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Disjunctures and diaspora in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai juxtaposes underprivileged diasporic subjects in India and the USA in both the colonial past and the global present, thereby challenging its readers to develop a larger perspective on historical and global power asymmetries and minority struggles for recognition. She uses a fragmentary structure that shifts across time and space to suggest that immigration and diaspora are predicated on a rift between home and host land. I argue that in her novel, diaspora represents both a socio-political formation and a narrative strategy that underscores socio-economic inequalities in the world and invites readers to think critically about immigration and global capitalism. In blending aesthetic and material concerns, Desai departs from theories of diaspora and cosmopolitanism that tend to privilege hybridity and mobility. By narrating the experiences of cross-ethnic diasporas in the context of global capitalism, Desai expands the generic boundaries of Indian diasporic writing in English.

Keywords

cosmopolitanism, diaspora, immigration, Kiran Desai, narrative form, South Asian diasporic fiction

Kiran Desai's Booker Prize-winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) chronicles the journeys to England and the USA of immigrants from South Asia and other parts of the world. The phenomenon of transnational labour eking out a living in the USA has not been mapped out in literary terms in extensive ways. The newness of the novel thus resides in its literary representation of a new type of migrant in a globalized labour market. The text not only depicts the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots in the Global North, but also the shared experience of racialization of cross-ethnic

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diasporas in the USA. By bringing together illegal labour from several continents and depicting their unfolding relationships, Desai connects different geographies of migration and diaspora, showing that just as globalization creates new social and economic divides, it also enables migrants to challenge ethnic and social barriers by forging cross-cultural connections.

By focusing on the material experiences of various ethnic diasporas and on the phenomenon of diasporic dispersal in the context of late twentieth-century capitalism, Desai departs from earlier conceptualizations of diaspora. Since the 1990s, diaspora has been theorized as the displacement of individuals and groups from their homeland through exile and migration and their re-anchoring in their host countries. Viewed from the perspective of a double national and cultural belonging, diaspora has served to rethink the idea of the nation, whose borders and internal exclusions it challenges. Recent uses of the term, however, have moved from the notion of diaspora as an alternative paradigm for the nation, and from a preoccupation with the construction of diasporic identities as culturally hybrid, to the idea that diaspora entails lived and embodied experiences of diasporic subjects and communities, which are predicated on factors such as class, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and sexuality.¹ Kiran Desai extends this model of diaspora by exploring the material conditions that have given rise to transnational flows of people as well as the ways in which diasporic identities are lived and experienced in the context of global capitalism. In contrast to studies of diasporic subjects that tend to celebrate their mobility and hybrid cultural identity,² Desai attempts to re-politicize the genre of South Asian diasporic narratives³ through a renewed attention to topical themes and narrative form.

This article explores *The Inheritance of Loss* as a diasporic text that underscores the material histories of immigrant subjects by way of its formal aesthetics. Desai employs a fragmentary structure that shifts between different times and spaces and a sombre tone in order to underscore the idea that immigration is a difficult movement predicated on a rift between home and host land. In the novel, then, diaspora represents both a socio-political formation and a formal narrative strategy that extends from this formation, underscores socio-economic inequities in the world, and invites readers to think critically about immigration and global capitalism, which can be traced back to the heyday of European colonialism.

The ways in which the text's formal disjunctures highlight the geographical and psychological fragmentations triggered by diasporic journeys can be seen in the novel's juxtaposition of two parallel stories: the first recounts the demands of the Nepali-Indian minority for statehood in the Himalayan town of Kalimpong during the mid-1980s, while the second follows the trials and tribulations of Biju, an Indian illegal immigrant in the USA, where he joins a transnational labour force toiling in the basement kitchens of New York City's ethnic restaurants. Ostensibly disconnected, the two narratives are linked by issues of class and ethnic minority status in both national and diasporic contexts: the Nepalis' insurgency in India and Biju's illegal sojourn in the USA are spurred by a desire to redress the power imbalances between rich and poor Indians, and between ethnic majority and minority groups. To these two threads, Desai adds the story of Judge Jemubhai Patel, who travels to England as a youth in colonial times and returns home as an Anglicized Indian. The Judge's and Biju's diasporic travels underscore the historical

continuities between colonial and neoliberal times as well as the ways in which postcolonial subjects and economic migrants feel marginalized in the Global North. Yet, because the Judge and Biju are separated by class and legal status, their experiences and opportunities in their host countries are very different.

Through a narrative structure that scrambles time and scale, Desai evokes the experience of dispersion that diaspora exemplifies. Readers are thus compelled to “migrate” textually between different narrative threads and interweave India, England, and the USA as well as colonialism, nationalism, and globalization. By depicting diasporic and immigrant Others in several national as well as transnational contexts, the novel also asks audiences to imagine the illegal immigrant, the foreigner, and the stranger, and to find ways of accommodating them in the nation-state. In this way, the novel opens up questions of ethical responsiveness and responsibility by placing readers and critics in empathetic subject positions and compelling them to make transnational connections. But empathy and cross-cultural conversations are characteristics that are also shared by contemporary discourses on cosmopolitanism. Because of the possibility of such transnational conversations among the members of the cross-ethnic diaspora that Desai theorizes, *The Inheritance of Loss* should also be read as a cosmopolitan novel that intertwines colonial and neo-imperial histories and delineates a global consciousness reminiscent of older cosmopolitan ideals of world citizenship.

