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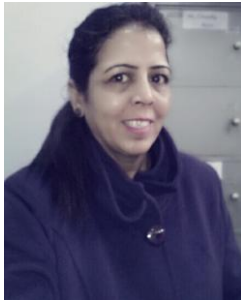
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THE TWO GENERATIONS OF STORY WEAVING: ANITA DESAI AND KIRAN DESAI

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ABSTRACT

The need to write was born as soon as they could hold a pen and place letters one after each other and across the page. The substance of this paper is set against the story weaving tradition of two generations i.e. mother (Anita Desai)-daughter (Kiran Desai) duo. The two generations of story weaving, Desai's touch on the same raw social nerves and massage them deftly into literary art. Both Desai's are known for their devastating wit and charming style. The way both Desai's keep the pace going on in her novels is remarkable. They leave no issue untouched and no point of view un-presented. They have a rare eye for detail. As the daughter of the noted writer Anita Desai, Kiran Desai has inherited considerable gains in the world of fiction. Literary paraphernalia of Kiran Desai shows unmistakable imprints of her illustrious mother, Anita Desai. Thus, it can undoubtedly be said that Kiran Desai is treading on the same path which her mother, Anita Desai, used to tread.

Key Words: Alienation, Immigration, Migration, Identity, Style, Flashback, Flashforth.

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The mother –daughter duo i.e. Anita Desai and Kiran Desai are two prominent stars shining in the firmament of Indian English Writings and occupy a distinct and distinctive place in the realm of contemporary Indian English Fiction. Both of them deserve appreciation for their literary output as they write on the subjects like home, identity, immigration, alienation and loneliness.

Anita Desai, a renowned writer who is known for her writing style, has to her credit a tremendous literary output. Her themes shine gloriously in the pages of her novels. Anita Desai's fiction grapples with the intangible realities of life, plunges into innermost depths of human psyche to fathom its mysteries, the inner turmoil and the chaos inside the mind. The existential problem of the alienated self is the main theme of her novels. "What distinguishes Anita Desai from the rest of Indo-Asian writers is her pre-occupation with the individuals and their inner-world of sensibility and the resultant chaos inside the mind," (Asnani 5) remarks Shayam M. Asnani. Some have praised her as the most successful of the Indian novelists who write in English. Anita Desai's characters are all lonely and haunted by various obsessions.

Kiran Desai is an author of the new breed. She is known for her devastating wit and charming style. Kiran Desai, like her mother, examines subjects like home, identity, dispossession, shrinking and fading

borders, racism, class disparities, injustice, inequality, alienation and aggression. Desai leaves no issue untouched and no point of view unrepresented. She probes deep into the important aspect of globalization. Kiran Desai writes about different strata of society, their neuroses and their struggles. Kiran Desai's characters tend to be caricatures incapable of psychological complexity. Desai explores the pain of being an immigrant. Kiran Desai addresses issues like multiculturalism as well as acts of terrorism with a question mark. She tries to show feelings of negligence by the upper class as being the main cause for the poor to revolt. The parallel portraiture of both the narratives, as in the US and the other in Kalimpong, is drawn with superb dexterity by Kiran Desai. An immigrant society's plight, its eagerness to gain the green card is aptly portrayed.

Kiran Desai, daughter of the noted writer Anita Desai, has inherited many common traits and aspects of her novels from her mother. Kiran Desai has gained a huge reputation for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. Kiran Desai has dedicated this novel to her mother, "to my mother, I owe a debt so profound and so great that this book feels as much hers as it does mine"(TOI)

Mother and daughter are a study in similarities and different writing styles. The youngest Desai has inherited if not a style, but at least a technique from her mother. Kiran Desai says: "I grew up well aware of her reading taste, and surrounded by her way of writing, and I find that I write very much in the same way. Our styles are very different but the way I work and think ,feels so much of her"(The Guardian). Anita Desai is a prolific writer of economical, precisely rendered prose. Salman Rushdie describes their divergent styles in this way, "Anita is a deceptively quite writer, Kiran is little but more showy as a writer. There is a little more flamboyance in prose."(N Y Times)

