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NON SERVIAM: REFUSAL OF TRANSLATING CULTURES IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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Kiran Desai's most appraised novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, is generally acknowledged as an "*immigrant novel*" (Das 2009: 62), "*intelligently postcolonial*" (Moseley 2008: 295), dealing with the issues of class, race, and ethnicity. It moves back and forth between Kalimpong, in the northeastern Himalayas, and New York, the desperate realm of the illegal immigrants populating the grubby basement kitchens of its restaurants, "*knitting varied moods and textures*" (Hiremath 2007: 2). The sharp and gloomy, not at all heartening, manner of tackling with such issues confers Desai's novel its particularity on the stage of postcolonial writing. As Mishra puts it,

> Desai seems far from writers like Zadie Smith and Hari Kunzru, whose fiction takes a generally optimistic view of what Salman Rushdie has called 'hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs' (Mishra 2006).

She stands indeed away from the academic perception of multiculturalism and from the Western definition of it, adopting if not too much a skeptical, yet a realistic approach to the West's consumer-driven state of things and its impact on the downtrodden of the postcolonial world. Such realism makes Moseley remark the "*overall arc of the novel [as] gloomy*" (Moseley 2008: 295).

The portrait of the immigrant is, for the novelist, both the portrait of the world he dreams of and of the one he leaves: this makes Das remark that

> The book gives a realistic portrait of the lives of the migrants from Asia and Africa in the developed world and in what conditions they live in order to earn a living, while back home relatives and acquaintances paint a false glamorous picture of living and working in the Western Dreamlands (Das 2009: 63).

Thus, the novel turns socially and politically realist, in opposition to the magic realism practised in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. Moving people from poverty to promised wealth creates, as Desai calls it, "*an imbalance*" in a person's thinking and emotional life, the novel spinning around "*the multifaceted aspects of loss*" (Sen 2006: 27).

The plight of the postcolonial poor and suppressed is not new with Kiran Desai: it is also remarkably illustrated by Kamala Markandaya, Arun Joshi, and Arundhati Roy – only to mention a few. "*The shadow class*", as Desai calls them, is dramatically described at some point in the novel - "But it WAS so hard and YET there were so many here. It was terribly, terribly hard. Millions risked death, were humiliated, hated, lost their families – YET there

were so many here." (Desai 2006: 189) – a psychological background against which Biju, one of the main characters, stands, working his way to defining his self and his times.

Biju is the cook's son who left for/was sent to America, the ideal instilled upon him being the Green Card Land as the place where you could attain "a couch, a TV set, a bank account" (Desai 2006: 78). U.S.A. means making money and getting fat: this is the external premise of Biju's voyage to America and this is how he starts his identity quest and the journey to defining his time. However, leaving the country is an experience itself: changing places and different temporalities turns dramatic and tense so that the victory of his escape should be tasted properly.

After being duped by a recruiting agency, Biju experiences the harrowing process of getting the tourist visa at the American Embassy: joining a crowd of Indians fighting to reach the visa counter, Biju is in the limelight of a humiliation which he now takes for his greatest victory:

> Biggest pusher, first place; how self-contented and smiling he was; he dusted himself off, presenting himself with the exquisite manners of a cat. I'm civilized, sir, ready for the U.S.; I'm civilized, man. Biju noticed that his eyes, so alive to the foreigners, looked back at his own countrymen and women, immediately glazed over, and went dead (Desai 2006: 124).

His closed eyes is the same gesture as in Rushdie's character, Saladin Chamcha from *The Satanic Verses*: the blind refusal of a history he is prejudiced against, due to his father, a history whose understanding is never considered.

Out of India, once in America, Biju experiences the "peculiar habit of hopscotching jobs from one New York restaurant to another," (Das 2009: 60) living the illegal immigrant plight – inhuman surviving conditions - and being continuously on the run. About Biju's first American days, Moseley notes: "Biju immediately sinks into a subculture of dark-skinned illegal immigrants. (…) He is baffled at nearly every turn, unable to master the sharp skills that have enabled other immigrants to get rich" (Moseley 2008: 295).

The motivation behind living as a "*low-level kitchen worker*" (Sen 2006: 27) is the obsessive dreaming about the victorious return home after obtaining the Green Card – his father's ideal, not the one decided by and for himself. Meanwhile, his American experience also involves the failure in establishing any genuine relationships with his fellows. Friendships are of single use: though living intensely one relationship – with Saeed Saeed, for example – this shadows away and Biju is, each and every time, left with an empty soul. Biju and the other scattered dreamers form the "*Shadow Class*", as Desai calls them: "*The men left for other jobs, towns, got departed, returned home, changed names, (…). Addresses, phone numbers did not hold*" (Desai 2006: 102).

The present American experience does not convince Biju in any way to adapt to the new reality, the one so much desired when still in India. If in the case of Saladin Chamcha, the character of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, one could remark his immediate openness to the new space, time and 'moralities', copying them blindly as if swallowing worlds to be born with a new identity, Biju keeps to his "*home values*", his back-home morality and the inherited religion. As an example, he fiercely condemns the Hindu Indians who defy the law of not eating beef while in the American, away from home, restaurants.

Biju believes that man should not give up on his religion and on his father's principles, no matter what circumstances he has to face. Rules, especially the ones inherited, are to be obeyed, since this could give you a "*measure of your dignity*." The backbone of his Indian existence is too strongly prejudiced or too convincingly assumed to be replaced by the structuring elements of a new temporality. The pragmatic consequence is that he would rather not work in the places which he values as 'immoral'; hence his stubbornness in adapting to the country whose Green Card he obsessively mentions as a consequence of his

father's permanent urge. The only genuine Hindu place which he finds and accepts to work for is Gandhi Café, though the real morality which Harish – Harry, the owner of the place, promotes behind the Indian authenticity is that of money.

