



A Critical Review on the Key Literary Works of Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

Aim: *The paper is an exploratory study of the works of two Avant Garde woman writers of modern India. They both have some common traits, namely their masterly command over the English language, their global approach, and their deep understanding of the problems faced by the immigrant Indians living particularly in the United States of America. Furthermore, both writers have chosen the subject of insurgency in different parts of India occurring at different times. They both portrayed the buoyant mindset of modern women in the Indian context. The paper tries to explore further the outcome of insurgent movements and the ensuing plight of the common man. Similarly, it is focused on the condition of migrant Indians living in the U.S.A. and facing existential questions. It is also aimed to highlight the changed mindset of women in India in the twentieth century as shown by both literary geniuses.*

Methodology and Approach: *The study is based on the reading and analysing of the texts of the books by Kiran Desai, namely, The Inheritance of Loss, and The Lowland and The Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri.*

Outcome: *Gleanings from the works under study offer an incisive portrayal of the insurgency conditions and the travails of the common man during that period. In both the writers' works, the plight of Indian immigrants has been described with clinical precision. There is also a reflection of modern Indian women who can face the world in their stride. It has been a fruitful experience to wade through page after page of both writers' books.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *Both writers have reached the same conclusion that insurgency does not arrive overnight. It steadily grows out of continuous neglect of public demand and the lack of empathy by the ruling classes. Also, in the insurgent situation, it is only the poor and downtrodden class that badly suffers. Similarly, both writers have painted with the same brush the not-so-happy picture of the Indian immigrants living in the United States of America. They are facing an existential problem. They are not as well off as their counterparts are in that country. But the silver lining is that Indian women, whether living abroad or in the country, are facing the challenges of life daily with courage and grit. Reading both the writers' works exploring the growth of modern India through the annals of history.*

Keywords: Insurgency, Migration, Women's Empowerment, Naxalbari Movement, Gorkhaland Movement.

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Both the writers under study are internationally renowned names in the field of world literature. While Kiran Desai is the winner of the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2006, Jhumpa Lahiri is the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, in 2000, arguably the ultimate honor in the field of literature and journalism in the United States of America. Her novel, *The Lowland* was also longlisted for The Man Booker Prize, in 2013. Besides that, both writers have a long list of felicitations and accolades recognizing their brilliant literary acumen. Here, the works under study are *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai and *The Lowland* and *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri.

Both the writers have some common traits, namely, the virtuoso-like command over the language, their global approach, a deep understanding of the problems faced by the immigrants, especially from India, a vivid and unbiased portrayal of the insurgency due to the demand for the Gurkha Land in Darjeeling district of West Bengal, and the Naxal movement, originating from the Naxalbari village again in West Bengal, the depiction of economic inequality among the classes existing in new and independent India. Further, both writers have successfully narrated the schism between the various sects based on religion, caste, and a few other denominators. They both enjoy a strong relationship with Indian ethos, culture, and language which is frequently reflected in their writings. While the story of writings of Kiran Desai veers around Kalimpong and Darjeeling in India and New York, in particular, in the U.S.A., Jhumpa Lahiri has woven her plots covering the city of Calcutta and Delhi in India, New York, and Rhode Island in the U.S.A. From this angle also, both writers have chosen almost similar landscapes. It would be worthwhile in this context to take an overview of the works mentioned above as such.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, the main protagonist is a retired Indian Civil Service officer, the erstwhile Chief Justice, Jemu by the household name who has chosen Kalimpong as the most appropriate destination for his retirement days. He has built his big house in such a far-off place situated in the bright shadows of the mighty Kanchan Jungha range in the sylvan settings. This is in tune with his usual dislike of people around and also because of his ICS background, a colonial hangover, indeed. He is accompanied by a cook from Uttar Pradesh, and a bitch, a pup much doted by him. Later, his granddaughter also joins her from a Convent school in Dehradun, then in Uttar Pradesh. Kalimpong is a sparsely populated area where a few European citizens also reside because of their love for solitude and snowy mountains. Kalimpong is a British Cantonment, and it bears the strong signs of a colonial legacy. Besides, a couple of ladies from Calcutta also reside there being prisoners of circumstances. Life at Kalimpong seems to be good and mirthful till the start of the Gurkha insurgency culminating in reckless violence. This new trend initiates disastrous and nightmarish consequences upsetting the apple cart resulting in the total annihilation of the existing peaceful and contented fabric of the colonial framework of the upper-class society there. In the ensuing violence, several innocent and poor citizens die for no fault of theirs. One Father Booty, a Swiss citizen, living in Kalimpong for 43 years and a lover of Indian ethos, was forced to leave India as he was found living in Kalimpong without being an Indian citizen. The story also narrates the insurgency activities capturing fine details. She has successfully portrayed the hidden anger and disdain of the local Gurkha people who thought of them as an oppressed class subjected to all kinds of inequalities, humiliation, and even subjugation. The leaders of the movement added fuel to the simmering fire already existing in the Gorkha/Indian Nepali population living in the three subdivisions of the hilly terrain of Darjeeling. It is most interesting to read the change of expression brought about in the young boys and local youths in their behaviour and articulation. The story

