



**KIRAN DESAI AS AN EMERGING POST – COLONIAL  
WRITER WITH THE SKILL FOR EXPLORATION OF  
HUMAN PSYCHE AND ALIENATION IN HER FICTIONAL  
WORLD: AN APPRAISAL**

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**Cite This Article:** Dr. S. Chelliah, “Kiran Desai as an Emerging Post – Colonial Writer with the Skill for Exploration of Human Psyche and Alienation in Her Fictional World: An Appraisal”, *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities*, Volume 2, Issue 2, Page Number 98-102, 2017.

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**Abstract:**

This paper examines the literary qualities of the earliest writers writing in English focusing on the theme of alienation and identity crisis as some sort of experience of colonial consciousness touching on the nature and character of the Indian mind deriving from an age – old civilization with its unique values and world – view, projecting in particular Kiran Desai as an emerging post – colonial writer with the skill for exploration of the human psyche of individuals and alienated self pictured in her fictional world. It neatly projects alienation as nothing but the human condition – the predicament of the modern man who is deprived as anonymous and impersonal in an urbanizing mass uprooted from all values and also as disorganization of one’s sensibilities, loss of identity and estrangement from one’s surrounding and its accepted values, for Kiran Desai’s *Hullabaloo* in the *Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss* deserve analysis and evaluation here in this paper to bring home the point that Desai’s novels are nothing but eye – openers for people to realize how and why people alienate themselves from society.

**Key Words:** Alienation, Identity, Crisis, Indian Mind, Unique Value, Meaninglessness, Globalization, Disorganization of Sensibility, Estrangement & Eye Opener

It is generally held that the novels of many of the writers writing in English including some of the earliest writers do have the dimensions of alienation and identity crisis. The experience of alienation has been very much a part of colonial history. But here again the Indian experience as well as the articulation of that experience has been different from those Africa, Canada and West Indies. Among a number of other reasons, one principal reason for this difference is to be sought in the nature and character of the Indian mind deriving from an age – old civilization with its unique values and world view. Indian literature, particularly in novel, does often land itself to analysis and interpretation in terms of the experience of alienation, considered in the sociological sense as well as to a limited extent in the existential sense.

With the advancement of science and technology, modern man’s life has become less difficult because of labour saving devices on the one hand, but on the other hand, his life has also become more monotonous and meaningless because of the mechanical and repetitive activities. People in both the industrialized as well as the rural sectors have come to find life quite unsatisfactory. But the alienation that we now hear about more frequently refers more to the life situation in the industrialized sectors. Quite contrary to popular notion, ‘alienation’ is not a social problem but ‘an individual problem’. This gets reflected in literature by writers who try to convey their alienation by referring to the society of which he or she is an inalienable part. The theme of alienation or rootlessness is not particularizing the literature of any one country but has, instead, served as a recurrent subject treatment of alienation, his constant portrayal of rootless characters and an awareness of his predicament seem to be suggestive of his own up rootedness. The problem of alienation is related to the loss of and quest for one’s identity. In the words of Donald Oken, “it is the loss of identity that results in alienation” (Johson 84).

Alienation has come to be one of the principal themes expressed in modernist literature, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century American and European fiction. James Joyce’s story “The Dead” is one which projects the theme of alienation primarily through the central character, Gabriel Conroy. The theme of alienation finds a place in T.S Eliot’s “The Wasteland” for the fragmentation of the poem is the essential alienating factor of the piece suggesting “a way of experiencing material, historical, time bound existence, daily life, as never really Wholly real” (Underhill 150). Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a novel which influences many later modernist writer’s including Eliot and Joyce, is in many ways an impressionist story of alienation amongst other things. Both Leo Tolstoy in *The Death of Ivan Illyich* and Franz Kafka in *The Metamorphosis* used alienation as a central theme to comment on the human need to experience love and acceptance. The modernist movement towards intellectual and emotional exploration as the inevitable conclusion. Often it is through alienation that men experiences his typical nature and attitude.

