Chapter 1

Introduction: Background to Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai

Kiran Desai (1971- ) and Jhumpa Lahiri (1967- ) are both contemporary Indian Diaspora women writers. Although the two women each employ distinct and unique narrative techniques, nevertheless, they share familiar threads of concern in their writings. This mutual interest appears to be quite inevitable, given that both writers share a common background, thereby inculcating an Asian American and post colonial interest. While Lahiri’s prose is simple and elegant, Desai’s narrative is lush and imaginative, with a touch of comedy. Despite their distinctive style, there is a pervasive sense of melancholy and nostalgia which emanates throughout the overall narrative of Lahiri and Desai, no matter what the subject matter. It is interesting therefore, to delve into the background of this remarkable pair. By doing so, we learn to appreciate the common threads and concerns which harmoniously works alongside their individual vision.

Kiran Desai is the daughter of eminent Indian novelist Anita Desai and was born on 3rd September 1971 in Chandigarh, India. Young Kiran spent the early years of her life in Pune and Mumbai and studied at the Cathedral and John Connon School. At the age of nine, Kiran and her family shifted to Delhi. At fourteen, Kiran and her mother relocated to England and after a year, shifted to the United States where she finished her schooling in Massachusetts. She went on to study Creative Writing at Bennington College, Hollins University.
and Columbia University. Thereafter, the promising writer took a break of two years to write her first book *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*.

Kiran Desai’s maiden novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* was published in the year 1998 and received various accolades from notable figures including literary giant, Salman Rushdie. This fictional marvel won the Betty Trask Award, a prize given by the Society of Authors to the best new author under the age of thirty five, by citizens of the Commonwealth of Nations. It was consensually agreed by the literary world that Kiran was a writer to watch out for. Thereafter, her second book, *The Inheritance of Loss*, published in 2006, became well acclaimed and went on to receive among others, the 2006 Man Booker Prize as well as the 2006 National Book Critics Fiction Award. This much celebrated book was also shortlisted for three prestigious literary prizes in the year 2007; the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize and British Book Awards Decibel Writer of the Year. It may be said that Kiran Desai has inherited the passion for writing as her own mother Anita Desai is a gifted writer herself and has previously been shortlisted for the Booker award on three occasions. Kiran is a citizen of India and permanent resident of the United States. She is partner to acclaimed writer Orhan Pamuk, recipient of the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature. It is also significant to mention that Desai is the youngest woman to have won the prestigious Booker Prize in 2006.

Desai first came into literary attention in 1997 when “Strange Happenings in the Guava Orchard” was published as the closing piece in *Mirror work*, an anthology of fifty years of Indian writing edited by Salman Rushdie. Besides the genre of the novel, Desai has also displayed her proficiency in the short story with “Night claims the Godavari”, which appeared in the 2008 anthology titled *Aids Sutra: Untold Stories from India*. This book has been edited by
Negar Akhavi and contains a foreword by renowned Microsoft owner and philanthropist Bill Gates and his wife, Melinda Gates. The fine sensitivity with which Desai portrays the sex workers in Andra Pradesh reveals her innate compassion and empathy as a writer. The fictionist in her also lends the story a sense of mystical pathos and romanticism.

Desai reveals that hermit Sampath, the central character in her debut book, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, was inspired by a story she had heard and read, about a man who climbed up a tree and lived there for many years until his death. Desai states, “So, I began to wonder what it was about someone like this who would do something as extreme as to spend his life on a tree” (Desai. www.randomhouse.com). This admission proves that she is an adventurous and bold writer who is not content with writing about what she knows but instead, desires to explore new and uncharted territories. Through her protagonist Sampath, Desai explores the reasons as to why a person could choose the life of a hermit. In the extract below, Desai talks about her courageous philosophy as a writer and about how attending a writing workshop failed to help her.

I think one of the great joys in writing is to try and explore what you don’t know, that’s exciting to me. There are all kinds of little things- show, don’t tell- I just wouldn’t pay attention to any of that really. I don’t think you can write according to a set of rules and laws; every writer is so different (Desai. www.randomhouse.com).

