses on the plight and

frustration of the Indian immigrants in England and America. This paper contains two sections: one deals with the story of Jemubhai in England and the other with Biju in New York. First section centres its attention on the biased treatment that an immigrant gets in the new world; how he is marginalized and ill-treated because of his race and ethnicity; and how he is made to feel himself inferior. The second section lightens the emotional crises that leads the immigrants into an utter frustration and makes him to recall his ethnic home as a land of dream because it seems to be an unattainable place.

I

Jemubhai Popatlal Patel is born in Gujarat who goes England to pursue education. He is the first person of the Patel community who goes abroad, joins the English University and becomes "the first son of the community to join the ICS". (165) In England, jemubhai is cornered and disgusted for his race and ethnicity. His skin colour, native culture and regional accent make him strange and disgusting among the English. When he goes to get a room to rent, Jemubhai is disappointed. At every door, he knocks, he gets a despairing answer, that is , "Just let", "All full". The humiliating and disgusting attitude of the house owners makes him feel miserable. He visits twenty-two houses before he arrives at the door-step of Mrs. Rice. She also does not wish to get Jemubhai as her tenant, but she lets him a room because she is badly in need of money and her house is so located that she would not be able to find a lodger at all. Kiran Desai narrates the plight of Jemubhai.

While he was unimpressed, though, so too were the people who answered his knock, when they open their doors to his face: "Just let", "All full", or even a curtain lifted and quickly dropped, a stillness as if all the inhabitants had, in that instant, died.(38)

Jemubhai is ignored and hated because of his different race, He is an Indian, so unworthy of getting a room everywhere he likes. The house-owners in England despise him because his skin-colour, race and ethnicity remind them of certain attributes that they hate and Jemubhai cannot protest against this construction of his race that figures in the mind of the white people. Describing these social attributes, Ania Loomba states that "laziness, aggression, violence, greed, sexual promiscuity, bestiality, primitivism, innocence and irrationality are attributed (often contradictorily and inconsistently) by the English, French, Dutch, Spanish,

Portuguese colonists to Turks, Africans, Native Americans, Jews, Indians, the Irish and others".⁹ These racial qualities that Jemubhai is presumed to possess make him inferior and detestable. Jemubhai cannot change and protest against the image of his race as inferior and uncivilized because the othering of "vast number of people and their construction as backward and inferior",¹⁰ depends upon what Abdul Zan Muhamed calls the "Manichean allegory",¹¹ in which binary and implacable discursive poosition between races is produced.

In th New country, the immigrant is compelled to experience the death of his self as he has known it; he is made to renounce old habits and adopt new life style under a new identity. Jemubhai does not get his Indian food for meal and supper. Now he has to satisfy himself with "bolied egg, bread, butter, jam, milk" that does not make as much quantity as to remove his hunger. What Jemubhai can do is to manage to live with this and to recall tearfully with "half-empty stomach" his home and "family in Piphit who thought him as worthy of a hot dinner as the queen of England". (39) Now Jemubhai is not Jemubhai; instead, he has got a new name, an Anglicized name, "Jemes". Jemubhai cannot resist his this construction; he cannot even protest against the injustices and inconveniences caused to him. He is not allowed to criticize the Western ways of living; he cannot deny and protest against his Westernization. What he can do is to adjust with the new world and life at the cost of the death of his own costumes and habits and applaud whatever is Western as superior and desirable. When jemubhai works up the courage to ask for a proper evening meal, he gets a flat answer from his landlady: "we don't eat much of a supper ourselves james".(39) Jemubhai thanks his landlady for in sufficient food she provides him saying it be sufficient and absolutely delicious.

Jemubhai qualifies the entrance exam and secures his admision at Fitz William. He works hard to prove his skill and occupy a recognizable place among his English classmates. But his pusillarimity and limeliness makes him introvert. He retreats into a solitude, the solitude becomes a habit, the habit becomes the man, and it crushes him into a shadow. His Indian race and ethnicity let Jemubhai being treated as unfamiliar and thus he becomes an unmixed mixed among his collage students. No one is friendly to him; everywhere he gests solitude, and liness as a gift by Europeans. Kiran Desai describes the plight of Jemubhai in such words:

For entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammes with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things, and elder ladies,

even the hapless blue-haired, spotted, faces like collapsing pumpkins moved over when he sat next to them in the bus, so he knew that whatever they had, they were secure in their conviction that it wasn't even remotely as bad as bad as what he had. The young and beautiful were no kinder; girls held their noses and giggled, 'phew, he stinks of curry!' (39)