Truly speaking, alienation is nothing but the human condition- the predicament of the modern man who is deprived as anonymous and impersonal in an urbanizing mass uprooted from all the values yet without faith in the new national and burmen cratic order” (P574). V.K Gokak describes alienation as disorganization of ones’s sensibilities a loss of identity and an estrangement from one’s surrounding and its acceptance values.(P14). Alienated persons are always haunted by anxiety, doubt and distrust. A sense of isolation and loneliness keeps

them rather unhappy in all respects. Writers all over the world are afflicted with an agony caused by the sociological, psychological, cultural and economic situations prevailing our times, is a symptoms of an alienation that they are subjected to philosophy, art, literature and morality are the products of man, which become independent and powerful and tend to enslave man, the producer himself and make him powerless and dependent. Thus, man alienated from the activity through which these products are created. Man can also be alienated from the natural world of his existence as well as from other men:

“In reality all these forms of alienation are found to be one comprehensive from the alienation of man from his human ‘essence’ or ‘nature’ or from his humanity” (P76).

G.Petrovic has pointed out that contemporary writers seem to differ widely in the way they conceive of and define the term “alienation”. There are some for whom the term ‘alienation’ is applicable only to individuals and not to the society as a whole. In their view, the individuals who are able to adjust themselves to the society are alienated. There are others like Walter Kaufman who look or alienation as a state of estrangement from something or somebody” (Pxxiv). In the words of Walter Kaufman, ‘alienation’ is inevitable in the process of growing up, for in that process, “one has to detach oneself from the womb of one’s environment in order to become a person, an individual – an independent being. Consequently, one becomes estranged from nature, society, one’s fellowmen and one’s own self” (Pxivi). ‘Alienation’ is a term which has been in use in theological, philosophical, sociological and psychological writings for a long time, The oxford English Dictionary defines ‘alienation’ in three ways:- estranged, withdrawn or turned away in feeling or affection, mental alienation, withdrawal loss or derangement of mental facilities” (P219).

Literature undoubtedly interprets and records human life in all its diversities and complexities. Much of modern writing focuses its attention on the individual’s alienation in his own society. There are three kinds of alienation – cultural alienation, social alienation and self – alienation of which the last one is the most agonizing. Though the writer’s individual talent should be rooted in the tradition of a particular society and culture, the real strength of the modern literary imagination lies in its evocation of the individual’s predicament in terms of alienation, loneliness, rootlessness and their search for identity. The contemporary literary genre, particularly the fiction deals mainly with emotional problems which clearly reflect the pathetic condition of the modern man. Thus, this problems of alienation appears to be the chief concern of the post – modern Indo – Anglian novelists like the British novelists thereby gaining the trend to find expression’ in their fiction. Among the more recent novels, those of Arun Joshi and Anita Desai present more serious studies of individuals who find themselves alienated from the world and from their own inner selves. Their works are the eye – openers to those who wrongly presume that this issue does not exist in India. Anita Desai admits that he novels deal with the terror of facing single – handed, the ferocious assaults of existence” (Naik 241). Joshi’s alienated characters are mainly men. His recurrent theme is alienation in its different aspects and his heroes are intensely self – centered persons prone to self – pity escapism.

Anita Desai is perhaps the writer who concentrates almost exclusively on “the interior landscape of the mind” (Singh 4). Most of her central characters have some problems in relating to the world around them and aloneness in their usual condition. Nanda Kaul and Raka in *Fire on the Mountain*, Maya in *Cry*, The Peacock and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* are well known examples of almost totally alienated characters. Following the footsteps of her mother Anita Desai, Kiran Desai has exhibited her artistic skill in portraying the alienated characters, who experience the pain of being alienated, iin her two novels *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Kiran Desai is an emerging post colonial writer in the area of Indian writing in English. Being the daughter of the famous and well-known Indian English writer Anita Desai, Kiran Desai is said to have inherited rather undoubtedly he mother’s literary skills. The literary environment to which she has been exposed to since her childhood has helped her create her literary outputs. She was blessed with an opportunity of entering the world of literature in 1998 with the publication of her very first novel namely *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. She shot into the limelight after her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* published in 2006. Even if she has publication of only two novels to her credit, she was awarded the prestigious Man Booker Prize for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* in the year 2007. It is given to understand that she is the only youngest woman to win the prize for literary excellence.