recapitulates vividly the varied pictures of the tumultuous period of insurgency in the Darjeeling area which almost shook the whole nation. That problem is not fully resolved yet. The story also highlights the prevailing inequality amongst the populace which needed to be diluted, if not washed out in the light of rapid economic growth witnessed by the country. Was this a reflection of the lop-sided thought process of the political masters in power or any other reason is a question to be answered by the people who mattered in the planning process? It also signifies a lesson that though such types of insurgent movements are spurred by the long-crushed aspirations of the downtrodden masses, the worst victims are always the same common men and women who don't even understand a word of the political lexicon.

One more noteworthy aspect of the novel is the use of local dialect, slang, and colloquial language by the writer with dexterity. In doing so, she creates wry humor and the much-needed punch to the dialogues spoken by ordinary local people whose articulation is in stark contrast to their anglicized counterparts who are the carriers of the British colonial legacy. Not the locals alone, even the Biju uses this type of broken English spiced with such language in titbits in cheap and ordinary-looking restaurants in New York. The frequent use of such vocabulary adds charm to her writing. In the form of Biju, she has also highlighted the youth's lure for visit to America which looms large before their eyes as the veritable Shangri-La. Still today, this remains the most cherished dream of youth in India. The novel ends with Biju's returning to meet his father and to some extent, to his roots also. He symbolizes the condition of illegal immigrants in America of Indian origin and their travails over there. Undoubtedly, her portrayal is sincerely done and with complete sensitivity. The novel is fast-paced and spans the two continents, multiple cultures, and the arch encompassing colonialism at one end and globalization at the other. The theme and content of the novel are interspersed

with dark humour that is befitting of the interregnum between the colonial eras to transgression into a global age.

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Lowland* is a family saga spanning the two continents and the two countries, in particular. The story begins from a focal point, the lowland in front of their ancestral house in Tollygunge, a suburb of Calcutta. This is the point where the rainwater got accumulated during the rainy season and remained there for a few months after the rains were over. Though the pond containing this amount of water never appeared to be without the minimal amount of water throughout the year. In the old house near the pond, both the brothers, Subhash and Udayan were born. Both were brilliant in studies, but as luck would have it, Udayan got immersed into the whirlpool of the Naxal movement which started in the late sixties. He was later on killed in a police encounter right in front of his house in the same lowland, adjacent to the pond. His elder brother, Udayan, goes to America for higher studies in oceanography at the University of Rhodes Island. After the death of his brother, Subhash comes to India and marries his younger brother's wife to heal the wounds, as well as to rejoin the shattered family threads. However, this marriage fails and Gauri, the wife of his younger brother, Udayan, joins a school in California in pursuance of some course of her choice. Gradually, both Subhash and Gauri, his current wife, lose contact with each other and their marriage becomes a nullity. Subhash takes care of Gauri and Udayan's daughter in the role of both parents. The old parents of Subhash die one after another in their old house at Tollygunge in Calcutta. The entire story runs like the flow of a mighty river, continuous and uninterrupted. While reading the book, it seems almost impossible to put down the book anywhere till the end. It is written in the racy style without losing the sheen of brilliant prose expressive of masterly command over the language. The writer has narrated the whole story without losing sight of the minutest details of the events,