Anita Desai usually writes with the double perspective i.e. writing about migrants in India and Indian migrants to the West. Both mother and daughter, Anita Desai and Kiran Desai, write on the same immigrant experience in their novels. Anita Desai says that she has felt especially close to Kiran Desai since she started writing. The two of them share a house in New York. Kiran writes upstairs, Anita Desai writes downstairs. When Anita Desai moved to the West, first of all to take up a post of Cambridge University and later to New York, Kiran Desai was only fifteen. Anita Desai says that now she has very conflicted feelings about the emotional impact of it on her daughter. But it is clearly the experience of living between cultures and the challenges defining an identity as an immigrant which has given Kiran Desai the subject matter for her novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. In her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai uncovers the pain of being an illegal immigrant allowing the reader to see through Biju's eyes as he struggles to find work, sleeps in a basement with rats and longs to return to his homeland. Biju's long quest through an inferno of Manhattan basement kitchens, for the holy grail of a green card reflects his creator's urge to replace myth with truth. He not only runs from immigration but cheated by employers also. Biju suffers more because his father feels proud that his son is working in America. Biju also experiences the ambivalence which seems spawned by his experience of rejection and racism in the novel. *The Inheritance of Loss*, truly, depicts the sad lives of those 'tribes' which come to US for the first time and are desperate to make both ends meet. Kiran Desai touches on such aspects as how the characters sought out their dreams and future by looking outside their culture, religion and country which is exemplified at the end of the book when Biju contemplates the steady stream of immigration from India to America. This novel grew out of Kiran Desai's own experience of coming to the United States and living between countries, she found that to understand the present, she needed to go back to immigrant experience of her parents' and grandparents' generations. For Kiran Desai, the immigrant experience is one that involves the inexorable narration of identity. In the novel, the judge's journey to racist England as a student follows the agonizing process by which he becomes alien even to himself. On his return to India, he finds himself despising his culture, family and inadvertently attempting to colonize his backward wife.

Anita Desai has written many novels on the subject of immigration. The Diaspora Indian community is also not exempted from being a victim of the sense of loneliness since Indian Independence; UK has been a prime destination for migrant Indians. The earliest of such communities constitute either of 'Anglophiles', whose purpose of migration has been to experience the pristine beauty of England, or of 'Anglophes', who migrate to take the proverbial 'postcolonial revenge'. In England, both these two types of migrant Indians are

pressed together and marked as 'the others'. Anita Desai's characters tend to be outsiders, torn between privacy and the powerful family and social bonds that both stifle and unite them. Anita Desai's novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is about migrant Indians in the England of 1960s. Adit lives in London with his English wife, Sarah. Dev is newly arrived migrant from India and, thus, feels more lonely and alienated than Adit who is comfortably settled in the city. Dev's loneliness stops haunting him and he decides to stay in England. Adit, in the interim, suffers from a crisis of identity. He, too, aspires for his homeland and its people. Like the United Kingdom, the United States of America has emerged as an attraction for Indians who want academic and economic prosperity. As a result, the Indian Diaspora community in the US is gradually increasing day by day in this era of post-globalization. Arun from *Fasting, Feasting* is such an Indian living in the suburbs of Massachusetts, USA. He finds himself so alienated and lonely that he cannot adjust to a culture that votes for freedom. In her latest novel *The Zig Zag Way*, Anita Desai again focuses her attention on the subject of migration. In her earlier novels, America has been a favourite place for Indians but in *The Zig Zag Way*, she marks a change and portrays the immigration from New York to Mexico. *The Zig Zag Way* showcases Anita Desai's unique ability to view a new world through an outsider's eyes. In this novel, Desai deals with the cultural annihilation of Mexico's indigenous people, a topic similar to the plight of American Indians. Desai chooses to write about Mexico because India resembles this country in many ways. Mexico has the same colonial powers –Spanish on the one hand, British on the other. At the same time, it is utterly foreign, which makes it intriguing. In the novel, we meet Eric, an aimless graduate student struggling to expand his thesis on immigration into a book. He follows his more disciplined and competent scientist girlfriend on a research trip to Mexico. Eric fortunately becomes aware of his Cornish grandfather, who once worked in the mines of Mexico, and sets out to learn more. Between Eric's arrival in the town and his search for his grandmother's grave, Desai tells the story of how young Betty left Cornwall to marry Eric's grandfather, adjusted to life in a Mexican village, but died giving birth to Eric's father. The pathetic life of the miners who migrated to other places to work in mines and how they were exploited, have been presented before the reader in a brilliant manner. The complexities of forced immigration and exploitation of workers, migrants and otherwise, are certainly part of Desai's larger theme.

