

## Devising Neoteric Strategies to Teach Diasporic Fictions

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**Abstract:** *Literature extrapolates the full spectrum of human experience: aspirations, doubts, passions, heroism, faith and so much more. Literature has a unique function in shaping and teaching society at large. Literary fictions are portrayals of the thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in the society. They are treasure-trove of human experience. Literary fictions are the food for thought and tonic for imagination and creativity. The purpose of education is to grow and comprehend the complexity of the world and its people. Exposing an individual to literary fictions can elevate him/her to grow as an individual with heights of interpersonal skills which is the need of the hour.*

*We are at an age of 'videoacy' rather than 'literacy'. In today's fast-paced life style, students are intrigued by the visual arts (dramas and films) than by literary fictions. But these Medias with complete negation of literature may lead to mimicry of the hackneyed expressions rather than avant-gardism. This article outlines the pedagogical paradigms to explore diasporic fictions in literature class rooms. It combines traditional literature teaching with 'research-led' and 'student-centered' creative teaching methods which can forge emotional intelligence among students.*

**Key Words:** *Diasporic Fiction, emotional intelligence, human experience, Interpersonal skills, pedagogical paradigms,*

### Introduction

Literature is a versatile subject and is generally considered one of the most difficult subjects to teach. This forces the students to rely upon predigested responses and study guides than to relish the literary texts as living works of art. The job of an English teacher is not only to teach the works of art but also to lead the learners to the horizon of literary experience by his/her innovative and creative bent of mind and methodologies.

As Edward Proffitt proclaims, fictions are treasure-trove of human experience, limning "an intimate sense of the inner lives of people, their deepest feelings, their conflicts and confusions, their most secret joys and fears" (Proffitt 31). Fictions can proffer food for thought and tonic for imagination and creativity to its learners. Exposing students to literary fiction can elevate them to grow with social skills to understand the minds of other human beings and their view points. So the teachers need to find creative and smart ways to teach fictions which can forge emotional intelligence among students.

### Importance of teaching and learning diasporic fictions

Multicultural literature offers learners much diverse perspectives as they develop an understanding of various cultures. Due to ever-increasing and expanding global environment, we

believe in emphasizing teaching and learning Diasporic fictions in the class room. Diaspora is a scattering of the seed through foreign soil, the fruits of which are a new creation of hybrid nature, thrive to survive in an alien land. Diaspora is a notion regarding belongings with homeland, identity quest and search for roots, captured through the migrants' experience of displacement. Indian Diasporic Literature is a powerful network of connecting the globe. It serves as an outlet to the pent-up passions, emotions and feelings of displacement from homeland. The themes of cultural and personal identity in diasporic fictions connect the students to greater world view and open doors through ideas and insights of adolescent characters in multicultural backdrop. As members of global society we must make an effort to cross into "unaccustomed" areas of Diasporic fictions. This is why this article endeavours to search out creative methods for teaching Indian Diasporic fictions with illustrations from Kiran Desai's Booker Prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006)

Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* provides a variety of activities through which students can explore and connect with multicultural literature through contextual lens of personal identity. The world that Desai offers to students creates a larger global perspective that extends beyond four walls of the class room. Suasn Landt in his research article rightly opines that students who read about diverse cultures "discover similarities in their own" and "look beyond the differences and take a step toward appreciating cultural connectedness". (682).

### **Exploring Diasporic fictional text: Illustrations from Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* Pre-probe**

Before exploring any fictional text probing into the author's biography and nature of his/her literary work is essential. Adopting innovative ways of introducing the context using related knowledge about author, events and facts can stimulate interest and draw pupils into the book. In the context of teaching Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, the teacher can enquire about Kiran Desai and her winning of Booker prize award for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006. To grab attention of the learners, the teacher can share the following facts : Booker prize award was started in the year 1969; Last year Hillary Mantel got booker prize for her *Bring up the Bodies* (2012) and this year Jumpha Lahiri's *The Low Land* (2013) has been shortlisted for Booker prize. Then the teacher can introduce the fiction in interrogation – when it was written and how many awards it won? Is it adopted into film mode? Then the teacher can tease interest with short statements or extracts from the novel to initiate speculation about the likely contexts, setting and plot of the novel, characters and its capital theme. As the plot and setting is connected with Nepali insurgency in Kalimpong visualizing maps and colourful pictures of Kalimpong and video clips related with Nepali insurgency are tonic for their imagination. Main theme relates the pitiable condition of illegal Indian immigrants in U.S. So the teacher can share the latest news connected with that – "An estimated 2,40,000 Indian immigrants are among 11.5 million foreigners living illegally in the United States without proper immigration documents" (*The Hindu*) to arouse realistic mind picture about setting and theme. Such **Pre-probe** strategies infused with attention grabbers ignite sparks of curiosity among learners.