places, or languages spoken by the protagonists. For example, her depiction of the Naxal movement is well-researched covering newspaper reports, relevant documents, and books from the library. While reading the narrative, one feels that he is going through an eyewitness account! Similarly, her description of the University of Rhode Island, and the surrounding city is replete with fine details. This is true about other things also, like the quality of food served in Calcutta, Rhodes Island, and other places which are connected to her plot. Overall, she relishes in details of everything related to her work. Astonishingly, this detail never breaks the chain of the flow of events in her novel.

Like in the book by Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, she has pinpointed the fault lines of every movement that is started by the people for the betterment of their conditions. It is the common man who suffers most in the aftermath of such revolutionary movements. During the days of the Naxalism phase, several innocent people lost their lives and properties at the hands of the miscreants and the official machinery. In the hindsight, it also raises an important question about the efficacy of such movements. The matters-in-cruX of these movements are primarily related to the long-standing problems of the common man. When such problems go unnoticed for an inexplicably long time, such revolts against the existing system take place in which the main victims are the same people who had revolted. Further, the results of this sudden outburst in the name of revolts are not always certain. Positive results depend upon several other factors on which the success of such movements largely hinges. In case of failure, the common man is relegated to his previous moorings. That is indeed a tragic situation that raises a question- what to do next?

The author has further highlighted the modern approach of women in general in today's context. They want no mental or physical barriers which might fetter their growth in any field. They have a right to live their life according to

their wishes. Marriage does not mean that they cannot score high in the sky. In this case, Gauri, the erstwhile wife of Udayan and the present wife of Subhash, does it by pursuing her intellectual pursuits to her satisfaction. In doing so, her marriage goes on the rocks, and she frees herself from the parenting of her only daughter. But she remains unyielding. That shows another aspect of the modern woman's persona. By its sheer range and scope, her novel can easily be placed in the category of all-time classics.

Her novel also spotlights the condition of Indian immigrants in America, though, unlike Kiran Desai's novel, their category is different. Mainly, intellectual class falls into this category. However, their yearnings for the homeland, and inherent desire to connect with their roots are similar to the lower middle classes living in America of the Indians. One wonders how the people living abroad manage to cut their roots and get them submerged into the flowing stream of a different country inhabited by different people.

Her stories in the book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, are a great surprise for the readers. The most interesting thing about these stories is that they are woven around only one incident or two. These, too, are related to mundane affairs and often liable to be ignored by many. These elegant stories are set in Boston in the U.S.A. or West Bengal in India and deal mainly with the immigrant Indians living in exile. Picking a thread from here and there out of routine life and developing stories out of them is reflective of the art of a seasoned storyteller which Jhumpa Lahiri undoubtedly is. In these stories also, she has taken into account the historical and geographical background of the places. Steeped in history, culture, and traditions, her stories do not miss on account of a woman's newly found confidence and elan. She can take her own decisions in life without being dependent on others, especially her male counterparts. Many times, her stories mirror the changing face of Indian women living in exile.