From diaspora to cosmopolitanism

As an ideal of border crossing and interconnectedness, cosmopolitanism dates back to early efforts by Cynic and Stoic philosophers to create world citizens who would endeavour to establish connections and conversations based on their shared humanity. Cosmopolitanism has been dismissed as naïve particularly in its ancient Greek and Enlightenment forms, seen as representing an abstract ideal denoting detachment from local affiliations and attachment to humanity as a whole. As critics have argued, the histories of colonialism, slavery, and neo-imperialism have invalidated philosophical ideals such as Immanuel Kant’s project for perpetual peace (see Kant, 2003; Cheah, 1998b: 291; Gilroy, 2004: 4). Furthermore, contemporary globalization and the resurgence of nationalism since the end of the Cold War have called for a revival of the concept of cosmopolitanism. Recent theorizations have situated it within the context of global capitalism and defined it as “a political practice” (Pollock et al., 2002: 1) and as “a critical or emancipatory project of a global consciousness” (Cheah, 1998b: 291). One of the major challenges was indeed to make this universal ideal of rationality and progress applicable to local contexts. Hence the proliferation of terms denoting “actually existing cosmopolitanisms” (Robbins, 1998: 1): that is, plural and localized forms such as “rooted” (Appiah, 1998: 91), “discrepant” (Clifford, 1998: 369), “minoritarian” (Pollock et al., 2002: 6), “vulgar” or “demotic” (Gilroy, 2004: 67), and “plebeian” (Brennan, 1997: 39) cosmopolitanism – to name just a few.⁴

All these terms have in common the idea that the new cosmopolitanism has lost its connotations of social and economic privilege, encompassing now the experiences of subaltern subjects. As Pollock et al. state, “Refugees, peoples of the diaspora, and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitical community” (2002: 6). Yet

one should be sceptical about dismissing cosmopolitanism's notoriously elitist character too easily and regarding "the 'immigrant as global cosmopolitan,' carrier of some liberal and liberated hybridity" (Wilson, 1998: 352).⁵ As less celebratory views pointed out, the concept is too abstract and detached to have commensurable political effects such as political rights for immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, while it also underestimates the power of nation-states to shape cultural identities (Brennan, 1997; Malcolmson, 1998). Furthermore, cosmopolitan openness towards foreigners and curiosity about their cultures does not succeed in changing power imbalances. Whereas cosmopolitanism may have a limited political impact, its aesthetic dimensions, however, offer the possibility of cultivating feelings of empathy and of forging cross-cultural conversations.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, migrant and diasporic characters' actions have indeed a limited transformative potential in their host societies and even within their own diasporic communities. This is due to the fact that Desai cosmopolitanism primarily associates ... with the Indian aristocratic classes, who can afford to experience a feeling of cultural kinship to the world through literary practices that create intertextual connections to authors and texts located elsewhere. By contrast, subaltern immigrants in the USA lack the luxury of such cross-cultural conversations, yet they also experience encounters with difference. In their case, cosmopolitanism should be construed not as "a cultural disposition" that views distant cultures as possibilities for personal enrichment, but rather as a feeling of empathy for and openness towards the Other (Tomlinson, 1999: 185).

This second model of cosmopolitanism that emerges from Desai's novel recalls Anthony Appiah's notion of conversation as a cosmopolitan ideal that demands that one to empathize with the stranger. In *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), Appiah uses conversation as a metaphor for imaginative engagement with the experience and ideas of others, whose ultimate aim is to develop "habits of coexistence" (2006: xix) with "particular strangers" (2006: 98). Although Appiah advocates shared values as a basis for sympathy and solidarity, he does not offer a clear portrait of the stranger, of situations when the stranger is real, rather than imaginary, and of how one could carry on conversations with others, defuse conflicts, and bridge differences. *The Inheritance of Loss* depicts precisely such situations and underscores the difficulty of carrying on conversation with Others in the context of a shared history of political violence. For example, upon meeting a Pakistani co-worker in one of the ethnic kitchens in New York, Biju, an Indian immigrant, finds that "he could not talk straight to the man; every molecule of him felt fake, every hair on him went on alert. / *Desis* against Pakis. / Ah, old war, best war" (Desai, 2006: 25).⁶ The Indian-Pakistani conflict runs deep; yet despite Appiah's underestimation of the potential for conflict with strangers and Elaine Scarry's reminder that "our capacity to imagine other people is very small" (1996: 103), Desai's novel offers a version of Paul Gilroy's "demotic" cosmopolitanism based on "mundane encounters with difference" in contemporary multicultural societies (2004: 67). Whereas Gilroy is optimistic about this bottom-up approach that places value on ordinary exposure to otherness, Desai contends that cosmopolitan "contact zones"⁷ should be viewed as sites of contamination, negotiation, and conflict, and not simply as opportunities for inter-ethnic conversation (Pratt, 1992: 4).

From a perspective emerging from such contact zones, *The Inheritance of Loss* narrates encounters between individual and collective subjects in local, national, and

