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MIGRATION, GLOBALIZATION, AND DIVIDED IDENTITY IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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In this time of ever-accelerating migration and cultural globalization, the production of Anglophone literature and the field of literary studies reflect the profound influence of these processes. Among the group of transnational and multicultural authors who write literary texts that address these processes is Kiran Desai, whose personal background and literary output exemplify the growing presence and importance of transnational writing. Drawing on the studies of Vijay Mishra and Paul Jay about diaspora and globalization, this paper discusses Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) in light of the colonial legacy of displacement and the resultant divided identity. Through an examination of the novel's main themes centered on the impact of the U.S. capitalist empire and English colonization in India, this analysis explores the fragmentation of values and the crisis of individual and collective identity in an ever-changing, globalizing world. Spanning continents, and switching back and forth in time and viewpoints, Desai's narrative reveals the ambivalence of the characters' adjustment to the inexorable economic and social demands that leave them trapped between tradition and transition, colonialism and nationalism, diaspora and cosmopolitanism. This paper argues that the complex interplay of local custom, migration, postcolonial conflicts and diasporic existence both bring together and separate seemingly disparate worlds and characters. It also investigates how tensions between the colonial hegemony of the past, family aspirations, and community expectations affect the characters who are suspended between assimilation and resistance in the struggle to assert their personal and national identities.

Keywords: postcolonial writing, Indian diaspora, Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss,* colonialism, global mobility, identity

INTRODUCTION

In our fast-changing, globalizing world, with rampant migrancy and the dominance of English as a leading world language, it is of little surprise

that Anglophone literary production and its associated literary studies have communicated the impact of this reality with fascinating scope, diversity, and quality. Much of this immense body of fiction focuses on diaspora, and tensions arising from the binarisms of the local and the global, the homeland and the diasporic location, the "traditional" and the "modern". Invariably, these oppositional discourses provoke the destabilization and termination of such bifurcations, and lead to new, often self-affirming and emancipatory possibilities. In most cases, because of the authors' multiracial, multicultural, transnational backgrounds and literary output, they strive to capture the vicissitudes of history and the global economy in the process of forming diasporic consciousness. As Paul Jay points out in his study *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*, their "work explores the intersecting effects of colonialism, decolonization, migration, and economic and cultural globalization" (Jay 2010: 91). The tradition of literature in India (both in the vernacular in the country's numerous languages, and in English) is rich and captivating. But since India's independence in 1947, English novelistic writing by Indian authors has taken center stage in the literary representation of the contemporary circumstances of their people and country. A watershed publication in the development of the Indian-English novel, and possibly for postcolonial writing in English as a whole, was Salman Rushdie's 1981 novel *Midnight's Children*. This novel spawned new international attention for postcolonial literature and the broader processes of decolonization. Since then, a number of notable Indian writers have captured the manifold challenges of their tradition and contemporary situation. A significant group of them, as Prabhat K. Singh recognizes, authored what he dubs "the Diaspora novels that deal in realistic fashion with cultural clashes, identity crisis, alienation and search for a substitute living which are but the outposts of immigrant odyssey" (Singh 2013: 24). One writer whose personal history, family experience and literary texts illustrate transnational involvement and writing on cross-cultural exchange linked to migration and identity issues is Kiran Desai. She belongs to the younger generation of Indian authors, i.e. a later group than Rushdie's, who are sometimes labeled "Midnight's Grandchildren". Their predecessors include Kiran Desai's mother, Anita Desai, who has contributed substantially to the development of the Indian novel in English.[1]

The primary source of this paper's analysis is Kiran Desai's second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), which received substantial international praise

[1] For a cogent discussion of Indian novelistic production in English, see Gopal 2009.