Kiran Desai’s style surely resembles that of her famous mother, Anita Desai. Both seem to be preoccupied with the theme of alienation. When asked if there were echoes of her books in Kiran’s writing, Anita Desai replied, “We share the same material” (P11). Speaking about a universal sense of loss and detachment, Dr. Indira Bhattacharya observes:

“The inheritance of loss is universal. Young people are losing their sense of inheritance, that of belonging, their culture, detached from their very backgrounds, as they go their different ways” (P 9).

According to her, the alienated characters in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* represent the alienated people in our society. Though the novel is set against the background of the Gorkhaland movement, Desai’s purpose was not such much to write a political novel but to examine how people deal with such situations – “how they survive, who goes under, who comes out alive, who pays the price for what is happening” (Suroor 1).

Kiran Desai's real concern is with the exploration of the human psyche. Her thrilling experience and literary skill lie in the creation of characters placed in situation involving choices and commitments and her characters are shown to be often indulging in self analysis and discovering themselves in the process of adapting to or alienating themselves from their surroundings, generally experiencing a sense of loneliness quite unable to communicate with people around them. Their sense of loneliness culminates in alienation which makes them drift away so as to create a world of their own where they spine dreams left rather unfulfilled at all levels possible.

Kiran Desai's first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, is the tale of a young man Sampath Chawla who lives in the town of Shahkot, India. He is born on the night a severe drought ends when a ferocious monsoon sweeps over the region. Immediately following his birth, the Swedish Red Cross makes a food drop right in front of Sampath's house. The people in the Shahkot Community are convinced that Sampath is destined to be an important man. Sampath's eccentric mother and demanding father are not so much sure about their son becoming a great man. To Kulfi, his mother, he is an odd looking alien with a large brown birthmark on his face. Twenty years later, Sampath has not yet lived upto the prediction of greatness. His father tries to counsel him or how he can get a better job or atleast a raise in the salary at the post office where employed. Not paying any heed to his father's advice, he spends hours alone, steaming open letters return to and from neighbours. Kulfi feels sorry for Sampath with whom she has great association and gives him a fresh guava. After he eats it, he immediately feels energized and transformed. With no job and no prospects of one, his father is frantic and orders his son to immediately go job hunting.

Sampath makes up his mind to run away and as a result, he bolts off the bus to an attractive orchard he sees in the distance. He climbs a beautiful guava controversy develops about the monkeys who live in the guava tree with Sampath. The large monkeys attack people and often steal alcohol and get very drunk. The officials are determined to rid the town of the monkeys but Sampath decides to save his simian friends. How he saves them is both surprising and magical. When his father looks for him he finds a large guava in his place with a brown mark on its skin. Sampath is able to save the monkeys and find a new home for himself making his dream to become part of nature become a reality. What is to be understood from the narration is that feeling isolated from the world around him and wanting to be free from the responsibilities of his adult life, Sampath takes refuge in a guava tree in an abandoned orchard. His mother Kulfi can think of nothing other than food, and she has absolutely no association with any other person or thing. Totally alienated due to mental disorder, kulfi's solitary pursuit is cooking strange dishes for her son and also hunting for bizarre ingredients. Jemubhai is another alienated character who is condemned to a lifetime of loneliness and self – hatred and lives in an isolated house with his only companion, a dog named Mutt.

Alienation is considered to be a modern human condition – the predicament of the modern men who is defined as “anonymous and impersonal in an urbanizing mass, uprooted from all values yet without faith in the new national and bureaucratic order” (P 574). V.K. Gokak describes alienation as “disorganization of one's sensibilities, a loss of identity and an estrangement from one's surroundings and its accepted values” (P 14). Alienated persons are haunted by anxiety, doubt and distrust. A sense of isolation and loneliness keeps them rather unhappy in all respects. The concept of alienation has a history of considerable antiquity. Baldwin in his *Dictionary of philosophy* says, “...alienation is a genetic name for the various forms of insanity or mental derangement” (Schacht 3). Looking at Kiran Desai's debut novel *Hullabaloo Guava Orchard* from this perspective, it becomes obvious that its female protagonist Kulfi Chawla, who is suffocating beneath flowering neuroses and private grief, is a victim of alienation as a psychiatric disorder. She is pictured as living within a self-created fortress, buttressed with a passion for food and whimsical manners, to keep everyone except her son Sampath out of her life. there are several instances to illustrate Kulfi's alienation but one thing becomes clear that she has inherited the strain of insanity from her ancestral family background. Food is the sole thought in her mind. The hunger that grows inside Kulfi, when pregnant becomes so insatiable that she bribes the vegetable sellers, fruit sellers and the butcher with the leftover bits of her dowry. Her husband Mr. Chawla gets annoyed and worried at the thought of her going to the market place over and over again and at the sight of emptying cupboards and shelves. Kulfi finds it so difficult to adjust herself to her environment that she feels desperate “for another landscape” (Desai 7). Her sense of alienation and detachment keeps growing inside her with her baby. Quite contrary to normal human behavior, Kulfi does not want anyone's company and desires to be left alone in her own world. The only person Kulfi is able to relate with is her son Sampath. he is the only one for whom she has feeling of love and affection and the only person for his son when rebuked by her husband. And amidst all her thoughts about food, she does murmur, “Poor Sampath” (desai26).