transnational situations. The novel draws parallels between the lives of destitute peoples in different parts of the world, offering readers an enlarged, cosmopolitan perspective on historical interconnections. The representation of disenfranchised lives – whether they are viewed as subaltern, native, minority, or immigrant – in a literary work by a diasporic writer living in the Global North poses a dilemma that, however, can be instructive in our understanding of Desai's diasporic subjectivity and its effect on her novel. In a discussion of nineteenth-century literary texts by both British and South Asian women in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that “[a]ttempts to construct the “Third World Woman” as a signifier remind us that the hegemonic definition of literature is itself caught within the history of imperialism” (1999: 131). Even a work that is “critical of imperialism” cannot “turn the other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been an incommensurable and discontinuous other that consolidates the imperialist self” (1999: 130, original emphasis). It would seem, then, that any metropolitan literary project that tries to inaugurate a full minority or immigrant self in the fullness of its lived experience and historical condition is bound to fail, unless, as Spivak cautions, we modify the framework within which we understand the production and reception of the text. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said too argues that one should view the “discrepant experiences” of colonizers and colonized subjects with the awareness that literary genealogies are a product of imperial histories and that there is a striking asymmetry in the ways colonial history is perceived in the centre and the periphery (1993: 32). As he puts it, “in one instance, we assume that the better part of history in colonial territories was a function of the imperial intervention”, whereas in the other, we equally assume that “colonial undertakings were marginal and perhaps even eccentric to the central activities of great metropolitan cultures” (1993: 35). Said further contends that the juxtaposition of discrepant experiences is a strategy that, by “mak[ing] concurrent those views”, underscores their discrepancy even more, revealing the power and continuing influence of imperial legacies (1993: 33).

The Inheritance of Loss, which interweaves colonialism, nationalism, diaspora, and globalization, has done more than recovering or representing the lives of people who have lived and are living in these historical forces and socio-cultural formations. As a “postcolonial subject” who tries to “resist a mere celebration of global hybridity”, Desai “anthropologize[s] the heritage of the Euro-United States more deliberately” (Spivak, 1999: 157). This account of Desai's writing helps us understand the idea of inheritance in the novel's title not as an unquestioning embrace of Euro-American history and values, but as a critical reading of its continuing effects in our contemporary world marked by inequalities, suffering, and loss on psychic, social, and cultural levels. Desai's novel requires what Spivak calls a “deconstructive reading” that “does not privilege the text of life as an obligatory object of investigation” and compels the reader to understand that “it [the process of reading] is part of the text being read, written otherwise and elsewhere” (1999: 154). Such a deconstructive reading does not, as some critics of theory might assume, privilege a transcendent or detached readerly or writerly position, but instead engenders what Rajini Srikanth terms “a reticulate consciousness”, that is, “an awareness of oneself as part of an extensive network of the globe's inhabitants” (2004: 10). While “a ready cosmopolitanism can be an alibi for geopolitics” that is complicit with the

exploitation of global capital, Desai's diasporic subjectivity, expressed through her novel, sets up reticulate connections to multiple social and cultural texts being written otherwise and elsewhere (Spivak, 1999: 419).

Kiran Desai as a diasporic South Asian writer⁸

Kiran Desai belongs to cosmopolitan elites in both her home and host society, and this places her at a remove from the lives of the downtrodden she seeks to represent, in both senses of the word (Spivak, 1994: 70). As the creation of a privileged, rather than subaltern voice, her novel functions, at least on one level, as a cultural commodity that caters to literary tastes and demands in the Global North, making available unfamiliar local cultures and experiences, but in a language recognizable to Western audiences. Therefore, far from attempting to recuperate Desai's writing as solely critical of global hegemonic structures, I view it within the context of both the resurgence of interest in South Asian writing in the last few decades⁹ and its co-optation by a global literary marketplace.¹⁰

Critics have intensely debated the dialectic between complicity in and resistance to the dictates of the global literary market¹¹ in the case of South Asian diasporic writers such as Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Michael Ondaatje, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Desai. In *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001) Graham Huggan argues that postcolonial and minority writers capitalize on their "perceived marginality", which they help turn into "a valuable cultural commodity" (2001: viii). In *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2007) Sarah Brouillette takes Huggan's argument further, contending that postcolonial authors actively participate in the construction of their literary identities, while also displaying anxiety about the commodification of their works. Although Huggan and Brouillette insist that postcolonial authors are not merely co-opted by a literary market that fetishizes their difference, but also critical of it by self-reflexively representing this phenomenon in their works, they do not acknowledge the extent to which self-reflexivity itself may be a narrative strategy that leads to postcolonial writers' critical and commercial success.

The Inheritance of Loss is a self-consciously diasporic novel, but that is precisely where its critical intervention can be located. While Desai's novel does not have immediately visible social and political effects,¹² it nonetheless intervenes in debates on diaspora and cosmopolitanism at the level of genre and readership. Desai re-conceptualizes the Indian diaspora not only in relation to different diasporic groups but also in the context of global capitalism. She historicizes her Indian protagonists' diasporic journeys to highlight the parallels between Indian diasporas in the colonial past and in the neoliberal present, showing how late capitalism, like colonialism before it, operates along a similar logic of exclusion of the racial other. To this end, the novel juxtaposes three types of Indian diasporas. The first diaspora, of indentured labour – which is marked by the displacement of Indian indentured labourers to the Caribbean and East and South Africa during British colonialism (Mishra, 1996: 422) – is exemplified when Biju learns that the Indian diaspora is scattered not only in the Middle East, but also in Guyana, Trinidad, Madagascar, and elsewhere (24). The second is the post-1965 diaspora, characterized by mobility and represented by Indian college students in New York. Biju, who is a low-caste member of the third, contemporary labour diaspora, briefly crosses paths with

them – an episode that shows that poverty, class, and migration in South Asian contexts are closely linked.

By offering a complex view of the Indian diaspora, Desai expands the generic boundaries of Indian and South Asian writing in English.¹³ She depicts trans-temporal and cross-ethnic diasporas in terms of what Rhacel Parreñas and Lok Siu term “collective consciousness and connectivity with other people displaced from the homeland across the diasporic terrain” (2007: 1-2). Her novel aims to “make concurrent”, in Said’s words, these different views and diasporic experiences in order to highlight more easily the context of transnational capitalism (1993: 33). *The Inheritance of Loss*, which is self-consciously diasporic in form, should be read with more than one location in mind by its discrepant audiences in ways that necessarily engender awareness of global interconnections as well as asymmetries.