and the Man Booker Prize for fiction. It is a literary text that "confirm[s] the outstanding growth of the Indian English novel as an art form disencumbered of the Western freight" (Singh 2013: 2). Set in America, India, and Britain, the novel follows the lives of characters who immigrate to New York, as well as those who return to or stay in their homeland. The novel's themes mainly address the pervasive ramifications of U.S. capitalist dominance in light of the English colonial legacy of dislocation and dispossession, and the resultant truncated identities in India. Consequently, the novel describes the difficulty of the characters' existence due to a fragmentation of values, and crises of individual and collective identities. In the words of Paul Jay, it is a novel that deals with "intersecting and sometimes conflicting identities (personal, cultural, political) grounded in forms of displacement endemic to the long history of globalization" (Jay 2010: 91). Thanks to its narrative structure, including shifts in geography, time and point of view, the novel compellingly presents the problematic position of characters facing relentless economic and social pressures, which cause tensions between traditional values and assimilation, and national identities and transnational belonging. Their diasporic experiences are set against the background of migration, decolonization, postcolonial circumstances and the quest for self-assertion. These forces, contending with the legacy of the colonial past, family ambitions, cultural norms, and globalization shape and transform Desai's characters, who are often suspended between pressures of assimilation and opposition to this adjustment in their efforts to affirm their sense of self. In this context, *The Inheritance of Loss* spells out the tragic ramifications of power inequalities, class-based exploitation and broken values that are embedded in the fate of the novel's characters, and shared by millions of people around the world. Therefore, the novel illustrates the interplay between different categories of influence and identity in the context of migrancy, diaspora, and globalization. In such circumstances, it may appear that globalization is a recent trend, and that writing about it has only just become topical. However, the urgency of this matter has been pinpointed repeatedly by numerous scholars and writers, most notably Salman Rushdie in his collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands*, which draws attention to the potential of migrancy for literature:

> Let me suggest that Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and politics of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group […] America, a nation of immigrants, has created great literature out of the phenomenon of cultural transplantation, out of examining the ways

> in which people cope with a new world; it may be that by discovering what we have in common with those who preceded us into this country, we can begin to do the same (Rushdie 1992: 20).

The acknowledgement of migration and cultural dislocation as conduits to understanding longer-term interconnected historical processes should take into account their potential for literary inspiration. It is precisely in this vein that Desai's novel exemplifies global mobility in different periods of history and socio-economic systems, and highlights the unsettling effects that dominant narratives of the global have on individual and collective senses of belonging and self.

BETWEEN CULTURES: MIGRATION, BELONGING, IDENTITY

The diasporic experience has diverse concerns and theories, depending on the diaspora in question. For Kiran Desai, an Indian-born novelist, the diasporic imaginary is derived from the Indian context, and can be situated cogently in the context of Vijay Mishra's ideas, presented in his book *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. At the book's beginning, Mishra offers his definition of diasporas:

> All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by spectres, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements. Diasporas are both celebrated (by late/postmodernity) and maligned (by early modernity). But we need to be a little cautious, a little wary of either position (Mishra 2007: 1).

Mishra's argument underscores the divided sense of self diasporas experience as a consequence of a dislodged and upset condition, displaced in territory and thought, and hinging on their particular circumstances and narratives. In order to study the latter, he makes a case for approaching the Indian diaspora "as two relatively autonomous archives" (Mishra 2007: 2),

one belonging to the "old" Indian diaspora of nineteenth-century indenture and early capitalism, and the other "new" one shaped by the transnational capital of the late twentieth century. They mirror "the very different historical conditions that produced them" (Mishra 2007: 3), where the latter, "new" diaspora stems from

> globalization and hypermobility, it comes with modern means of communication already fully formed or in the making (airplanes, telephone, e-mail, the internet, videocassettes, DVD, video-link, webcam) and it comes, since 2003, with the gift of dual citizenship from India (the Indian Citizenship Act 1955 has been amended to allow the Indian diaspora in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands and Italy to retain dual citizenship). In a thoroughly global world the act of displacement now makes diasporic subjects travellers on the move, their homeland contained in the simulacral world of visual media where the "net" constitutes the "self" and quite unlike the earlier diaspora where imagination was triggered by the contents in gunny sacks… (Mishra 2007: 3–4)

Mishra contends that a comprehensive understanding of the Indian diaspora can only be reached if the particular locations of both diasporas are considered. He detects the core of Indian diasporic literature in its place of origin as an intimation, and a location to which diasporas seek to return despite its unattainability. Its idealization, colored by nostalgic reminiscences of a site, constitutes the diasporic imaginary: "any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied coercion, as a group that lives in displacement" (Mishra 2007: 14).

