Chapter II

Kiran Desai: A Study Signature in Global Visibility

Ruth Prawar Jhabvla, Arundhati Roy and now Kiran Desai had brought laurels to Indian English Writing by proving their mettle as women writers of extraordinary skills. Unlike the two, Kiran Desai has been fortunate enough to observe her mother’s creativity in the form of sizeable number of novels and short stories collection added to the body of Indian English writing. Inspired by writers and contemporaries all over the globe like Salman Rushdie, Upmanyu Chatterjee, Amit Choudhary, Rohinton Mistry, Suketau Mehta, Moustin Ahmed (both from Pakistan), Trumar Capote, Williams Flanner, Winfried George, Haruki, Issack Bassevis and Saul are the American Writers revered by her. Candiedly she accepts the influence generated on her by the older writers like Salman Rishdie, Amitav Ghosh and Bapsi Sidhwa.

Kiran Desai was born on 3rd September 1971, in Chandigarh to Anita Desai, a distinguished creative writer and to Ashwin Desai, a renowned industrialist. Her father is Gujrati whereas her mother a Bengali. Of her siblings, Kiran Desai has two bothers and a sister. Kiran Desai’s maternal grandmother was a German married to a refugee from Bangladesh who later separated from her husband for all times.

Kiran Desai has a much travelled about childhood, she spent her early childhood in Pune and Mumbai stepping into the corridor of Cathedrals and JohnCannonSchool. At the age of nine, she moved to Delhi; at the age of fourteen to England and then to US where she has now made a permanent home with her mother who is
now an estranged Parent. Here she continued her schooling in Massachusetts for where mother joined as professor in the writing and Humanities Studies Programme at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. On the completion of her school education she joined Belington College to become a scientist but soon her inclination for writing surfaced and she joined a graduate writing programme at Hollins College, Virginia. Such a training was later declared fruitless For Kiran Desai opines;

There are all kinds of theories that you get told in writing workshop, write what you know, and sort of thing which I don’t believe at all … I think of the great joy of writing is to try and explore what you don’t know, that’s exciting to me. There are all kinds of little thing show, don’t tell – I just wouldn’t pay attention to any of the reality. I don’t think you can write so different. I can’t imagine how to come up with there rules. They are really ludicrous.

(http://www.randomhouse.com/599/desai.interview.html/)

Disillusioned by the mechanics of writing taught to her, Desai surrendered herself completely to her mother’s creative space so as to be spontaneously groomed by the magic of her words in manuscripts. With same uncertainties she continued to hover over her mother’s shadow and began the process of learning writing on a self-reliant basis. She describes her learning-at-home as:

When I started writing it I had no ideas what the story would be; I had no idea of the plot. It sort of gathered momentum and drove me along. It was
an incredibly messy process and I don’t know if it was the smartest way to go about it because this was my first book, so I had to teach myself how to write it as I was writing it. (randomhouse.com/0599/)

To this date she has won Betty Task award for *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*: Man Booker Prize for Fiction and National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award (USA) for *The Inheritance of Loss*. The recent prized novel was also short listed for ‘British Book Award’ Decibel Writer of the year and Orange Prize for fiction. She measures her own credentials as:

This book (*The Inheritance of Loss*) is better than the last but certainly don’t think it is perfect. It is the hardest thing to write a perfect book for that reason.

(http://www.themanboojeroruze.com/perspective/quanda/40)

She acknowledges the great influence her mother had been on her excellence in creativity, consciously. Her sense of gratitude can be measured in her statement:

I am sure she did have a big influence because all my life, I’ve grown up hearing her talk about writing on literature and books.

*(The Week, 78)*

Kiran Desai’s debut novel, ‘Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard’ stirred public opinions and acclaimed critical appraisal
with its appearance in 1998. On the surface, it is a simple novel narrating a common practice in the Indian cultural feast but its objective is grave and corrective in its vein and might. Unlike her mother Anita Desai, she had focused on the broad, socio-cultural practices that have exerted tremendous but unshakable impact on the mind set, consciousness and everyday behaivous of the individuals and society, even in the contemporary era of globalization dominated by rationalism. Being Indian, she knows the cultural background of her motherland and certainly must have observed several saints and sadhus walking along the road or sat under the trees in coloured clothes. Her mind was struck when she read in the newspaper the report about a hermit who had climbed up a tree and lived there for several years, The plot of the novel is based on it. It ignited a voluntary compassion with imigination fired, as she looks into the past of the Indian cultural hearitage and its reflection, so much mixed with contemporary, bustling life going after mounting of money in all possible ways and corruption in various areas of the Indian life style.

Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* aims at the many issues like insurgency of Gorkha in India, terrorism, violence, discrimination of gender, denigration of the impoverished people of the society, cultural conflicts, tension of ethnicity, and globalizations which are of course the basic issues of the modern world which has ridden on fast running car turning into a global village. It has given the opportunity to the market and business but truly speaking has worsened the condition of the poorer people and the developing countries like India. Biju, the character in the novel faces the denigrating consumerist culture of America which instead
of fulfilling desire to get riches turns out to be a legacy of loss. Desai also illuminates the pain of exile and the ambiguities of post-colonialism with a tapestry of an embittered old judge and Sai, his granddaughter in the light of globalization.