Kiran Desai probes deep into the aspect of alienation just like her mother, Anita Desai. Alienation forms the backbone of Anita Desai's themes in each of her novels. According to Hariprasanna:

Anita Desai's primary intention as a novelist is to depict the psycho-emotional and socio-psychic states of the protagonists living in an alien and cloistered world of existential problems and passions. Alienation in her novels is presented in the form of tension between self and society (Hariprasanna 81).

In most of Anita Desai's novels, the aspect of alienation has been focussed. In *Cry, the Peacock*, the alienation of Maya is rooted essentially in Gautama's philosophical detachment, his imperviousness to the beautiful yet tremulous beauty of the natural world and his gross unconcern over the basics of life. Maya's alienation leads her on to utter desolation. *Voices in the City* is far more realistic than Anita Desai's first novel. The human drama of alienation takes place against the background of "the monster city that lived no normal, healthy, red blooded life but one that was subterranean, underlit, stealthy and odorous of morality" (Desai 150). Of all the novels of Anita Desai, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is intimately related to her own experiences. She told an interviewer, "Of all my novels it is most rooted in experiences and the least literary in derivation" (Ram 40). The novel captures the confusions and conflicts of another set of alienated persons. It has been maintained that in the novel "the tension between the locale and immigrant blackbird involve issues of alienation and accommodation that the immigrant has to confront in an alien and yet familiar world" (Sharma4). In her novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, she, again, deals with the theme of loneliness and alienation. This novel depicts the life of Sita who has to face the loneliness as a woman, a wife and a mother. The Sahitya Akademi award winner *Fire on the Mountain* explores the alienation of Nanda Kaul and her great granddaughter, Raka. Anita Desai's novels *Clear Light of the Day* and *In Custody* also present the theme of the alienated self. Desai has delineated in these novels the problems and plights of alienated individuals caught in the crisis of a

changing society. The existential problem of the alienated self finally emerges to be the central theme of her novels.

In Kiran Desai's fiction, too, there is no escape from solitude. She captures the vivid descriptions and meticulous details in her novel. Kiran Desai's characters, just like her mother, alienate themselves. Sai in *The Inheritance of Loss* feels alienated and because of alienation, she suffers from loneliness. Sai is an orphaned grand-daughter of a judge and returns from her convent school for her grandfather's care, and at a loss to provide the love and warmth she yearns for, the judge turns her care to the cook. The cook takes care of her just like her parents. Sai yearns for affection and she finds an outlet in her maths tutor, Gyan, whom she loves from the depth of her heart. Gyan is another character who joins the Gorkha agitation not as much for the cause but an outlet to vent his own rage and alienation. Biju, the cook's son, struggles in an alien land. Desai uncovers the pain of being an illegal immigrant. She explores their aspirations, hopes and expectations of their families and their disconnections with their roots. The character of judge also throws light on alienation. He lived and worked in England all through his life. When he returns from England to India, he alienates himself from the society as well as from his surroundings. He has little love for anyone except his dog. The judge experiences discrimination and humiliation. Loneliness and isolation curse him into a shadow. He becomes a stranger to himself and forgets how to laugh. He vents out his anger and frustration by beating his apparently unsophisticated wife, Nimi.