These ideas resonate strongly through *The Inheritance of Loss*, which falls under Mishra's "new" diaspora. With its narrative approaches, the novel exemplifies the tension generated by the diasporic imaginary. As in Desai's first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, the primary setting of this novel is India, but the story jumps to the United States and alternates between the two settings, providing a backbone in which these two worlds convulse in antagonism. The novel's abundance of characters, themes, subplots, and flashbacks, and its constant shifts in location and point of view place the novel on the edge of chaos and confusion. With strong and vivid prose, this novel confirms Desai's "indisputable talent for describing scenes so vividly that the reader loses herself in a Darjeeling restaurant, or a neighborhood in Harlem" (Albritton 2007: 170), and points "towards a new poetics of the Indian English novel" (Singh 2013: 26). Most importantly, however, this narrative articulates the marginalized and class, race and gender minorities;

in the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, it is about "letting the subaltern speak" (1988).[2] Desai's acerbic depiction of the subalterns' condition and the effects of globalization leads to a critical examination of the way in which cultural discourses and ideologies reflect the issues of changes due to (neo)-colonial displacement and the related crisis of individual and collective identity. The novel offers a striking portrayal of "the plight of the subalterns disempowered by globalization […] Evidently, Desai's less than celebratory slant on globalization is informed by her perception of the lingering age of colonization with its neo-colonial dimensions" (Prasad 2013: 62). Desai presents these dimensions through a close insight into two interrelated, truncated families, thus disclosing several South Asian histories, both personal and collective, that suggest various changes. One of these changes is literally revolutionary: it involves a major political, social and cultural upheaval sparked by a Nepalese insurrection in northeastern India. Simultaneously, the narrative follows the lives of African and other immigrants struggling to eke out a living in the United States. With this narrative structure, the novel's obliteration of "global" vs. "local" illustrates the nexus of historical forces coupled with economic and cultural aspects of globalization that affect the characters' destinies. Desai's crafty narrative strategy weds the two strands effectively, and captures the position of protagonists caught between cultures and the trials of globalization. As Paul Jay explains:

> On its surface, the novel seems to be telling two very different stories, one rooted in the contemporary economic and cultural politics of globalization, the other in an older, fading history of ancient territorial disputes, ethnic rivalries, and nationalist aspirations. Read more carefully, however, it becomes clear that its two narratives are linked in a way that underscores a continuity between the stories they each tell, emphasizing the extent to which the relationship between migration, identity, and belonging under the forces of globalization mirror longstanding problems created by territorial, cultural, and personal disputes about identity among national groups (Jay 2010: 119).

[2] It should be noted that the use and interpretation of the term "subaltern" and related concepts differ in critical practice. One of the leading Subaltern historians Ranajit Guha extends the term to define subalternity as "the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (Guha qtd. in Young 2001: 354). Spivak extends subalternity to women's and gender issues. Thus, as Robert Young concludes, "in postcolonial studies generally, the subaltern has become a synonym for any marginalized or disempowered minority group, particularly on the grounds of gender and ethnicity" (Young 2001: 354).

One of these histories is set at the foot of the Himalayas, in the border region between Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Indian state of West Bengal. This account doubles as a history of colonialism, embodied in an old, ramshackle colonial-era house in the hill station of Kalimpong near Darjeeling, where retired Indian judge Jemubhai lives with his orphaned granddaughter, his cook and his beloved dog. The judge's cook provides the other history: a narrative on contemporary globalization through New York City's "shadow class" of illegal Indian restaurant workers who harbor hopes of an American dream, shown through the cook's nineteen-year-old son Biju. The cook nurtures unrealistic expectations, and worries about his son, who is doomed to low-wage jobs as an illegal immigrant in New York City, where he "joins the United Nations of the desperate – young men from around the globe who work at dirty, underpaid jobs and sleep crowded together on the floors of unventilated tenement basements" (Halpern 2007: 19). Desai's evocative description of this existence merits a longer excerpt from the novel:

> Biju put a padding of newspapers down his shirt—leftover copies from kind Mr. Iype the newsagent—and sometimes he took the scallion pancakes and inserted them below the paper, inspired by the memory of an uncle who used to go out to the fields in winter with his lunchtime parathas down his vest. But even this did not seem to help, and once, on his bicycle, he began to weep from the cold, and the weeping unpicked a deeper vein of grief—such a terrible groan issued from between the whimpers that he was shocked his sadness was so profound.
>
> When he returned home to the basement of a building at the bottom of Harlem, he fell straight into sleep. The building belonged to an invisible management company that listed its address as One and a Quarter Street and owned tenements all over the neighborhood, the superintendent supplementing his income by illegally renting out basement quarters by the week, by the month, and even by the day, to fellow illegals. He spoke about as much English as Biju did, so between Spanish, Hindi, and wild mime, Jacinto's gold tooth flashing in the late evening sun, they had settled the terms of rental. Biju joined a shifting population of men camping out near the fuse box, behind the boiler, in the cubby holes, and in odd-shaped corners that once were pantries, maids' rooms, laundry rooms, and storage rooms at the bottom of what had been a single-family home, the entrance still adorned with a scrap of colored mosaic in the shape of a star. The men shared a yellow toilet; the sink was a tin laundry trough. There was one fuse box for the whole building, and if anyone turned on too many appliances or lights, PHUT, the entire electricity went, and the residents screamed to nobody, since there was nobody, of course, to hear them (Desai 2006: 58–59).

Biju's precarious life as a disenfranchised illegal alien toiling in infernal restaurant basement kitchens triggers his self-doubt, signifying the uncertainty of our time, as well as the economic, social, and racial inequality in an era of globalization and alienation. He "is tenuously connected to the processes of transnational formations in that he clings to the possibilities of prosperity in the 'core' region of globalization even as he shifts from one temporary job to another in the basement kitchens of New York restaurants" (Prasad 2013: 66). This narrative is also a history of displacement, diaspora and change, in which the sense of home is lost, revealing the inability of an undocumented worker to rise above the unrelenting poverty and legal precariousness of the global economy's underbelly.[3] According to Paul Jay, "the novel focuses our attention on the decidedly uneven economic and cultural effects of globalization in the metropolitan West, on its tendency to both create and exploit a kind of tribal underclass of transnational diasporic workers whose experiences call attention to a set of class-related issues" (Jay 2010: 120). Alongside the economic exploitation fed by global mobility, Desai adds a caustic debunking of the sham multiculturalism on display in a restaurant with an apparently sophisticated name. The different countries' flags on display mock America's democratic openness and economic possibilities, and intensify Biju's divided sense of self:

> Biju at the 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, Pakistani.
>
> Biju at Le Colonial for the authentic colonial experience.
> On top, rich colonial, and down below, poor native. Colombian, Tunisian, Ecuadorian, Gambian.
> On to the Stars and Stripes Diner. All American flag on top, all Guatemalan flag below.
> Plus one Indian flag when Biju arrived.
>
> There was a whole world in the basement kitchens of New York, but Biju was ill-equipped for it (Desai 2006: 29).

Desai's pared-down and curt style in this section deepens the irony that all of these restaurants are "ethnic", a feature that disingenuously

[3] In his illuminating article "Literary Perspectives on Globalization: Reading Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*", Murari Prasad argues for a specific classification of this novel as "global fiction", because of its portrayal of the (neo-)colonized in the global context: "Desai's novel gives place to the colonized in the new international network and advances debates surrounding the idea of globalization" (Prasad 2013: 63).

reinforces the transnational disposition of New York City under the vicious and increasingly uneven economic effects of global migration. Sharp economic inequities, harsh labor exploitation, racial exclusion and his own cultural prejudices gnaw at the protagonist's diasporic consciousness, because he realizes the vulnerability of his position as one of the hordes of transient and disposable undocumented workers, struggling for survival and belonging. Additionally, "Desai's upstairs-downstairs stress on economic and class divisions between patrons and workers" (Jay 2010: 120) evokes the spatialized master-servant stratification of the British social system and its colonial legacy in India.

The other narrative ties Biju's displacement from India to the capital of the global economy in the 1980s to the judge's similar experience as a young man in the unwelcoming Cambridge environment of the 1930s. The two characters embody the dislocation that originates in colonial hegemony, and the experience of those who have migrated from their homeland to a place that becomes embedded in their diasporic consciousness, evoked in discourse and challenged by colonial obstruction. As representatives of a colonized people and its related legacy, these characters testify to a complex interaction of language, history and environment, reflected in their displacement and divided sense of self.

