Chapter V

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai are both master storytellers of their generation. Although unintentional, these two formidable writers share common concerns in their writings by virtue of them both being contemporary female Diaspora writers and sharing post colonial links through India, where their ancestry is traced. A consistent trademark in their literary offerings is the detailed attention and sensitivity with which they accord their fictional characters, treating them almost as if the characters are based on real people. Perhaps this is because their characters are influenced by real life experiences. This is something both the writers have themselves admitted, time and again. Desai and Lahiri delve into the deepest recesses of the mind of their protagonist/s with a psychological accuracy which brings the characters to life. This natural empathy for their fictional creations make the readers connect with the story better and also enables them to picture themselves in the shoes of the protagonist and other fictional characters.

It is worth noting that Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai are both Diasporas who have had to balance their identity between two countries. This experience is reflected in their writings and is thus, an inevitable by product of their common history. Although some neo Freudian psychologists including Carl Gustav Jung may disagree, Freud had believed that “meaning can be deciphered only in relation to the biography and associations of the author”
This idea appears relevant in the case of Lahiri and Desai who have each highlighted the immigrant experience in their writings, in view of being diasporas themselves. It is pertinent to note that the immigrant experience is deeply psychological in nature and can only be adequately understood from a psychoanalytical perspective. Lahiri has admitted that her writings give her a sense of catharsis. In reference to the challenges she faced as a young Diaspora, Lahiri states, “I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough or mature enough to allow in life” (Lahiri. www.chipublib.org). In psychoanalysis, this act is evocative of the mechanism referred to as “sublimation”, which Freud has propounded to be the healthiest form of defence mechanism as repressed impulses are channelled into healthy and productive activities.

For example, a writer may divert some of his or her libido to the creation of a poem or novel, thus indirectly satisfying the same drives. Freud believed that much of our cultural heritage—literature, music, art—is the product of sublimation (Morgan 590).

Kiran has admitted that she fully realised the burden of immigration which she carried, only after writing about it in her book. This conveys a kind of catharsis where she has channelled negative and complex issues into her writings. When asked about the yoke of migration, she replies “It is something that has been going on forever. I did not realise it at first. There are so many interlinked patterns that it has become important to examine it” (Desai. http/indiatoday/kiran-desai/html). Consequently, both Desai and Lahiri concentrates on humanist themes and concerns such as dialogises of cultural encounters, diaspora, minority discourse, race and other issues. Because of this nature of narrative style, the characterization is often given more emphasis than the story line. It is therefore, only appropriate that a psychoanalytic study be
made into their works as it involves the study of the human psyche. Psychoanalytic criticism will thus, prove to be effective in interpreting the intention and relevancy in their literary outputs. Psychoanalysis states that there is often a basis for the birth of a story. The foundation for any literary creation lies in the psyche of its creator, whether consciously or subconsciously. It is therefore necessary for the reader to gain knowledge of the author’s background and also delve into the psyche of the characters in order to understand the book intimately. As previously stated, this is especially true in the case of Desai and Lahiri who have both admitted on several occasions, that their real life experiences mirrors their fictional stories.

The entire body of work by Lahiri and Desai, as analysed in this research study has ultimately revealed that alienation has little to do with the physical environment but actually resides within the deepest recesses of the mind which is far greater than the physical world in which the protagonist and other characters reside. The practical inconveniences faced by an immigrant fade in comparison to the degree of mental anguish and trauma which are actually the essence of the immigrant experience. There always appears to be more happening within the psyche of the protagonist rather than the story line or his physical situation. Lahiri’s debut short story collections entitled, Interpreter of Maladies contains a collection of nine short independent stories and is aptly sub titled Stories from Bengal, Boston and Beyond. Aside from the two stories, “A Real Durwan” and “The treatment of Bibi Halder”, all the remaining seven stories deal with the Indian American Interaction i.e., Diaspora. Lahiri not only gives us Indian American characters but also presents the lonely American woman Miranda, the neurotic American Paul, hundred year old Mrs Croft and various other non diasporas. In the end however, whether the characters are diaspora or otherwise, we observe that they are all
struggling to fit in a world where they do not feel like they belong. These are all intensely psychological in nature.

Similarly, Lahiri’s second collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, which consists of eight short powerful stories, also deal with the immigrant experience, particularly with regard to diasporic humanist concerns. Suffice to say, such complex issues can only be properly addressed through a psychological reading. Lahiri’s novel, *The Namesake*, also addresses the immigrant predicament which is chiefly psychological in nature. Gogol, the protagonist in *The Namesake* is struggling to come to terms with the concerns of being an immigrant in America. He internalises his fears and this ultimately results in an illogical as well as incomprehensible revulsion of his name which he believes to be the root cause of his problems. Gogol’s hatred of his name may appear to be irrational but a psychoanalytic reading reveals the inner mechanism of his tormented psyche which has led him to believe that his name is to blame for the challenges that he is up against. In the novel, Gogol meets an American girl called Maxine, who becomes his first serious girlfriend. Maxine and himself comes from two distinctly diverse cultures and have had very different upbringings as well. However, Gogol realises that the biggest difference between the two of them is psychological and not the obvious physical differences.