Kiran Desai’s own sense of being a South Asian writer living in the diaspora, emotionally indebted to both India and the United States, helps us understand her struggle with the overall structure of *The Inheritance of Loss*, which is ostensibly propelled by affective associations, rather than a carefully crafted plot. As Desai states, “I had no idea how to structure this book. [...] The emotional parallels and historical parallels draw the narrative forward” (Donadio, 2008: 172). Through the novel’s circular structure and constant flashbacks that illuminate the lives of the protagonists in the present, Desai suggests that immigration cannot be represented as a teleological movement of progress from home to host country, which ends with the protagonists’ successful assimilation. The novel’s deliberately fluid spatial and temporal structure is thus an effective mode of showing that immigration has far too often been rendered in linear ways and that an alternative mode of representation is through disconnected narratives.

As a broken journey, immigration thus requires a mode of narration that vacillates between visions of the wholeness of home and the fragmentation of immigrant subjects and diasporic communities in the hostland. Desai herself recognizes what she calls a loss of “a vision of wholeness” inherent in her own diasporic journey from India to England and the USA (Wachtel, 2007: 99). The implications for her writing about transnational issues are that “[she] would have half-stories and quarter-stories, but [she] wouldn’t have a whole story in that entirely contained single world” (Wachtel, 2007: 99). Desai’s writing a novel about Indians both at home and abroad entailed her physical and thematic return to India to tell the other half of the story, which was incomplete “without India” (Donadio, 2008: 168). Moreover, her own diasporic subjectivity turned out to be only the starting point to a larger perspective involving her immediate and extended family “traveling back and forth between India and the Western world”, such that “the book quickly took [her] back to India and made [her] feel much more Indian” in unexpected ways (Donadio, 2008: 168). Desai’s abiding familial, social, and cultural connections to India – together with her novel’s representation and interrogation of Indian national and transnational identities – correspond to important features of diasporic communities and subjectivities noted by other scholars (Tölölyan, 1996). For Desai, diaspora and immigration remain incomplete narratives without their contextualization as the outcome of historical forces such as British colonialism and American neo-imperialism, which help explain the formation of Indian diasporic groups in the UK and the USA.

Desai underscores the notion of historical legacies between the colonial past and the neocolonial present by relating form and content synecdochically. The juxtaposition between the Nepali diaspora in India and the Indian diaspora in the USA prompts readers' reflection on the historical patterns inherent in past and present migrations and the material histories of diasporic groups. Readers are invited to shuttle between the novel's different times and locales and, through this act of cultural translation, to understand the present through the perspective of the past, and view India via its relation to England and the USA and vice versa. The text's fragmented structure thus forges an awareness of the nation-state as part of a larger geopolitical configuration. Through its structure, plot, and the central trope of borders, the novel tells a shared, global story of displacement and dispossession.

The messy map versus the glorious orb: *The Inheritance of Loss*

The Inheritance of Loss examines geographical, socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and religious borders. By exploring the ways in which the protagonists attempt to draw, maintain, and dismantle borders, the novel challenges rigid constructions of citizenship that rely on ideas of cultural authenticity and ethnic purity. In one narrative thread, for example, Desai depicts postcolonial India via political events taking place in Kalimpong, a small Himalayan town during the mid-1980s. The insurgent nationalism of the Indian-Nepalis, who are "fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority" enables her to map the pervasive effects of both colonialism and globalization (10). The Nepalis' claim to an independent state, which existed in reality but did not result in the creation of Gorkhaland, is predicated on a quest for cultural purity and authenticity – that is, on a violent disassociation of the local Nepalis from the elite of Westernized Indians. However, while Nepalis pit notions of purity against Anglicized Indians' contamination by the Global North, they also use a Western cultural imaginary to construct their national identity. The Nepalis, depicted as "these unleashed Bruce Lee fans in their American T-shirts made-in-China-coming-in-via-Kathmandu" are "mostly just boys, taking their style from Rambo", who mimic Hollywood movie heroes (173; 323-24). Their quest for a homeland is thus interwoven with a search for masculinity and adulthood and couched in terms of a U.S.-based culture industry. By showing the extent to which Nepali identity is mediated by global cultural circuits, the novel parodies claims to pure spaces and whole identities. Such claims are inconceivable in a region where the Indian-Nepalis' identity is inextricably linked to that of the Nepalis across the border. As one character puts it: "It's an issue of a porous border is what. You can't tell one from the other, Indian Nepali from Nepali Nepali" (144). The novel satirizes the Nepalis' futile attempt to draw neat identitarian or geographical borders in a territory where, historically, borders have been constantly redrawn by successive powers-that-be:

Here, where India blurred into Bhutan and Sikkim ... it had always been a messy map. [...] A great amount of warring, betraying, bartering had occurred; between Nepal, England, Tibet, India, Sikkim, Bhutan; Darjeeling, stolen from here, Kalimpong plucked from there – despite, ah, despite the mist charging down like a dragon, dissolving, undoing, making ridiculous the drawing of borders. (10)

In attempting to define themselves in culturally authentic and pure terms, the Nepalis overlook the fact that they themselves constitute a labour diaspora closely connected to a history of British colonialism. They seek to create a map based on the containment of space in a territory that has been, in turn, colonized by the British, disputed by neighbouring states, and recently penetrated by Western culture. By satirizing the Nepalis' map-making attempts, the novel suggests that diasporic self-definition needs to take into account a larger context, in this case, colonial and regional politics. With a history of colonialism and immigration to the Global North, Kalimpong is a heterogeneous place that refuses to be captured in monolithic or authentic ways, by way of strict references to either local traditions and vernacular cultures or a detached, cosmopolitan subjectivity.