In the first story, A Temporary Matter, a young couple exchange confessions every night in a bid to offset the loss of their newborn baby and their failing marriage. This is an interesting story in which both the partners are finally on the brink of coming together after divulging their hidden secrets and feeling light, they are intending to start anew to reinforce their married life. The story moves on psychological pathways culminating in a step closer to a happy ending. The next story, When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine, successfully portrays the inner turmoil of Mr. Pirzada who has gone to England in connection with some research work. Against the backdrop of the Indo-Pak War of 1965 which ended with the birth of a new nation, Bangladesh, the protagonist's mind is always preoccupied with the security of his family living in Dhaka. The story ends on an interesting note with the observation that though his family was safe and secure, Mr. Pirzada couldn't digest the defeat of Pakistan's army in the war. Probably, he cared for both his family and his country at the same time. Her lead story, Interpreter of Maladies, is concerned with a unique character, Mr. Kapasi, who is a taxi driver and works as a part-time compounder in the clinic of a doctor. His main work there is to interpret the Gujarati language into the local dialect used by the doctor himself practicing in the eastern part of the country. That is how he earns the nickname of interpreter of maladies. While driving the taxi, his disclosure about his part-time job arouses interest in Mrs. Das particularly, while his husband evinces no interest whatsoever. Both are of Indian origin but are now citizens of the United States of America. However, expectations of Mrs. Das prove to be fruitless and the taxi driver's journey of hope also comes to a sudden halt. A Real Durwan is a touching story of an old lady working as a sweeper in a housing society where she rests near the main gate. She is gradually taken as the chowkidar of society also because of her sincerity and unflinching sense of duty. However, nobody cares about her, and one day, she is duped by some miscreants who become successful in attempting a theft in the society building. Thereafter,

the real-life drama begins ending in her expulsion from the premises of the building. She could only manage the epithet of the thief and other bad names instead of her sincere services to society for a long time. This story portrays our attitude towards old persons and the way we repay their debt, which seems to be a new phenomenon developing in the comparatively affluent society. In another story, *Sexy*, a young midwestern woman, Miranda is involved in a tantalizing affair with a Bengali man. However, she was missing something in life. One day, a small kid, Rohin called her sexy in his innocence. She was touched deeply. This was the first time when somebody had called her sexy. Her attitude towards life changes dramatically and finds her lost confidence at last. *Mrs. Sen* is a story of a lady tutor who gives tuition to a teenager. She fails to muster up sufficient courage to learn to drive in the U.S.A. At last, when she tried her hand at driving, she met with an accident in which his pupil was also injured, and consequently, she loses her job. *This Blessed House* is the story of a wife who thinks that even the statues of Jesus Christ and other pictures related to Christianity in the newly bought house were an auspicious sign which cannot be thrown away despite her husband's strong disapproval of being a Hindu. Ultimately, the diktat of the wife, who is also a Hindu, wins the day and her husband had to follow suit. The penultimate story of the collection *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* is filled with suspense and thrill. In the end, Bibi Haldar, a close relative of the owner of the house is found pregnant while living upstairs in the building. The owner couple disappeared from the scene without leaving any trace. She was then taken care of by sympathetic neighbors. The last story, *The Third and Final Continent*, deals with human relations depicting a contrast between the American and Indian ethos. Here, a young man reaches America for higher studies and searches for suitable accommodation. He comes across one aged lady nearing the century mark or so, but still agile and alert, Mrs. Croft. There he passes his initial eight months. Thereafter, he brings her newly married wife and shifts to a new apartment. One

day, he visits his old place but he does not find Mrs. Croft there. She was dead by that time. There he meets her daughter who doesn't look distraught while tears flow down from his eyes for some time. This reflects the traditional value in India that we still love our parents or the ones who have imparted the same feelings of love and affection to us. The plot of each of her stories is set in U.S. cities and the protagonists are the immigrant Indians living there and facing multiple challenges. The author has picked up simple themes and created beautiful stories around them. That way, her skill as a storyteller is worth appreciating.

Thus, both the writers, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri, have focused on the problems and the mental state of immigrant Indians living, especially in America. Be it the middle and upper class or the poorer sections of society, everyone is facing the existential problem in an alien land having entirely different social and cultural values. Surviving there has always been a great challenge. However, both writers successfully embellished the canvas using their deft and skillful strokes of the pen. Their command over the language is astounding. Both are adept in writing prose poetry, to say the least, in their novels and stories. Moreover, their works are well-researched historically and socially. They have kept their eyes on the ground and at the same time weaved the amazing text in the form of their writings. They have not forgotten to portray the Indian traditions and value system wherever it was needed. For an immigrant, it is like walking on the edge of a sword in the process of maintaining the proper balance between two different ideologies and cultures. This has all come alive in their writings. Their contribution to Indo-Anglian literature is immense. They can very well be called the Avant- Garde litterateurs in the field of many glittering stars on the Indian horizon.

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