The negation of the immigrant as inferior and savage demonstrates the European belief in "a hierarchy of races based upon colour, with white Europeans deemed the most civilized and the black Africans (or Indians) as most savage."¹² Every one eschews Jemubhai, hates him and humiliates him by passing intolerable comments on his skin colour, native culture, race and ethnicity. Jemubhai becomes an introvert and a complex figure. He becomes stranger to himself more than to others around him. He forgets how to laugh, can barely manage to lift his lips in a smile, and if ever does, he holds his hand over his mouth, because he cannot bear anyone to see his gums, his teeth. They become too private. Concerned for being accused of smelling, he washes his body obsessively, uses several scents and perfumes. To the end of his life, he cannot be seen without socks and shoes, and prefers shadow to light, faded days to sunny, having suspicion that sunlight may reveal him to people.

Jemubhai appears in ICS examination and clears written test. But again he cannot impress his examiners in viva vice because of his Indian race. His skin colour is odd and his Indian accent, typical Gujrati, sounds amusing to his examiners. When the result comes, Jemubhai scores hundred out of three hundred marks in interview, the lowest qualifying marks, and could not get selection. He almost faints and is to stumble away when a man comes out with a supplementary announcement that a new list has been conceived in accordance with attempts to Indianize the service. Here Jemubhai finds his name at the bottom of the page. Jemu cannot stop shedding tears. He runs home and gets immediately into bed and soaks his pillow with his weeping. He lies there crying for three days and three nights. Kiran Desai displays how the immigrant's (like Jemubhai's) skill is declared his shortcoming in European country; how his hardwork is made futile. An immigrant always appears unimpressive and ludicrous to the Europeans. Now he bears the identity crisis : Europeans do not accept him as their own and Indians think him as something superior that will not suit to their community. Jemubhai cannot survive the sacrificial knife of the racial discrimination that an immigrant is made to bear. He cannot secure himself in the merit of the first list, which is only

for the Europeans. If he holds the position of an ICS, it is only in the second list that is conceived to Indianize the service. He cannot survive the perceived or constructed social differences which are “transformed into very real inequalities by colonialist and /or racist regimes and ideologies”.¹²

When Jemubhai returns to India, he cannot adjust with his family. His lifestyle does not suit to that of his family and relatives. He talks to no one. He has discarded his parents and his wife. He has no understanding with his servant, the cook, who has given his life long service to him. He does not like his grand daughter, Sai. His only interest is in his dog, Mutt. Kiran Desai through the title of the novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, appears to demonstrate this loss of the immigrants. Jemubhai loses all, his family, his culture, his feelings, everything that was once his own. Now he sits all the day in a dark room and eschews everything, because all appear to irritate him, to remind him of what he has lost. Now he finds himself neither like Indians, his own country people, nor like Britishers. The reminding of his experiences in England fills him with ire and complexes and “imagining home brings fragmentation, discontinuity and displacement”¹³ because he has lost all that he could be proud of.

II

Another story that goes parallel with that of Jemubhai deals with the plight and frustration of Biju in New York. Biju goes to New York as a cook to earn his livelihood. But all his illusion is shattered about the new world. If Jemubhai is treated as detestable in all the ways by English people, Biju receives disgusting attitude and biased treatment from the Americans. Like Jemubhai, Biju cannot survive the hammer of the politics of racialization. Since skin colour is generally regarded as “the prime signifier of racial identity.”¹⁴ his owner’s wife, at Pinacchio’s Italian Restaurant, finds Biju smelling. She wants a man from the poorer parts of Europe who at least has something in common with them like religion and skin-colour. She hopes Bulgarians or Czechoslovakians and not Indian. Biju works at several hotels and Restaurants, but nowhere he could get a respectable place and establishment in job; and everywhere he is accorded the lowest position. It is remarkable that Biju, like Jemubhai, is not liked. Everywhere he is unwanted, ill-treated; he is unwanted even as a servant. He is overlooked and subordinated by his employers for the European servants; his service is no less proper and desirable than those of other servants, but he is cornered and disgusted. Usually

he is employed as a substitute for other servants. Miss. Desai here seems to make a distinction between the wage earning classes : one is privileged to other because of one's white skin.