If evocative descriptions of lush landscapes and regional food add local flavour to the narrative, the English language and culture are a strongly felt presence as well. This is evident in a passage that employs English and Hindi signifiers to suggest the double reality Sai Mistry, Judge Patel's granddaughter, is acquainted with in her Westernized convent education: "cake was better than *laddoos*, fork spoon knife better than hands ... English better than Hindi" (33). As Sai learns, English and vernacular languages and cultures represent hierarchical yet coexisting facets of Kalimpong and, by implication, India. Desai's portrayal of the imbrication between local and Western cultures and languages points precisely to this hybrid reality, which is also a linguistic reality for diasporas.

The tension between local and global cultures is further explored through the depiction of an anachronistic Anglophile elite. On the higher end of the hierarchical scale is the misanthropic Judge Patel, whose admiration for the English and contempt for the Indians render him "a foreigner in his own country" (32). His internalization of English superiority, which prevents him from forming meaningful bonds during his study years in England in the 1940s and continues to inform his life upon his return to postcolonial India, has transformed him into an ambivalent subject with "the fake English accent and the face powdered pink and white over dark brown" (193). The Judge lives with his granddaughter and his cook in a house that is a remnant of colonialism, having been built by a Scotsman through the exploitation of poor Indians. As an English- rather than Hindi-speaker, Sai has inherited the Judge's Anglophilia, being "an estranged Indian living in India", unable to communicate fluently with the cook: "their friendship composed of shallow things conducted in a broken language" (230; 21). Whereas access to the English language situates Sai within a small class of Anglophiles, it also leads her to a revelatory encounter with texts that makes her see herself through colonizers' eyes.

If, as a marker of identity, language denotes Sai's social privilege, literature also assists her in her identity quest. Sai is an avid reader who explores travel accounts in India and old issues of the *National Geographic*, which portray exotic places, in order to locate herself in a world that operates by power asymmetries. Such travel narratives bring her to the realization that she is a product of colonialism: "certain moves made long ago had produced all of them: Sai, judge, Mutt, cook" (217-18). Furthermore, an excerpt from *The Indian Gentleman's Guide to Etiquette* unsettles Sai's identification with Englishness by alluding to the racial inferiority of Indians to Europeans. Despite Sai's pretense of superiority, the *Guide* interpellates her as the racial other: "Although you may have acquired the habits and manners of the European ... identify yourself with the

race to which you belong” (218). Sai’s discovery of power imbalances is, however, tempered by Desai’s wry humour, which is an effective narrative technique that renders the notion of postcolonial identities and legacies more palatable. For example, in mapping Biju’s journey to the USA on her *National Geographic* Inflatable Globe, Sai tells Biju’s father that “somewhere on this glorious orb was Biju” (20). When she attempts to explain to the cook “why it was night there when it was day here”, he finds it “strange that India went first with the day, a funny back-to-front fact that didn’t seem mirrored by any other circumstance involving the two nations” (20). Sai’s inflatable globe symbolizes the power of globalization to penetrate even the remotest corners of the world and to trigger the dispersal of immigrant populations to metropolitan centres.

Because Sai reads the globe with an enlarged perspective in mind and seeks to transcend national and racial borders, she is a figure for the novel’s cosmopolitan – that is, engaged, activist – readers, who pay attention to differences and forge conversations across different spaces and cultures. In contrast to Sai’s engaged consciousness, the Indian sisters Lola and Noni evince a romanticized sensibility that blinds them to the harsh lives of the Nepalis from Kalimpong. The sisters’ Westernized way of life, which consists of living in a French-named cottage *Mon Ami*, importing British products, reading English-language fiction, and listening to the BBC, betrays their foreignness in Kalimpong, which they treat as a barbaric place in need of civilization. The sisters conceive of themselves as romantic adventurers in a wild and exotic landscape, much like the characters in the travel narratives that they too read. They are passionate consumers of epic accounts of British-Indian history, such as M. M. Kaye’s *The Far Pavilions*, and of the end of the British Raj, such as Paul Scott’s *The Raj Quartet*. They equally enjoy Anthony Trollope, “all of Jane Austen”, as well as Amit Chaudhuri and “Mahashveta Devi, translated by Spivak” (50; 239). They read books written by both Indian and English authors, but they prefer writers who identify with their place of origin to those who explore foreign topics and territories: “they didn’t like English writers writing about India; [...] it didn’t correspond to the truth. English writers writing of England was what was nice” (217). Reading *A Bend in the River*, Lola considers V. S. Naipaul “strange. Stuck in the past. [...] Colonial neurosis, he’s never freed himself from it”, while Noni wonders, “After all, why isn’t he writing of where he lives now? Why isn’t he taking up, say, race riots in Manchester?” (52). The sisters critique Naipaul for dwelling too much on colonial subject-matter rather than embracing Englishness, but they miss the irony that they are not unlike a certain vision of Naipaul, stuck on notions of India as a backward country and of English culture as that which could redeem them from Kalimpong. For Desai, however, Naipaul is a positive authorial figure and one of her decisive literary models, who has woven together the shared experiences of colonized people from Africa, Latin America and Asia, showing the destructive effects of dominant powers on smaller countries.