Kulfi's impossibly absent-minded son is sacked from his post office job after committing an unspeakable outrage or the wedding feast of his employer's daughter-when he performed an impromptu cross-dressing-strip-tease or the wedding. In the entire hullabaloo that is created after this event, kulfi, just like her son, seeks refuge on the balcony:

“From a window below, his mother's head appeared sticking out. Apparently she too was in need of a little quiet after all the noise in the house. He watched as she leaned out, craning her neck to look into the shopping bag of someone veturing from the bazaar. “jackfruit” he heard her say excitedly to herself. And

then, even more excited, so the word came out wrong: Carfruit. But it will give the whole family heart palpitations!” (Desai 44)

Through still preoccupied with thoughts of jackfruits and other eatables, Kulfi manager to come out of her estrangement to console her beloved son. Feeling sorry for her son, she goes to the roof top with a guava and offers it to him, pulling his ear affectionately. The alienation suffered by both is what brings them together. Seeing her son sitting in a guava tree, Kulfi is suddenly transported back back to her past. She is the only one who is able to comprehend her isolated son’s mental state precisely because she too had to pass through somewhat similar situations:

“Looking at her son, Kulfi feel the past come rushing back to her, engulfing her in the memory of a time when she was young, when her mind was full of dark corners, when her thoughts grew deep and underground and could be easily uttered aloud”(P54).

She cannot come to terms so easily with her social surround because it is impossible to reconcile her wild dreams with her tame life in Shahkat. When the Chawla family takes up residence in the forest along with Sampath Kulfi discovers the relief space. She finds herself in a landscape she identifies with her obsession with food become a diversion from the world as well as means of escape. Kulfi’s alienation really arises out of an inability to communicate with normal people under normal circumstances owing to her mental illness and the consequent breakdown of her relationship with others.

Kiran Desai explores another dimension of alienation in her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. Here it is Nimi Patel, the judge wife, who is a victim of interpersonal estrangement which is another form of alienation. Even the judge himself is alienated. His behavior towards his wife, the way he trends her all this leads to Nimi’s estrangement. In the word’s of Richard Schacht”, a person may be said to have alienated another or to have alienated himself from another, if he has done something to inspire feelings of antagonism or hostility to him (P4). Keeping this in mind, in the event of Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* being , it will be found that Nimi alienated herself from Jemubhai who had once felt a positive attachment towards her doing the first days of their marriage and later developed a bit away from that feeling leading to Nimi’s alienation.

The story is centered on two main characters, Biju and Sai. Biju is an illegal immigrant living in the limited states. He is the son of a cook working for sai’s grandfather. Sai is a young girl living in mountainous Kampling with her maternal grandfather Jemibhai Patel the cook and a female dog Mutt. Desai switches the narration between both points of view in the novel set in 1986 in the backdrop of the Gorkhaland movement. The novel follows the story of Biju, an illegal immigrant in the US who is trying to make a new life and Sai, an Anglicized Indian girl living with her grandfather in India. The novel shows the internal conflicts in India between past and present. There is the rejection and yet awe of the English way of life, the opportunities in the money in the US and the squalor of living in India. Many leading Indians were considered in becoming too English and having forgotten the traditional ways of Indian life shown through the character of the grandfather, the retired judge. The major theme running throughout is closely related to colonialism and effects of post colonialism; the loss of identity and the way it travels through generations as a sense of loss. Individuals within the text show snobbery at those who embody the Indian way of life and vice versa, with characters displaying the anger of the English Indians who have lost their traditions. The retired judge, Jemubhai patel is a man disgusted at Indians ways and customs, so much so that he eats chapati’s with a knife and fork, hates all the Indians including his father whom he breaks ties with his wife who he abandons at her father’s place after torturing her and is never accepted by the British in spite of his education and adopted mannerism.