This fictionista also possesses a finely tuned compassion which effortlessly spills into her complex characters. Her trademark touch of humour, coupled with the delicately nuanced sensitivity and emotional depth of her
characterization is proof of this statement. Desai is a child of many countries, having shuttled between continents repeatedly since a young age. This experience of being an immigrant pervades her writing.

It is this feeling of being caught between two continents that infuses *The Inheritance of Loss*. At times, it appears to rejoice in the intermingling of cultures; at others it seems to inspire a wistful melancholy (Barton. guardian.co.uk/book.in).

The above lines also reveal how Desai’s past experiences have strongly influenced her writings. Although not as conspicuous as Lahiri, Desai’s literary offerings definitely possess autobiographical strains. There is an unmistakable intimacy between herself and her characters. Desai states in an interview, “They’re made up of bits and pieces of people I know- the main characters are- and other characters are totally imagined. But of course I’m sure they all do have bits of me in them as well, different parts of my personality” (Desai. www.randomhouse.com). Sampath’s mother Kulfi, in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* constantly experiences intense food cravings and is obsessively adventurous in her culinary pursuits. This characteristic trait is also reminiscent of Desai’s own love for food which the writer herself gaily admits. “It’s (cooking) a great interest of mine; it’s so much a part of my life. I’m always in the kitchen, cooking and experimenting- I love it” (Desai. www.randomhouse.com). Desai has also revealed that she prefers writing in her kitchen. This jubilant passion for food has obviously been infused into her fictional creation.

The soft spoken Desai is a simple and grounded woman with strong family values. She is close to her father Ashvin Desai, who resides in Delhi and who had predicted his daughter’s Booker win long before it was even
nominated. Desai says of her father, “He is my closest link to India and what it means to me” (Lahiri http://indiatoday.html). Although she has lived the majority of her life outside of India, Desai still holds on to her Indian passport and is reluctant to surrender her Indian citizenship. This reveals a sense of attachment to her ancestral home as well as reiterates the diaspora predicament of never quite fitting in the adopted country. This dilemma is typically reminiscent of the immigrant experience where rootlessness, alienation and loyalty towards one’s adopted country and to one’s roots is always a constant tussle.

I feel less like doing it (surrender her Indian citizenship) every year because I realise that i see everything through the lens of being Indian. It’s not something that has gone away, it’s something that has become stronger. As I’ve got older, I have realised that I can’t really write without that perspective (Desai. www.guardian.co.uk.in).

It is revealing as well as significant that Kiran’s debut novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, happens to be based in India. “I think my first book was filled with all that I loved most about India and knew I was in the inevitable process of losing” (Desai. www.bookbrowse.com). This statement also carries a sense of memory in her acceptance that the India she writes about, which she remembered as a child, may not exist anymore. Desai has credited her writer mother, Anita Desai, to have made a huge impact in her writings. She confesses that senior Desai played a motherly role as she gave more emotional support as opposed to critical support when it came to her writings.

I’m sure she (Anita Desai) did have a big influence, because all my life I’ve grown up hearing her talk about literature and books. It
was wonderful to have her around when I was writing this book, to talk to her through this whole process”


Desai admits to reading a lot of poetry and states that her favourite writers, among others, are Ichiguru, Kenzaburo Oe, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and R K Narayan. She also reveals that one of her favourite books, which she rereads over and over, is Pedro Paramo by Juan Rulfo. Kiran’s admirable capacity to accept and find joy in any given situation which life brings transcends into her art. Her writings have won accolades because of the way she finds humour and beauty in very ordinary characters living ordinary lives. Kiran is presently believed to be working on her third book.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a second generation diasporic Indian American writer, born to Bengali parents. She was born in London on 11th July, 1967 and was later brought up in South Kingston, Rhode Island in the USA. She received her B.A. in English Literature from Barnard College in 1989, and then moved on to complete multiple M.A. degrees in English Literature, Creative Writing and Comparative Literature from Boston University. Lahiri also did her Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies from the same university. Later on, she took up fellowship at Provincetown’s Fine Arts Work Centre from 1997-98. In 2001, Lahiri married American journalist, Alberto Vourvoulias Bush and they have at present, two children. Lahiri currently resides in Brooklyn with her family and has been a Vice President of the PEN American Centre since 2005.