As readers of both English fiction and Indian authors who write in or are translated into English by postcolonial critics, Lola and Noni could also be viewed as members of Desai’s audience who are wholeheartedly invested in the consumption of authentic English and Indian cultures. On the one hand, Desai satirizes an Indian readership obsessed with the Romantic notion of native culture, because this view associates writers’ identity with their place of origin, calling into question the authenticity of Indian

writers residing abroad. On the other, the sisters' exoticization of local culture also serves as a warning against Western readers' own tendency to regard Indian literary texts as opportunities for cultural enrichment, while disregarding the material histories that produced them. The romanticizing of the diasporic subject is perhaps an unintended consequence of cultural theories of diaspora that privilege mobility and hybridity over the material difficulties faced by diasporic individuals and communities, a pitfall that the novel eschews successfully.

The text's preoccupation with re-drawing maps and reading the globe invites reflection on possible ways of being in the world for diasporic subjects shaped by hegemonic and global forces. The protagonists who engage in acts of reading the nation-state as well as the wider world represent various models of subjectivity. Yet neither the nationalist claims of the Nepali-Indian minority for an independent state and authentic culture nor the Indian sisters' embrace of Western culture and blindness to the socio-economic inequalities in Kalimpong are apposite self-defining and self-locating strategies, as they privilege either national or global formations. By contrast, the novel favours a diasporic consciousness embodied by Sai, who reads the nation as always already embedded politically and culturally in the world, and who acknowledges the effects of global powers on small nations.¹⁴ Because of her awareness of such local-global dialectics, Sai can be viewed as Desai's narrative consciousness, as she attempts to draw parallels between minority subjects across nation-states, in the spirit of Srikanth's networked consciousness and Naipaul's work.

If, in one narrative strain, Desai maps India's relations to its nationalistic diasporic groups and the transnational aspirations of its elite, in her U.S.-based narrative, she explores the contact zones between different ethnic and diasporic subjects. Such horizontal relations represent an alternative to mainstream assimilation, diasporic community formation, and nostalgic constructions of the homeland for illegal immigrants. Yet these are fragile and fraught relations, governed by the unequal distribution of global capital, which triggers the break-up of community ties: "You lived intensely with others, only to have them disappear overnight, since the shadow class was condemned to movement" (112). In highlighting the precarious lives of illegal immigrants, Desai contends that mobility is a dream that is unavailable to labour diasporas, who may easily cross geographical borders, but not socio-economic ones. The novel thus debunks the myth of the USA as a land of opportunity for postcolonial immigrants who undergo not only racial discrimination, but also economic exploitation within their own diasporic communities. In addressing the economic and social aspects of immigration and diaspora in the USA, rather than simply racism against ethnic minorities and diasporic communities, the novel stresses an underemphasized view of the postcolonial USA¹⁵ as deeply implicated in the workings of transnational capitalism – a point that Jenny Sharpe raises in her discussion of the postcolonial nature of the USA. Sharpe defines the postcolonial in the context of the USA as "the point at which internal social relations intersect with global capitalism and the international division of labour" (2000: 106). She strongly critiques postcolonial definitions of the USA that take into account only its status as a white settler colony, the post-civil rights struggles against racism, and the presence of immigrants and racial minorities in the wake of decolonization, without heeding its emergence as a neocolonial power. In this respect, *The Inheritance of Loss* shows that immigrant and

diasporic individuals and communities in the USA are closely tied to the global networks of inequality that have given rise to them. The novel's representation of the ways in which diaspora engages with the nation shows us how both social formations are embedded within a larger postcolonial framework.

Not surprisingly, Desai's immigrant protagonists are no cosmopolitan readers. For illegal residents, cosmopolitanism remains an unattainable ideal. In their experience, New York City is not what Jacques Derrida calls a "city of refuge", which is governed by the laws of hospitality and where illegal immigrants may find sanctuary, but rather a city of overcrowded basements and minimal wages – and this, in itself, represents a particular kind of cultural experience that encourages vernacular forms of cosmopolitan engagements (2001: 160). Because immigrants' shared experience of poverty and marginality prevents them from entering their own ethnic communities that are economically fragmented, they become part of a transnational and cross-ethnic labour class. Yet diasporic protagonists' nationalist investments and reliance on national stereotypes render difficult such transnational and cross-ethnic solidarities. For example, upon his arrival in the USA, Biju is simultaneously confronted with the global dispersal of Indians and the Indophobic attitudes it engenders: "From other kitchens, he was learning what the world thought of Indians: / In Tanzania, if they could, they would throw them out like they did in Uganda. / In Madagascar, if they could, they would throw them out", and the same treatment applies to Indians in Nigeria, Fiji, China, Hong Kong, Germany, Italy, Japan, Guam, Singapore, Burma, South Africa, and Guadeloupe (86-7). What is missing from this list is not only the Indian diaspora of the East and South Pacific, but also that of North and South America. This omission is presumably due to received images of the highly educated, socially mobile post-1965 Indian diasporics in the USA. Biju's awareness of this elite diaspora, which is inaccessible to him because he cannot cross class and caste barriers, complicates his sense of the pervasiveness and contiguity of Indian diasporic communities.