Anita Desai works on revealing the varying mental states, psychic aberrations, inner motives and existential pursuits of man. Desai's characters are continuously engaged in trying to find out their hidden selves either through expiation or re-examination. They attempt to find out where they stand in relation to others, through self-analysis, through going over the same ground over and over again. In her latest novel *The Zig Zag Way*, Anita Desai uncovers the search for identity in an alien land as well as the aspect of alienation. Eric undertakes a journey in an alien land to search for the reality. Desai portrays the dilemma of uprooted individuals through the experience of exile in a beautiful manner. Dona Vera, the 'queen of sierra', feels alienated because of the presence of solitude in her life. She is an egocentric and autocratic woman who suffers secret torments. But when compared with the portrayal of women in Desai's earlier novels, Dona Vera appears to be the strongest character. In *The Zig Zag Way*, Eric uncovers a legacy that changes his own perspective and direction of his life. He searches for his identity and is finally successful in finding the key to his past. Kiran Desai, in *The Inheritance of Loss*, depicts the trauma of an immigrant in quest for identity in a foreign land. Biju in *The Inheritance of Loss* and Eric in *The Zig Zag Way* undertake journeys in their quest for identity. A close study of these novels reveals that Kiran Desai has inherited some of the important themes e.g. search for identity, alienation, from her mother Anita Desai.

All the novels of Anita Desai, from *Cry, the Peacock* to *Journey to Ithaca*, are patterned on the flashback and flashforth techniques of narration. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* also follows the flashback technique. In Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, Sita relates her childhood spent on the magic-island at Manori village with her present narration. Nirode outlines the remaining part of the structure when he relates the over-indulgent behaviour of his mother and her illicit relations with Major Chaddha while talking to his younger sister Amla. Maya reveals the facts of her fear psychosis when she tells Gautama about the efficacy of albino astrologer's prophecy on her brother Arjuna. Adit's nostalgia about the Hindu Muslim riots in 1947 in Calcutta reminds the reader of his intense longing to come back to India for the feeling of his existence. The arrival of Raka at Carignano shifts the narrative of the story from the present to the past when Nanda Kaul relates to her childhood inclinations and the facts about her father. Baumgartner's childhood with an authoritarian father and an over-protective mother makes him nostalgic to the level of an obsession. The reader in *Journey to Ithaca* is acquainted with the past of Laila as a daughter of Amla and Hameed. Eric, in *The Zig Zag Way*, comes to know his past. Eric discovers a link between silver mine and his past. His travels into an old mining village near Mexico City become the basis of this book, and through them we also learn a part of Mexican history. Dona Vera has her own European past which becomes alive in the novel in a series of flashbacks.

Like Anita Desai, Kiran Desai presents before the reader the lives of some characters in a series of flashbacks and flashforth in *The Inheritance of Loss*. As the lives of these characters unfold in flashbacks, the reader learns of their personal struggles, their connections to a coronial past, the injustices they have suffered and the injustices they have, in some cases, inflicted upon others. The social and political history of India is revealed subtly through the experiences of these characters. In the novel history repeats itself, as America becomes the focus of Indian Diaspora dreams. Biju suffers from nostalgia in a foreign land and wishes to go back to his homeland. Judge recalls his days in England and feels nostalgic towards his past.

Thus, it can be said that both mother and daughter, Anita Desai and Kiran Desai, have some aspects in common. Both write from the same perspective. Heromione Lee, chairman of the judges said, "I think her mother would be proud. It is clear to those of us who have read Anita Desai that Kiran Desai has learned from her mother's work. Both write not just about India but about Indian Communities in the world". Kiran Desai has inherited some important themes of her novels from her mother, Anita Desai. Kiran says, "My mother and I have worked together in India, Mexico and the United States" (Redif). Alienation, immigration, poverty, search for identity are some of the common themes in the novels of both Anita Desai and Kiran Desai.

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