The peers of Kiran Desai includes Anita Nair, Jhumpa Lahiri, Manju Kapur, Bharti Mukherjee and Anita Desai to name a few. Anita Nair a popular Indian-English writer was born of Mundakottakurissi, near Shornur in Kerala State. She was educated in Chennai before returning to Kerala, where she gained a B.A in English Language and Literature. She was working as the creative director of an advertising agency in Bangalore when she wrote her first book, a collection of short stories called *Satyr of the Subway*, which she sold to Har-Anand Press. The book won her a fellowship from the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. Her second book was published by Penguin India, and was the first book by an Indian author to be published by Picador USA. Her books have been published in several languages around the world. She lives in Bangalore.

Thereafter followed her novel *The Better Man* (2000) which also has been published in Europe and USA. In 2002 appeared the collection of poems *Malabar Mind*, and in 2003 *Where the Rain is Born*. Anita Nair’s second novel *Ladies Coupe* from 2001, has turned out to be an ever greater success than the first both among critics and readers in so far 15 countries outside India: from USA to Turkey, from Poland to Portugal. In 2002 it was elected as one of the five best in India. The novel is about women’s conditions in a male dominated society, told with great insight, solidarity and humour.
She has also written *The Puffin Book of Myths and Legends* (2004), a book for children on myths and legends. Anita has also edited *Where the Rain is Born* (2003). Anita’s writings about Kerala and her poetry have been included in “The Poetry India Collection and a British Council Poetry Workshop Anthology”. She has also written a few other novels such as, *Mistress* (2003), living *Next Door to Alise* (2007) and *Magical Indian Myths* (2008). Her works also include many travelogues, With the play *Nine Faces of Being*, best-selling author Anita Nair turns into a playwright. The story is adapted from Nair’s book *Mistress*.

**Manju Kapur’s** first novel *Difficult Daughters*, fetched her the Commonwealth Prize for First novels (Eurasia Section) and went on to become a bestseller in India. She speaks for the middle-class and even has been earned several comparisons with Jane Austen for her sharp-eyed, finely turned character portraits that are caught in tricky situations.

**Custody** (2011) tells the story as when Shagun leaves her husband Raman for another man, a bitter legal battle begins. The custody of their two children is at stake- and Shagun must decide how much she wants to pay for freedom. Raman’s new wife is unable to conceive and finds happiness by being a step mother. But when the court threatens the security of her new family, she decides she has to fight for it.

**The Immigrant** (2009) is the tale of a girl who is married to a loner and moves to Canada to be with him. But she finds that her marriage is not what she thought it would be. Her husband suffers
from sexual inadequacy and the distances come between them and cause distress in their marriage.

Manju Kapur’s third novel *Home* (2006) is an engrossing story of family life amid the bustle and commerce of the Banwari Lal Cloth Shop. When their traditional Delhi business – selling saris – being threatened by advent of jeans and pre-stitched salwar kameezes, the whole family knows it’s time for change. So begins a series of struggles – to have children, to find education, to find peace.

*A Married Woman* (2003) shows Astha, an educated, middle-class Delhi woman has everything she could ask for – children, a dutiful loving husband, and comfortable surroundings. But she ends us having a physical relationship with a much younger woman, Pipee, the widow of a political activist. Astha finally throws off the fear instilled in her by her parents and her husband.

*Difficult Daughters* (1998) is a story, set during partition, revolves around Virmati who is caught in an illicit relationship with her married English professor. She gets pregnant with his baby and so the professor has to marry her and bring her home to stay with her first wife and children. This is a poignant tale of a lady who has to sacrifice her freedom for her love.

*Bharati Mukherjee’s* works focus on the phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants, and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates as well as on Indian women and their struggle. Her own struggle with identity first as
an exile from India, then an Indian expatriate in Canada, and finally as a immigrant in the United States has lead to her current contentment of being an immigrant in a country of immigrants. Mukherjee’s works correspond with biographer Fakrul Alam’s categorization of Mukherjee’s life into three phases. Her earlier works, such as the *The Tiger’s Daughter* and parts of *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, are her attempts to find her identity of her Indian heritage.

*The Tiger’s Daughter* is a story about a young girl named Tara who ventures back to India after many years of being away only to return to poverty and turmoil. This story parallels Mukherjee’s own venture back to India with Clark Blaise in 1973 when she was deeply affected by the chaos and poverty of Indian and mistreatment of women in the name of tradition, “What is unforgivable is the lives that have been sacrificed to notions of propriety and obedience.” (*Days and Nights* 217) Her husband, however, became very intrigued by the magic of the myth and culture that surrounded every part of Bengal. These differences of opinion, her shock and his awe, are seen in one of their joint publications *Days and Nights in Calcutta*.