The way in which the Indian diaspora in the USA is fragmented along lines of capital is delineated in the split identity of the protagonists. For instance, the hyphenated names of *desis* such as Harish-Harry, Dhansukh-Danny, Gaurish-Gary, and Jayant-Jay suggest "a deep rift" in their identity and the ambivalence of living between two cultures (164). In the case of Harish-Harry, such double-consciousness is opportunistic, as he "tried to be loyal to so many things that he himself couldn't tell which one of his selves was the authentic, if any" (164). Ironically enough, Harish-Harry displays a bicultural identity, but he fails to embrace cultural diversity in practice. In running his Gandhi Café, "an all-Hindu establishment. No Pakistanis, no Bangladeshis", he deliberately excludes other South Asian diasporic peoples and exploits even Indian illegals like Biju, thus endorsing a parochial definition of diasporic identity and community (155). As Pnina Werbner explains, diasporics can also "support ethnicist, nationalistic, and exclusionary movements" (2000: 6). Because he insists on patriotic connections with his homeland, Harish-Harry exemplifies the parochial nationalism characteristic of some diasporic subjects. His attitude echoes the claims to ethnic purity of the Nepali diaspora in India and contrasts with the multiethnic diaspora to which Biju belongs.

The economic imbalances between *desis* and illegal Indians are underscored by the gaps between American patrons and illegal immigrants working in the kitchens of

Manhattan's ethnic restaurants. These disparities are translated into the hierarchical structure of these restaurants, where colonial centre and periphery exist as two sides of the same coin: "Above, the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian. And, when a Paki was hired, it was Mexican, Indian, Pakistani" and "On top, rich colonial, and down below, poor native. Colombian, Tunisian, Ecuadorian, Gambian" (23). The iterative language underscores that the presence of black and brown illegal workers in the Global North is an ongoing phenomenon, while also suggesting the expendable nature of transnational labour. But this language of accumulation fails to reveal the relationships between diasporic subjects of different ethnic backgrounds, who replicate East-West divides. For example, upon meeting a Pakistani immigrant, Biju falls back on national stereotypes and allows the India-Pakistan conflict to interfere in their friendship. But when he encounters Saeed Saeed, a Muslim immigrant from Zanzibar, whom he admires for his buoyancy and ability to sabotage immigration laws, Biju is forced to reconsider his relation to difference: "Saeed was kind and he was not Paki. Therefore he was OK? [...] Therefore he liked Saeed, but hated the general lot of Muslims? [...] Therefore there was nothing wrong with black people ...? Or Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese, or anyone else ...???" (85-6). In confronting his own racial prejudices, Biju discovers that, in spite of the racial and religious differences that separate him from his fellow immigrants, they all share the experience of struggling with the effects of colonization and racialization in the USA. Biju's newly found inter-ethnic bond raises the ethical and political questions of how to relate to diasporic others. Therefore, the novel's cosmopolitan project is to conceive of diaspora networks despite, or because of, tenuous inter-ethnic bonds. Desai's portrayal of Indian immigrants in New York City is a starting point for enlarging diasporas' borders through thinking about other disenfranchised ethnic subjects, and thus for conceptualizing broader cosmopolitan engagements in the age of global capitalism.

As the novel's ending seems to suggest, the answer to these ethical and political questions hinges on the protagonists' class status and cultural capital. Torn between his realization that he will live a precarious life as an immigrant worker in the USA and his desire to reconnect to his family, Biju returns to India in the final pages of the novel. His decision, however, is based on a romanticized image of India as the place where he could retrieve the plenitude he had lost through immigration. By returning to Kalimpong, Biju hopes to put an end to diasporic displacement, which condemns immigrants like him to "have their hearts always in other places, their minds thinking about people elsewhere; they could never be in a single existence at one time" (342). Biju's return to India sharply contrasts with Sai's realization that India is too small a place for her, that her life will be comprised of many complex intersecting narratives and anchored in many locations: "Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own mean little happiness and live safely within it", especially when there was an entire "globe twirling on its axis" (355-6). Sai's awareness of global travel is accompanied by her responsibility for and world-scale engagement with Others – acts which, as a migrant worker, Biju finds difficult to perform. Whereas Sai feels she belongs to a larger world, Biju's diasporic consciousness is one of exclusion and discrimination.

The ending, which juxtaposes Biju's and Sai's movements back to and away from the nation-state, underscores once more the deep rift that characterizes Desai's ideological

view of immigration and diaspora. She warns readers against exclusively celebratory views of diaspora, as narratives of elite and labour migrations should not be collapsed. At the same time, Biju's and Sai's contrasting perspectives on transnational journeys, and on the nation-state as both a place of refuge and of departure for larger spaces, represent two halves of the same phenomenon. In other words, Desai contends that when we think of diaspora in the present global context, we should envision not only the possibilities for aesthetic self-invention, but also the costs of dislocation. Her novel engenders awareness of power asymmetries inherent in global capitalism and encourages cosmopolitan reading practices that heed the discrepant material histories of immigrant and diasporic groups. Yet by reserving the promise of future travel and wider vision to Sai, a member of India's elite – rather than to Biju, a destitute immigrant – Desai also underscores that there are obstacles to transnational mobility. The novel thus at once asserts the significance of transnational connectivities and displays self-awareness about the limits of cosmopolitan border crossing.