GLOBALIZATION AT WORK: MOBILITY, DISPLACEMENT, STRUGGLE

Because the novel is centered on the fate of the characters as diasporic subjects, there is extensive emphasis on mobility, movement from location to location, and the related sense of belonging and identity. Desai's narrative illustrates how the growing mobility of people across the world due to globalization causes diverse crises of personal and cultural identity. Confounded by the challenges he experiences in the seat of economic globalization and (ostensible) economic opportunities, Biju's sense of self and his cultural awareness are under pressure to westernize, which in turn triggers his struggle to resist. His awareness of himself becomes deeply shaken, driven by painful displacement not only from his homeland, family and culture, but also from his previous understanding of his individual and collective belonging. Paul Jay remarks: "One of the first things Biju learns after arriving in New York is that he belongs to a global South Asian

diaspora with a long history, and this knowledge upsets everything he knows about his own identity" (Jay 2010: 121). In globalization, mobility is key to the production and construction of diverse cultural identities. Global migrants like Biju are driven by poverty and economic exploitation, but in colonization, mobility is generated by subjugation or determined forms of mobility, as is the case with the character of judge Jemubhai. The destinies of these two protagonists—linked in the novel through Biju's father, who is the judge's cook—are meshed through intelligent use of the old motif of the journey, "updated to focus on a critical topic for globalization studies – mobility" (Jay 2010: 124). This emphasis on mobility is initiated by Biju's journey to New York, which is interlaced in the narrative with the history of Jemubhai's journey, which he undertook half a century earlier, by sea from India to Cambridge to study law. As an Indian educated in England, the judge seems caught between the waning British Empire and the turmoil of independent India's early democracy.

Retired to his isolated house in Kalimpong after being a judge with the Indian Civil Service (ICS), Jemubhai is an alienated and resentful Anglophile, displaced from his sense of belonging to Indianness. His father was a peasant whose occupation was to provide fake witnesses to the court give false witness in court. In order to rise above his father in rank, Jemubhai takes advantage of Indianization, and obtains admission to one of the lower-ranked colleges in Cambridge to study to become a magistrate. Once away from India, he undergoes an educational and cultural transformation in England that has a profound impact on his identity: he confines himself to his room, lets his landlady call him James, and becomes embarrassed by his unpronounceable name, his pronunciation of English, and the color and smell of his skin:

> For entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things, and elderly 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 what he had. The young and beautiful were no kinder; girls held their noses and giggled, "Phew, he stinks of curry!"
>
> Thus Jemubhai's mind had begun to warp; he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar (Desai 2006: 46–47).

The portrayal of this protagonist's devastating solitude, his sense of dislocation and anguish, turns him to self-abnegation through a debilitating

work routine that intensifies his warped and anxious state of mind. Shy and overwhelmed by the new, unfamiliar territory, he not only barely spoke during his years in England, but eventually stopped speaking in the first person as "I," and resorted to sentences with "one," as if his subject perception were that of anyone. This is indicative of his destabilized subjectivity:

> He worked late into the night back in his rented room, still tailed by the persistent smell of shit, falling from his chair directly into bed, rising in terror a few hours later, and rolling up onto the chair again.
>
> He worked eighteen hours a day, over a hundred hours a week, sometimes stopping to feed his landlady's dog when she begged for a share of pork pie dinner, […] Three nights before the Probation Finals, he did not sleep at all, but read aloud to himself, rocking back and forth to the rhythm, repeating, repeating.
>
> A journey once begun, has no end. The memory of his ocean trip shone between the words. Below and beyond, the monsters of his unconscious prowled, awaiting the time when they would rise and be proven real and he wondered if he'd dreamt of the drowning power of the sea before his first sight of it.
>
> His landlady brought his dinner tray right to his door. A treat: a quadruplet of handsome oily sausages, confident, gleaming, whizzing with life. Ready already for the age when food would sing on television to advertise itself.
> "Don't work too hard."
> "One must, Mrs. Rice."
>
> He had learned to take refuge in the third person and to keep everyone at bay, to keep even himself away from himself like the Queen (Desai 2006: 118).