Biju is made to work like a beast. He finds that he is entrapped among the strong people who crush his cultural identity. He is made to experience the death of all what he has with him as cultural heritage. Most of the Indians living in America eat beef. Odessa shows her scorn and comments satirically "isn't ironic, nobody eats beef in India and just look at it - its the shape of a big T-bone." (135) Biju knows the logic that goes ehind the dictum "Holy cow. Unholy cow". He just adjusts with Americans at the cost of his own culture and identity. He knows that all cows are holy, no matter whether they are in India or America. But he invents the logic that American cows are not holy; it is only Indian cows which are worshiped, and so are holy. Biju knows that he cannot check the slaughtering of cows in America. He knows that "One should not give up one's religion, the principles of one's parents and their parents before them". (136) But immigrants suffer this lose, they are made to disregard their religion and culture. Biju thinks of his friends, Saeed, who refuses to eat pig. Saeed says : "They dirty, man, they messy. First I am Musloim, then I am Zanzibari, then I will B W American". Biju visits several hotels for work, but on being asked whether he cooks beef, he refuses to work there. What he experiences is that everywhere in Now York he, like other diaspora people, is ghettoized and excluded from feeling that he belongs to a new country and suffers his cultural practices being mocked and discriminated against.¹⁵

Biju often takes shelter for solace in the memories of his past life in India. he recalls his uncle when he gets bone-breaking cold. He recalls "the memory of an uncle who used to go out to the fields in winter with his lunch time parathas done his vest." (51) But even this does not seem to help, and once, on his bicylce, he begins to weep from the cold, and the weeping unpicks a deeper vein of grief- such as a terrible groan issues from between the whimpers that he is shocked his sadness is so profound. Biju is always shown, like Jembubhai in England, inferior and his Indian culture so detestable and humiliating that he himself feels ashamed of it. When he finds Saeed like and appreciate Indian dishes and movies, he feels proud of his country and native culture :

Saeed Saeed could sing like Amitabh Bachchan and Hema Malini, He sang, "Mera jotta hai Japani..." and "Bombay se aaya mera

dist - oi!" He could gesture his arms out and wiggle his lips, as could Kavafya from Kajakasthan and Omar from Malaysia, and together they assailed Biju with thrilling dance numbers. Biju felt so proud of his country's movies he almost fainted. (53).

Difficulties in adjustment, nostalgia for ethnic home, inability to connect on return visits to India, schizophrenic sense of double Indian or Western identities, or a sense of belonging nowhere, remain the dominant feelings of the Indian expatriates.¹⁶ These feelings over powers Biju's mind when Mr. Ipe tells him about the troubles that the Nepali created in Darjiling. A sense of belonging to India and his feeling for his father and native country caputre his head and heart. He phones to his father but the clear talk could not be possible. This stimulates his emotions more. On being asked when he would come, Biju bursts out into emotions: "I DON'T KNOW, I WILL TRY...." Biju wants to weep on the phone. "CAN'T YOU GET LEAVE?" asks the cook. Biju has not "even attained the decency of being granted a hiliday now and then. He could not go home to see his father." (232) Now he actual fight begins. Biju fights with his desires fo returning home. He fight with American officials for the passport. He wants to turn his dream (glorius past life in India) into reality. Avtar Brah states that "Home" is a mythic place of no return, evenif it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin".¹⁷ Biju yarns to attain that mythic place of desire. Growing riots in Kalimpong storms his feelings to return home. Anyhow he arranges a ticket from Mr. Kakkar and ignores him utterly when he emphasizes on his staying in New York. Now Biju does not "think of any of the things that had made him leave in the first place." (270) Now he only remembers how as a child he had been "part of a pack of boys who played so hard they'h come home exhaustede." (270) He reminds how they had thrown stones and slippers into trees to bring down "ber" and "jamun"; chased lizards until their tails fell off and tossed the leaping bits on little girls; how they had stolen *chooran* pellets from the shop..... He remembers bathing in the river, gnawing a sugarcane, working out the sweetness no matter how his jaw hurt, completely absorbed. Biju smiles recalling the time when the "whole village had watched India win a test match against Australia on a television running of a car battery because the transformer in the village had burned out."(270)

The presentationof diasporic experience in *The Inherigance of Loss* ranges from identity crises, to relationship failures, to immigrant dreams and fantasies and to their plight and frustration that result from the biased treatment of the new

world. Jemubhai is unable to adjust with his own wife and family and has become almost an introvert and a complex figure. Bijureturns India with "an unbearable feeling, sad and tender, old and sweet, like the memory of falling asleep, a baby on his mother's lap." (300) But at the next moment he feels everything shifting and clicking into place around himself slowly shrink back to size, the enormous anxiety of being a foreigner ebbing. He feels "unbearable arrogance and shame of the immigrant. Nobody paid attention to him here, and if they said anything at all, their words were easy unconcerned." (300)

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