Lahiri came into acclaim with her debut collection, Interpreter of Maladies, which won the Pulitzer Prize 2000 for fiction. This book was then translated into twenty nine languages and became a bestseller in
the United States and other countries as well. She then went on to write a novel, *The Namesake* in 2003 which is now a major motion picture. She wrote another collection of short stories titled *Unaccustomed Earth* which came out in 2008. For her brilliance, Jhumpa Lahiri has been conferred many literary awards besides the Pulitzer Prize, such as the Trans-Atlantic Award from the Henfield Foundation in 1993, O Henry as well as PEN/Hemingway award for *Interpreter of Maladies* in 1999, Addison Metcalf Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2000, M.F.K. Fisher Distinguished Writing Award from the James Beard Foundation in 2000 and Guggenheim Fellowship in 2002. The Commonwealth Award of 2009 was conferred to Lahiri for her contribution to the literary world. This prolific fictionista’s most recent work is a novel, *The Lowland*, which released on September 2013.

This remarkable author has been appreciated for her superb prose writing, be it short stories or the novel. Her literary contributions such as *Interpreter of Maladies, The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth* have each dealt with the subject of Diaspora. Lahiri, being a Diaspora herself understands only too well the immigrant experience. However, she claims this was not intentional and in one of her interviews, she states:

When I first started writing, I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough or mature enough to allow in life (www.chipublib.org).
Lahiri is a child of three countries – having Indian roots but born in London and later, raised in Rhode Island in the USA. Shuttling periodically between Boston and Calcutta, Lahiri has admitted to not ever feeling like she belonged to any particular place. She seems to express her feelings as a diaspora through her characters. In a particular interview, Lahiri says, “I wasn’t a part of things. We visited (India) often but we didn’t have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully ours with encouragement” (Lahiri. www.bookbrowse.com). She has experienced firsthand the diasporic trauma of never being able to fully connect to any particular place. “Growing up with ties to all the three countries, Lahiri has lived with a sense of homelessness and an inability to belong to any of these countries” (Sah 152). However, her search for identity is not weighed down by insecurities but is rather, a quiet, mature and reflexive one. Her stories are the product of an observant, reflexive mind.

As a young girl, Lahiri was shy and reserved and had few friends with whom she could share a common and healthy interest such as the love for books. It is interesting to note that Lahiri’s real name was actually Nilanjana Sudeshna. After she enrolled in her school in America, her teachers found her original name too difficult to pronounce. Therefore, the nickname ‘Jhumpa’ was adopted instead (www.bookbrowse.com). Now that she has gained recognition as a writer, many readers are often astounded to learn that Lahiri’s graduate school application was rejected by several schools which she had applied to. This compelled her to join a non profit organisation in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She worked there as a research assistant and this turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Being a research assistant, Lahiri was given a computer of her own and this led to the creation of many ideas for her stories. She admits to
having drawn inspiration and being influenced by various writers, some of which are James Joyce, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Virginia Woolf and Antov Chekov. Says Lahiri: “I am eternally indebted to two living writers, William Trevor and Marvis Gallant. Recently I’ve been reading a lot of Thomas Hardy and am Completely under his spell” (www.chipublib.org).

Lahiri’s works are mostly based on first and second generation Indian Diasporic writers. A commendable aspect of her writings is the sincere honesty in her narrative style. Being a Diaspora all her life, Lahiri obviously has no real experience about life in India, her ancestral homeland. No doubt, she has gathered some knowledge about India from her frequent visits to India when she was younger but other than that, she has no real experience of daily life in India. Therefore, she does not write about resident Indians but rather, about a subject she knows intimately and that is the life and predicament of Indians living abroad.