Throughout the novel, the main characters experience various obstacles to their language, social, and historical aspects that debilitate their individual and collective sense of self. Thus, when Jemubhai returns to India having been awarded a judgeship, he clings to all that he has acquired in performing English identity, including a powder puff to whiten his face, as he feels uncomfortable in his own, Indian skin. With cultural values, eating habits and tastes that are utterly English, Jemubhai elevates himself above others in his community, retreating into self-imposed isolation. This is intensified by a sense of alienation and self-loathing that leaves him perpetually detached from himself, and turns him into a stranger in his own country, deficient in linguistic and other sensibilities: "The judge could live here,

in this shell, this skull, with the solace of being a foreigner in his own country, for this time he would not learn the language" (Desai 2006: 36). Jemubhai's Englishness, borne of colonialism, is linked to his unreasonable form of Anglophilia, which feeds his self-hatred and contempt for his Indian past, other Indians and his homeland. In Paul Jay's opinion, "[t]he oppressive operations of colonialism continue to work in Jemubhai's psyche in dramatic and debilitating ways" (Jay 2010: 133). His rejection of his previous identity and suppression of his Indianness, which he feels as a burden, makes him a foreigner to everyone including himself in the new political and social circumstances: "Stunted by the colonial encounter, […] an unwanted anachronism in resurgent postcolonial India" (Prasad 2013: 66). The following quotation illustrates the character's relative complicity with the historical narratives of national and imperial progress in his quest for self-definition, burdened by the colonial legacy and the breakup of earlier dominant values:

> Thus it was that the judge eventually taking revenge on his early confusions, his embarrassments gloved in something called "keeping up standards," his accent behind a mask of a quiet. He found he began to be mistaken for something he wasn't—a man of dignity. This accidental poise became more important than any other thing. He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both (Desai 2006: 126).

The portrayal of the judge as one of those characters "who have embraced the education, manners and values of Britain (or more recently, the United States), [and] embody the type of Westernized 'native' that Lord Macaulay advocated in his infamous 'Minute on Indian Education' in 1835" (Albritton 2007: 170) could come "perilously close to being a literary type, specifically, that type of anglophile found in a number of postcolonial novels" (Albritton 2007: 170). But Desai's craft for characterization and narrative structuring precludes the potential flatness in his portrayal and turns him into a complex character, at odds with his roots and authentic self.

The tensions of the colonial hegemony of the past, family aspirations and community expectations work similarly in different characters. According to Paul Jay, "[i]n each of these cases their literal journeys are linked to westernization, so that the experience of westernization becomes itself a kind of journey. Personal and cultural identity becomes mobile, fractured, challenged, open to change, but change linked as much to fear as to

liberation" (Jay 2010: 126). In the course of the novel, Desai consistently presents protagonists' transformations and relative successes and failures in terms of how they adapt to experiences that upset their expectations and prejudices when cultures engage in conflict. For example, Biju ponders how he should interpret and adjust to different pressures, while paralyzed in an inner struggle to understand his new situation: "He tried to keep on the right side of power, tried to be loyal to so many things that he himself couldn't tell which one of his selves was the authentic, if any. […] He had come home to no clarity of vision" (Desai 2006: 154–155). Alarmed and dejected because of the financial and psychological difficulties he encounters, Biju seems increasingly to question who he is and what kind of person he is becoming. His disillusionment with the opportunities created by the global economy in New York is heightened by his apprehension that his identity is becoming divided. Unlike the judge and some other immigrant characters who see migration as a way to improve themselves, Biju resists the new culture in which he finds himself, and frequently recalls his home. Worried about his father amid the mounting violence in his homeland, he leaves the United States, deciding to abandon his American dream and return home to be poor in a way that is more tolerable to him. His disappointment with America is, therefore, illuminating, as he realizes he is better off going home than struggling to become part of the world of success and grappling to comprehend his new, alienated self. The poignancy of his homecoming and sense of relief at restoring the previous order in which he is no longer worlds apart from his own self is captured in the description of his arrival in India:

> Biju stepped out of the airport into the Calcutta night, warm, mammalian. His feet sank into dust winnowed to softness at his feet, and he felt an unbearable feeling, sad and tender, old and sweet like the memory of falling asleep, a baby on his mother's lap. […] Sweet drabness of home—he felt everything shifting and clicking into place around him, felt himself slowly shrink back to size, the enormous anxiety of being a foreigner ebbing—that 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. He looked about and for the first time in God knows how long, his vision unblurred and he found that he could see clearly (Desai 2006: 307).