Dodging the authorities and moving from one ill-paid job to another, caught between his father's ideal and a reality that "*lacks horizon*" (Desai 2006: 209), Biju starts thinking about returning "*home*". One early manifestation of his incompatibility with the new temporality is his regularly feeling homesick, accompanied by his anger with his father for having sent him away: "Biju couldn't help but feel a flash of anger at his father for sending him alone to this country, but he knew he wouldn't have forgiven his father for not trying to send him either" (Desai 2006: 82). This stands as the trap of his immigration experience, a situation Biju will solve by his decision to reject his father's slogan – STAY THERE. MAKE MONEY. DON'T COME BACK – and thus return home.

After hearing about the rebellious situation in Kalimpong, Biju experiences a feeling of total emptiness while, in the same time, he realizes the lack of any genuine dialogue between him and his father – love is just a habit, he ponders. It is for the first time that Biju has distanced himself from the one whose words and urges forced him into a different and unacceptable reality. This is not the only revelation Biju experiences: he becomes aware that America is not his history and, more than that, his life in such a place is both unreal and artificial. Nothingness stands as the pattern of his present life: no family and no friends, Biju being the only one to fill the space called, by his father, his successful American life. For him - states Mishra - the city's endless possibilities of self–invention become a source of pain. Though 'another part of him had expanded: his self-consciousness, his self-pity,' this awareness only makes him long to fade into insignificance, to return '*to where he might relinquish this overrated control over his own destiny*' (Mishra 2006).

Self – consciousness being one of the two positive values that he acquired, Biju realizes that either he develops an artificial variant of himself and of his life or he returns home. The alternative to his present American experience – having no name and no knowledge of those foreign space and time – is his 'back-home' projected new life, one in which he will not be the only person in a photo – the hope of community and belonging proving more acute than ever.

In spite of being accused of sentimentalism, Biju opts for the latter variant and prefers to take America with him. After a visit to Jackson Heights to buy things, Biju flies home, "*bearing the fruits of his labour – cashews, electronics, aftershave, baseball caps*." (Moseley 2008: 295) Biju will offer back what he was sent for: a soulless reality, a foreign territory and temporality which he could never understand or adapt to. Yet, a reality not completely different from the one that Biju left behind: leaving Kalimpong was not the decision made after a conscientious deliberation regarding the reasons for doing so – on the contrary, it was his father's given and imposed solution, the one any Indian father would take for his son.

The decision of returning home is, for Biju, a negative experience: he goes back to India because he did *not* understand the country he had been sent to and therefore he did *not* manage to adapt to it, all of these happening because, from the very beginning, he experienced foreignness not as a personal project but as an external drive of his father, the necessity of being a true Indian. In the same way, he left India *not* because he previously decided against it and against its values, but because it was the proper way for a young man to adopt that route. The dilemma of his trajectory is firstly experienced when he feels homesick while wandering from one restaurant to another: his homesickness is accompanied by the anger at his father: "Biju couldn't help but feel a flash of anger at his father for sending him alone to this country, but he knew he wouldn't have forgiven his father for not trying to send him either" (Desai 2006: 82).

What functions as a positive outcome of his American experience is the fact that his immigrant life has expanded his "*self-consciousness and his self-pity*", the awareness that he

knows what he cannot accept as his own – as his temporality and his space, the circumstances of his self-definition. When landing at Calcutta airport, he feels coming back to himself, no longer "*the enormous anxiety of being a foreigner ebbing – that unbearable arrogance and shame of the immigrant*" (Desai 2006: 300). The sensation that he can see things clearly again stands as the premise of – finally – his self-defining process, of his new and assumed identity: "*For the first time in God knows how long, his vision unblurred and he found he could see clearly*" (Desai 2006: 301). We do have to agree with what Sen says about Biju's final act: "He returns not as a hero but as someone who has been robbed of all he had, down to the clothes on his back, but who feels whole and restored" (Sen 2006: 28).

We should also go along with what Desai herself confesses about her characters – "*What binds these seemingly disparate characters (Biju, Sai and Gyan) is a shared historical legacy and a common experience of impotence and humiliation*" (Mishra 2006)– however, Mishra's interpretation of Biju's back-home experience as the one according to which "*withdrawal or escape are no longer possible*", and that "*Desai offers her characters no possibility of growth or redemption*," seems too gloomy a perspective. As we have already pointed out, Biju is indeed the runaway – avoiding his country and rejecting the imposed one – yet one cannot say that these traumatic experiences leave him untouched and unchanged. Even if nothingness is what he gains, he still possesses the consciousness of what he cannot be, the very premise of his future becoming. The dilemma at the end of the novel seems, according to Tucker, as follows:

> Will cosmopolitan, global progress change the fabric of India so that the veils of the past no longer provide alluring shelter? Will India turn from a world view back to an insular nationalism? (…) A mixed horizon awaits: Desai's young and new Indians. Freedom is their gain to be shared with a loss of certitude. (Tucker 2007: 331)

Biju, Desai's intriguing character in *The Inheritance of Loss*, oscillates between a repulsive, native time and a much desired, foreign one, the modality in which he overcomes this dilemma of temporal and spatial belonging reflecting itself in terms of identity: he cannot understand and live his time unless he attempts to construct both himself and his context. In Biju's case, we face times closing back upon a bedazzled, wandering identity.

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