Lahiri projects the Indian immigrants of Bengali origins as economic refugees, self chosen exiles and transnational hybrids who form a new generation of Indian Americans in a codified Homogeneous American national culture (Nayak 134).

Another admirable aspect of Lahiri’s writings is the fact that she does not resort to clichés or eccentricities which immigrant stories are prone to. Her stories are humane in the sense that they deal mostly with human relationships and the struggles and joys of life felt by the en masse people everywhere. Her stories are genuine, sincere, thought
provoking and always seem to carry a deep moral message. With regard to this matter, Lahiri says in an interview:

Relationships do not preclude issues of morality...When I sit down to write, I don’t think about writing about an idea or a given message. I just try to write a story (which is hard enough) and there’s obviously a message, or a moral, or something. I think that’s good – but it’s not something I actively think about, to be honest with you (www.pifmagazine.com).

This expatriate writer is interested in human issues such as relationships, loneliness, fidelity, love, marriage etc. A lot of her stories are about marriages that are under great strain. This appears to be relevant to the Indo-American exchange. “Lahiri remains a detached observer of the daily events in the lives of her fictional characters” (Kadam 122). In India, the institution of marriage is given a lot of importance but in America, divorce rates are very high and the sanctity of marriage and family is fast deteriorating. Lahiri brings out this influence in her stories.

An impressive aspect of Lahiri’s writing is her ability to write in the voices of both the genders. She professes the ability to write in a male perspective as “an exhilarating and liberating thing to do” (www.bookbrowse.com). Having experimented with both forms of prose i.e., short stories and novel, she states that writing a novel is both liberating and overwhelming whereas a short story has more intensity and purity. In discussing Gogol, the main protagonist in *The Namesake*, Lahiri confesses that she and Gogol have a lot in common. This
confession pertains to how names played a significant role in both Lahiri and her protagonist, Gogol’s lives. Like Gogol in the novel, this writer’s petname ‘Jhumpa’ inadvertently became her official name. The significance of a name is dissected in her novel as this was something that obviously affected her own life as well. “Emotion involved in finding a child his name is examined at length, as also the real life inconveniences, embarrassments and psychological pain issuing from it in practical encounters” (Mishra 166).

In this way the stories, although purely fictional in nature, contains autobiographical strains as Lahiri draws richly and honestly from her own experiences about life. When Interpreter of Maladies made its debut, it received rave reviews from various literary critics. Pulitzer prize winner and book critic, Michiko Kakutani hailed Lahiri’s entry into the genre of diasporic writing as a ‘precocious debut’ (www.powells.com). This new age diasporic writer’s skill as a writer has been compared to literary giants like Hemingway and Carver. Her trademark narrative technique is her sparing words which is economical yet deeply eloquent. This is typical of a writer of short stories. At the same time, she has also proved to be as skilful in the genre of the novel with The Namesake. Lahiri’s writing has a charming lyrical quality to it.

As Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri are both Diaspora writers, it is natural that common themes run throughout their narratives. They are also female writers writing under the literary genre of contemporary Indian Fiction in English and both have each achieved success before the age of thirty five. Sharing such a common background, it is inevitable that Desai and Lahiri develop similar issues and concerns. Topics such as the problem of immigration faced by the diaspora community, marginalisation, identity crisis,
internal and external conflict, ambiguity of ‘home’ and other such similar predicaments are common refrains in the literary output of these two expatriates. It is significant that the above stated concerns are largely psychological in nature. Desai and Lahiri have become a kind of representative figures for young, aspiring Indian women writers. They hold an important position in the modern world as the voices which speaks for the multi cultural communities, the post colonial, the marginal, the immigrant, the subaltern and the feminist. For this reason, their writings are rich in diversity. Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri are a pair of dynamic writers whose prolific careers have only just begun.
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