However, his romanticized recollections of his homeland have made him helpless and unprepared for the reality he encounters, which is trauma, shock and dispossession from the insurgency. The rebels rob him of everything he brought back for his family, divesting him even of the clothes he wears,

leaving him "[b]ack from America with far less than he'd ever had" (Desai 2006: 324). The novel culminates in a dramatic finale, in which the emotional fulfillment and relief of returning home is undercut by the trauma of being robbed and thus rendered collateral damage in the subaltern fight against the colonial burden of border-making. In this manner, "Desai chronicles the chaos and loss in the wake of colonialism and globalization further down the road in postcolonial India" (Prasad 2013: 67), and contributes to the discussion about postcolonial and immigrant identity.

The Inheritance of Loss offers a narrative that spans continents and eras, with alternating viewpoints in short chapters, thereby further underscoring the ambivalence of the characters' adjustment to the inexorable economic and social demands of globalization and migrancy. The pressures of the global economy and colonial legacy leave the protagonists trapped between tradition and transition: two worlds, at home and abroad, which are incompatible and irreconcilable. These characters are troubled with an unshakable feeling of multiple exile, away from their home, family, and country—what they hold dearest and miss most—in their exposure to their new circumstances. The interlacing of the two stories set on two different continents and periods meets at the node of dispossession, colonization, migration, globalization and its related opportunities and dislocations. According to Paul Jay, "[b]y the time we finish *The Inheritance of Loss* these two stories and the historical epochs they encompass have utterly fused in a way that stresses the long historical continuities linking the various epochs of an ever-accelerating globalization" (Jay 2010: 124).

CONCLUSION

It is widely accepted that the author Kiran Desai (1971–) is part of a dynamic and growing postcolonial female literary tradition in the making. Within the theoretical framework based on the writing of Vijay Mishra and Paul Jay about diaspora and globalization, Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is a proof-text in the discussion of these trajectories. The dominant thematic of the novel is the colonial legacy of dislocation, coupled with the long-standing and profound influence of the West's economic, political and cultural dominance and the ensuing social and cultural changes that originate in economic globalization. Desai's writing does not support the idea that the consumerist global economy of late capitalism carries

the potential for the advancement and prosperity of subalterns or other subjugated or disenfranchised individuals and nations. Rather it indicates their understandable and forceful desire to repress the memory of the colonial past and to search for another mode of living with a diasporic consciousness. Brief alternating chapters take the reader first to a small eastern Himalayan town in India (which is undergoing a postcolonial struggle against a colonial past marked by cartography and dispossession), then to New York (the embodiment of multicultural and transnational America) and the global economy's contemporary effects on destitute illegal immigrants, who strive to carve out a living in precarious conditions. Interlaced in these two strands of narrative is the notion of diasporic imaginary, as defined by Vijay Mishra, and the notion of the diaspora as being both the nation's past and its future. In both histories, different characters experience the burden of history, cross-cultural encounters, identity crises, and fragmentation of values in their search for another way of life. In this process, their sense of dislocation and change is underscored by fragmented narration, jumping back and forth from the Himalayas to Manhattan, with short chapters that teem with motifs and metaphors offering parallels between different histories, worlds, families, continents, generations, cultures, races, and religions. Through careful, nuanced characterization, the readers discover how globalization, among other factors, impacts the protagonists' transformation of their personal and collective identity. Their changed sense of self manifests as different responses, including postcolonial subjectivity, self-loathing, shame, confusion, sexual abuse, alienation, and resistance. In the novel, Desai unequivocally places the source of the iniquity in politics that impel the destabilization of the individuals' awareness of themselves, and their individual and collective self-esteem. Almost every character in the novel is at some point disrespected to a lesser or greater degree, and almost every character disparages others. Whether it is over-privileged Indians putting on absurd English airs, or destitute immigrant workers toiling in Manhattan's basement kitchens and sleeping in shifts in the crammed tenements of late capitalism, Desai's strong and vivid prose is a powerful testimony of heterogeneous human loss across the globe. In this light, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* presents a notable contribution to the reconceptualization of the postcolonial and Anglophone novel, and of its literary history in the currently contested context of transnational exchanges and forces of globalization.

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