*The Inheritance of loss* is set partly in India and partly in US. He describes it as a book that tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant and goes to say that it also explores at a deeper level, “What happens when a western element is introduced into a country that is not of the west. This novel *The Inheritance of Loss* if viewed as a diasporic novel focuses on various themes like globalization, multiculturalism, insurgency, poverty isolation and loss of identity. No doubt, the theme of Diaspora in the world of literature describes loss of identity and isolation witnessed by the Indian writers who are settled abroad. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and Kiran Desai have given insight into what it means to travel between the West and the East.

The novel, set in modern day India, does depict the collapse of established order due to insurgency. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai portrays the issue of poverty and globalization not being an easy solution for the problems of trapped social middle classes. The narrative revolves around the inhabitants of Kalimpong, a town in the north-eastern Himalayas, an embittered old judge, his granddaughter Sai, he cook and their rich array of relatives, friends and acquaintances, and the effects on the lives of these people brought about by the Gorkha uprising. The book paints the act of immigration and how the post colonial war creates despair resulting in a sense of isolation inherited by each character in the novel. It presents the story of one family as a symbol of the global issues related to colonization and the resulting search for identity. Desai presents the similarities between the judge, Gyan and Biju – as they fight to find their identities and reconcile themselves with their histories. The characters in the novel are bewildered and disillusioned by the world, with no initiative to speak of nor any capacity to learn. Almost all the characters have been stunted by their encounters with the West. As a student



isolated in racist England, the future judge feels “barely human at all” and leaps “when touched on the arm as if from an umbrella intimacy”. Yet on his return to India, he finds himself desiring his beautiful Indian wife. Arguably the most beautiful portions of the book are the nuggets Desai paints of the cook’s son who gets by on the barest of bare from one minimum wage job to the other in New York City.

What binds these disparate characters are shared historical legacy and a common experience of importance and humiliation. For the characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, escape is impossible and misery is their birthright. Sai’s parents – before they die – are filled with the same loneliness as their daughter, the son whose mother is bidding him farewell botches his goodbye, and it is learnt that “Never again would he know love for a human being that wasn’t adulterated by another contradictory emotion. The plot of the novel is fascinating. However, its real charm lies in its atmospheric descriptions and in quirky characters with whom the reader quickly identifies. Desai is a careful observer of behaviours, both in India and in the U.S, with a fine eye for details which bring her character and narrative to life. Intensely human, Desai’s characters, like people from all cultures, make huge sacrifices for their children, behave cruelly towards people they love, reject traditional ways of life and old values, rediscover what is important to them, suffer at the hands of faceless government officials, and learn and grow, and make decisions, sometimes ill – considered about their lives. Dealing with all levels of society and different cultures, Desai shows life’s humour and brutality, its whimsy and its harshness, and its delicate emotions and passionate commitments in a novel that is both beautiful and wise.

In a nutshell, Kiran Desai writes an elegant and thoughtful study of families, the losses each member must confront alone and the lies each tells himself/herself to make memories of the past more palatable. This novel is about the shared legacy of its diverse characters and their past. The judge, Sai, Lola and Noni, father Booty and Uncle Potty, as well as Gyan are tortured and tormented souls who have not found fulfillment in life; they all have inherited “loss” of one kind or another in their lives and they must live with it. These characters are torn between hope and despair throughout the narrative; even at the end, there is no glimmer of hope in sight. However, amidst all this despair and pessimism, the relationship between the judge’s man Friday, the cook and his immigrant son Biju stands out.

To conclude, it may be said that the novels of Kiran Desai, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss* are really interesting in that they are really eye openers for people to realize how and why people alienate themselves from society.

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