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Notes

1. For an overview of diaspora studies and the field's new directions, see Braziel and Mannur, (2006) and Parreñas and Siu (2007).
2. Some diaspora scholars celebrate the cultural possibilities offered by diasporic movements. For example, James Clifford discusses culture in terms of "routes" that enable cross-border and cross-cultural movement (1997: 6) and uses the metaphor of "travel" to refer to movements as diverse as diaspora, immigration, tourism, pilgrimage, and exile (1997: 11). Paul Gilroy describes Black Atlantic cultures in terms of "hybridity, creolization and rootlessness" and as the outcome of transnational structures of circulation and intercultural exchange established long ago (1992: 199). Stuart Hall defines cultural identities as a continuous "positioning" that eschews the notion of cultural essence and fixed identity (1990 [2006]: 237), whereas Arjun Appadurai describes new models for the circulation of culture in terms of scapes, flows, and cascades (1996).
3. Contemporary South Asian diasporic authors – such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Meena Alexander, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Kiran Desai, among others – form a highly heterogeneous corpus. Their literary visions range from assimilationary desires (Bharati Mukherjee), to diasporic, anti-assimilationary self-positionings (Meena Alexander), to critiques of globalization and the Global North (Arundhati Roy). Their works often function ambivalently as both critical of and complicit in dominant structures of power and privilege.
4. For a compelling study that discusses non-Eurocentric and non-contemporary forms of cosmopolitanism, see Breckenridge et al. (2002).
5. For views that criticize the conflation of transnational migration with cosmopolitanism see Cheah (1998a: 37) and Brennan (1997).
6. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
7. I am indebted to Mary Louise Pratt's term that denotes "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (1992: 4). However, by diasporic "contact zones", I understand the

interactions not between the colonizers and the colonized, or Europeans and South Asians, but between immigrants, diasporics, and ethnic minorities.

8. As a writer, Kiran Desai belongs both to the Indian diaspora and, more broadly, the South Asian diaspora in the USA. The label “Indian writing in English” is sometimes used interchangeably with and “hegemonically references all South Asian writing in English” (Ghosh, 2004: 2). This literary-critical term is problematic because it fails to distinguish between Indian authors who write in English, but are based in different locations. As Shashi Deshpande notes, the label “Indian writing in English” overlooks the fact that Indian writing in English is also one of the literatures of India, albeit a marginal genre. She argues that the global literary marketplace privileges diasporic South Asian authors whose sensibilities and experiences are cosmopolitan (2003: 30-1). The category “South Asian writing in English” homogenizes the different strands of South Asian writing, while South Asia itself – which includes India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives – is a political construct that has meaning for the diaspora, since South Asians on the subcontinent do not define themselves as such, but rather along national, linguistic, and religious lines (Shankar and Srikanth, 1998: 2-3).
9. The resurgence of interest in South Asian writing in English was spurred by the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in 1981 and the 50th anniversary of India’s independence in 1997. Another factor explaining the global success of South Asian diasporic writers may be attributed to changing readerships, increasingly accustomed to mass media images of far-off cultures. For example, while V. S. Naipaul attracted an older kind of cosmopolitan, urban readership who needed to have a sense of (post)colonial history, the younger generation of South Asian diasporic writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri or Chitra Divakaruni appeal to more global and diverse audiences who are somewhat familiar with mass media images of the Other.
10. For a consideration of the conditions that led to the global marketability of South Asian writing in English, see Huggan (2001); Ghosh (2004); and Brouillette (2007).
11. This has been a staple critique of postcolonial, multicultural, and cosmopolitan writers by Spivak (1994); Ahmad (1992); Brennan (1997); and Chow (1998), among others, who underscored the discrepancy between culture and politics, and the extent to which the celebration of ethnic and cultural diversity obscures ongoing racism and class imbalances.
12. Even though *The Inheritance of Loss* is critical of global power relations, it is not politically transformative for immigrant and diasporic subjects. The novel passed smoothly into the critical and commercial markets of Britain and the USA, being widely acclaimed by Anglo-American critics and receiving the Man Booker Prize. At the same time, it was criticized for its misrepresentation of the Nepali minority and exoticization of India for Western audiences. For powerful critiques of Kiran Desai’s complicity in the power structures within which she writes, see Mendes (2009) and Saibaba (2001).
13. *The Inheritance of Loss* diverges from South Asian diasporic fictional works written in the tradition of “claiming America” as home and of asserting South Asian belonging in the USA, by authors such as Bharati Mukherjee and Meena Alexander (Shankar, 2007: 80). For example, although they differ in their professed attachments to the USA, Mukherjee (a self-declared immigrant author in the USA) and Alexander (who prefers the position of an unassimilated diasporic writer) both “claim” America in novels and memoirs such as *Jasmine* (1989) and *The Shock of Arrival* (1996), respectively. In contrast to these two visions of immigration and diaspora as well as other fictional accounts such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and her novel *The Namesake* (2003), which valorize transnational mobility and hybrid diasporic identities, Desai examines the Indian diaspora in the context of global capitalism. She can thus be affiliated to what Bishnupriya Ghosh

- (2004) describes as a body of cosmopolitan South Asian writers such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy, among others, who share ethical and political concerns for subaltern struggles and global power asymmetries. The social and linguistic specificity of their works requires acts of cultural translation on the part of non-Indian readers, who are “borne across” cultures and languages and compelled to imagine transnational connections (Ghosh, 2004: 12). Like *The Inheritance of Loss*, these fictional works are at once co-opted by the global literary market and resistant to the metaphorization of the material histories of subalterns.
14. Nations in the Global South, such as India and Nepal, also replicate the power asymmetries between neo-imperial powers and smaller countries. In this sense, India is in a position to Orientalize Nepal as much as both India and Nepal are Orientalized by Western powers.
 15. The postcolonial status of the USA has been much debated, given its ambivalent position as both a former British-ruled settler colony and a part of the global capitalist core. For debates about the adequacy of using postcolonial lenses to describe the contemporary USA, see King (2000). For an examination of the relations between postcolonial studies and U.S. ethnic studies see Singh and Schmidt (2000).

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