She (Maxine) has the gift of accepting her life; as he comes to know her, he realises that she has never wished she were anyone other than herself, raised in any other place, in any other way. This, in his opinion, is the biggest difference between them (*TN* 138).
Kiran Desai’s flair for story telling and her comic gift is wonderfully showcased in her debut book, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. The story of Sampath unfolds in a little rural Indian town known as Shahkot. Desai allows her rich imagination to run absolutely wild in the narration of this fantastical tale where fiction becomes indisputably wilder than reality. Desai’s Shahkot is a unique town where the entire system is upside down and the whole Shahkotian population appears to be slightly mad. Nevertheless, the people never realise their own peculiarities but instead, persist in labelling the protagonist Sampath and his mother Kulfi as strange. Sampath and his mother Kulfi are set apart for their peculiar brand of eccentricity. Thus even in a place when madness seems to be the norm and everything goes, the issue of isolation still persists for some who do not fit in with the en masse. This story reminds us of the intrinsic tendency of human beings to judge others but to never think of applying the same yardstick to their own selves. Finally, when Sampath decides to make his home up a guava tree, the people suddenly consider him to be a holy hermit and start to revere him. Thus, due to societal beliefs, Sampath’s most ludicrous decision turns to be a blessing in disguise for his family. This study also draws to attention, the question whether the issue of “normalcy” is possibly a man made concept. What is deemed normal and abnormal appears to be synonymous with socially acceptable or condemnable behaviour. The story conveys the idea that “madness” is often a state of mind which is intricately linked with societal norms.

An eccentric personality usually implies someone who is slightly peculiar with unconventional habits, set apart from the rest of humanity. One’s eccentricities are commonly believed to be an ingrained part of a person’s psychological make up. However, Nimi’s father, Bomanbhai, in *Inheritance of Loss*, develop his foibles and eccentricities only after acquiring his wealth. This suggests that physical circumstances can sometimes influence the psyche.
Thus, the degree of the indulgence of the Id may depend upon a person’s financial or social situation. This theory is substantiated by the fact that there are few poor eccentrics while rich eccentrics are quite commonly known. Human beings are curiously multi faceted creatures and a psychoanalytical criticism of the works unveils ambiguous meanings and complexities of the fictional characters.

“Night Claims the Godavari” from Aids Sutra: Untold Stories from India talks about the plight of sex workers in Andra Pradesh. These sex workers are ostracised from society and are not protected by the law. Thus their existence appears almost mythic in its misery. This short story reveals how the sex workers derive a modicum of comfort, however illusionary, from superstitious beliefs and religious folklore. Happiness and misery appears to be less to do with material comforts and much to do with societal acceptance. A conviction of the latter ultimately lies in the person’s psyche.

Kiran Desai’s Booker winning novel The Inheritance of Loss is widely acclaimed for its originality and insight into dominant contemporary issues such as globalization, economic inequality, terrorism, diaspora etc. There is also the all encompassing shadow of colonisation which lurks behind almost every conversation of her characters and also their physical environment. The Britishers are gone but they have left their stamp in India and even more so, in the psyche of the people. This immensely witty book presents a coterie of Anglophile characters such as the retired judge Jemubhai Patel, sixteen year old Sai, Uncle Potty, Father Booty, the sisters Nonnie and Lola and various others. The Anglophiles are the elite group and on the other divide is Sai’s Nepalese tutor Gyan, the judge’s cook and his beloved son Biju who is struggling to get by in America. All these characters share the common belief that anything English is indefinitely superior to its Indian counterpart. As in the case of Gyan
or Lola, there may be a sense of bitter resentment against the white supremacy but nevertheless, this is the acknowledged truth. The characters are all in the grip of terrible mental torment and a psychoanalytic reading enables the reader to understand the actions of the characters. Desai has admitted that her fictional characters are influenced by her own history. It is evident that Desai’s personal experiences are responsible for the psychological depths of her literary creations. In a way therefore, it appears that the fictional characters contain a little bit of Desai in them.

The characters of my story are entirely fictional but these journeys (of her grandparents) as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is this I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance (Desai. www.bookbrowse.com).

Through a psychoanalytic reading of the literary output of Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri, we realise that what links all the characters together is that they are all people struggling to fit in and carve a niche for themselves, whether diaspora or otherwise. Also, it is primarily observed that the predicament each character finds himself or herself in, predominantly lies in the realm of the psyche. This makes their fears complex since it is unseen to others and therefore, incomprehensible. An understanding of the character’s psyche and emotional or mental state brings to attention the importance of the person’s history which inevitably contributes to his or her present state of mind. A psychoanalytic understanding makes the reader more sympathetic to the character, even if his or her actions are not exactly right or appropriate. It is often stated that great literature reflects life and thus, through this reading, we
are reminded to be more tolerant of people and take greater pains to understand our fellow human beings, as we have done with our fictional characters.

Above all, the most significant finding revealed by this psychoanalytic study into the fictional narratives of Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri is that every human being suffers from insecurities and fears which lead to certain actions. Freud’s Id, Ego and Superego helps in deciphering the personality structure and significantly contributes to the understanding that our inner world is much more complicated than the physical world. As Desai and Lahiri’s writings are character centric, the Freudian psychology becomes most apt for interpreting the true nature and behaviour of the protagonist and other fictional characters.

The Freudian psychology is the only systematic account of the human mind which, in point of subtlely and complexity and tragic power deserves to stand beside the chaotic mass of psychological insights which literature has accumulated through the centuries (Trilling 43).

This study proves that the psychological realm is not demarcated; one person’s reality or morality may not be applicable to another. Therefore, we are made to understand that the actions of human beings cannot be generalised or judged so easily. Psychoanalysis reveals that two people may have very different motives for the same action and thus, in order to understand a person, it is necessary to treat each individual as unique. The writings of Lahiri and Desai also underline the message that it may be irrelevant, whether a person is clinically diagnosed to be suffering from mental disorders or otherwise. All human beings deal with the tussle between unconscious and conscious desires on a daily basis and this
influences our actions in life. Furthermore, one does not necessarily require to be a certified psychologist or be an expert in this branch of pedagogy in order to be able to gauge psychological problems. Lahiri and Desai, with their fine sensitivity and empathy, have shown that it is common human compassion and sincerity which has the greatest potential to unlock the vast complexities of the human mind.
WORKS CITED