The second phase of her writing encompasses works such as *Wife*, the short stories *In Darkness*, an essay entitled “An Invisible Woman,” and “The Sorrow and the Terror”, a joint effort with her husband. These works originate in Mukherjee’s own experience of racism in Canada, where despite being a tenured professor, she felt humiliated and on the edge of being a housebound, fearful, obsessive, and unforgiving queen of bitterness.
In the third phase, Mukherjee is described as having accepted being an immigrant, living in a continent of immigrants.

Mukherjee continues writing about the immigrant experience in most of the stories as in “The Middle Man and Other Stories”, a collection of short stories which won her the National Book Critics Circle Award for Best Fiction, Jasmine, and essays. These stories explore the meeting of East and West through immigrant experiences in the U.S. and Canada along with further describing the idea of the great melting pot of culture in the United States.

Jasmine develops this idea of the mixing of the East and West with a story telling of a young Hindu woman who leaves India for the U.S. after her husband’s murder, only to be raped and eventually returned to the position of a caregiver through a series of jobs. The unity between the First and Third worlds is shown to be in the treatment of women as subordinate in both countries.

Her latest works include The Holder of the World, published in 1993, and Leave It to Me, published in 1997. The Holder of the World is a beautifully written story about Hannah Easton, a woman born in Massachusetts who travels to India. She becomes involved with a few Indian lovers and eventually a king who gives her a diamond known as the Emperor’s Tear. The story is told through the detective searching for the diamond and Hannah’s viewpoint.

Anita Desai was born in Mussorie on 24th June 1937 of a Bengali father and a German mother. She received her early

Movements of a Wing, “Memoirs of Mendicant Professor” were published, “Within and without Tradition” came out in 1979 and “Out of the Shadows” in Indian Express 1984.


She has also won the award for Excellence in writing (1979) for her novel Where Shall We Go This Summer ? from the Federation of Indian publishers and the Author’s Guild of India. Her Clear Light Of The Day was considered for the coveted Booker Prize – the English Literacy Award which she lost to William Golding for his novel Rites Of Passage. Mrs. Desai’s first novel for children The Village By the Sea won her The Guardian Children’s Fiction Award in 1982. She has been a member of the Advisory Board for English of the Sahitya Akademi and has the distinction of being a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, London.

Anita Desai published her first novel, Cry The Peacock, in 1963. She considers Clear Light of Day (1980) her most autobiographical work as it is set during her coming of age and
also in the same neighborhood in which she grew up. In 1984 she published *In Custody* – about an Urdu poet in his declining days – which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. In 1993 she became a creative writing teacher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her novel, *The Zigzag Way* (2004), is set in 20th-century Mexico and her latest novel *The Artist of Disappearance* came in 2011.

Jhumpha Lahri born of Bengali parents, this young writer of short fiction is the first creative writer of Asian origin to win the highest American Literary Award for fiction of the year 2000 for her slim collection of nine superbly crafted short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, some Indian English writers like Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Deshpande, Shashi Tharoor and Upamanyu Chatterjee created waves at home and others like Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra and Vikram Seth made in-roads into Anglo-American countries in particular and west in general by winning Coveted prizes at the national and international levels. Likewise, writers of Indian diaspora such as Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahri have created waves in the west and made their impact on Indian literary scene, Jhumpa Lahiri created history by winning the highest American Literary Award (i.e., Pulitzer prize for 2000) for a collection of stories the roots of which lie in India. For this literary achievement, she has bagged number of awards which include O’ Henry Award for the title story, Transatlantic Review Award for best fiction, Louisville Review Fiction prize, Fellowship of prince-town’s Fine Arts Work centre and The New Yorker’s nomination among 20 best writers under 40 for twenty-first century. Her distinguished works are *Interpreter of*

The collection of short stories Interpreter of Maladies (1999) has the further explanatory sub-title: “Stories of Bengal, Bostom and Beyond.’ The popularity of this book can be gauged from the fact that it has been translated into no fewer than 29 languages of the world. These are simple and touching stories beautifully crafted around common themes. The condition of the diasporic is the constant concern of Jhumpa Lahiri. India is a strong presence in the nine stories contained in this collection. Most of these stories appeared earlier in The New Yorker and other publications. She can be easily compared to Anita Desai in her comprehension of the cultural charms dividing the two communities, even though she is not gifted with the smooth, poetic prose of Desai. Her characters are the children of postmodern times, so they do not recognize boundaries of any type-political, social or cultural.

The Namesake (2003) is a story of Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol’s life told in a very simple manner presenting a conflict that seems very mild on surface but had the capability to disturb an individual. Gogol’s search for identity ultimately ends with some sort of satisfaction to him and relieves him. The Namesake comes across as a nice blend of traditional, modern and post modern approach that the writer takes up and successfully sums up.

In 2008 appeared Unaccustomed Earth, a collection of eight stories. The locale covers a wide area from Cambridge and Seattle to India and Thailand. Through these stories, the secrets at the heart of family life are sought to be explored through a mélange of
relationships—brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, friends and lovers. They grow up in America, marry non-Indians but cannot escape the burden of family traditions.
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