*Important Characters:* 1. Jemupai Popatlal Patel -retired Indian Judge  
2. Sai - Jemupai's granddaughter  
3. PannaLal- The Judge's cook,

4. Biju- The cook's son,
5. Gyan- Sai's lover

*Setting:* Kalimpong, England and New York - 1980's

*Narrator:* Omniscient narrator

*Plot:* The novel follows the journey of Biju, an illegal immigrant in the US who is trying to make a new life; and Sai, an Anglicized Indian girl living with her grandfather in India

*Capital theme:* The major theme running throughout is one closely related to colonialism and the effects of post-colonialism: the loss of identity and the way it travels through generations as a sense of loss.

### **Post-it note**

Without the whole reading of a novel, we ask the students to analyze it along the way without the ability to understand a work of art in its wholeness. This resembles asking students to interpret a corner of painting. So the teacher can give guidance and schedule for individual reading and group reading of a novel, at home and within a classroom. We could select passages for close reading and pace reading; so key sections can be read in class room and pupils are instigated to read other sections as homework. Showing video clips or listening to audio tapes for some sections can do wonders. Encouragement should be instilled for posting notes in 'reading log' to record plot events and progress with timelines and to note down array of themes and opinions about characters (in their perceptions). In this 'reading log' the movements of the characters like Jemupai Patel and Biju can be drawn on the maps to follow the text closely. Working closely with texts could extend the depth of their understanding of literary techniques, inter-textual connections and comparisons. After whole reading of the novel is completed, discussion and analysis can be initiated among learners with authentic literary experience.

### **Arts within the arts**

The students can be encouraged to use dramatic art to understand the fictional art. For instance an episode like Nepali's insurgency can be adopted in form of drama using the whole class as protagonists. Thus whole events or chapters can be used to base paired/group work A *skit* can be played with amusement to represent the life of anglophile ladies at Kalimpong such as Lola, Noni and Mrs.Sen. To make the students to be thorough with the fictional characters and their traits hot seating can be employed. *Hot seating* is an interesting technique in which each student should take a character to study. Other students can ask questions to him/ her to which the student should answer in character personae. Teacher can devise a way of scoring points, if students catch the speaker out or rewarding those who show most understanding of the character. *Pop quiz* and *Mimes* can also be manipulated for character study. This strategy at initial stage leads us to begin work with close responses to characters and events, and later move on to more abstract issues and themes

### **Think aloud with Re-visioning**

This strategy modifies the literature class room as a place where co-students as well as professors are partners in learning and discussing and where literature is not just delivered but discovered, constructed and disseminated with practical ideas. This emphasizes rereading

strategies that help students move away from linear uncritical reading to interactive modes of reinterpretations by brainstorming with questions such as

1. To what extent does Sai in *The Inheritance of Loss* metamorphose during the course of the novel why does she change?
2. Do you justify Gyan's stand in Nepali's insurgency and his betrayal of Sai?
3. Is Kiran Desai an advocate of globalization?

may increase the analytical skill of students and strengthen them as literary detectives.

### Add fuel to the Fire

There is no room for a unanimous agreement in literature. As Arundhati Roy explains in a speech given in Sep.2002, "there can never be a single story (single interpretation) ... there are only ways of seeing". ("Come September"). The teacher can attempt to provide a new ways of seeing without exposing to a stagnant view of a literary text. The best way to do is to play devil's advocate. When they express a view the teacher can disagree and trigger off an interesting debate with 'heated arguments'. This is also good for waking up the snoozy students at the back. For an instance the teacher can take the following passage to instigate a heated argument:

...and drank whiskey every evening what sort of Muslim nation they have. And five times a day bums up to God ... so strict was the Koran that its teachings were beyond human capability. (*The Inheritance of Loss* 130).

Here Desai digs at the way the Muslims pray to Allah. As it relates with the denigration of a religion the teacher should handle the view points with care.

### Tag biog-backdrop

As the students become familiar with the text, they should be directed to become familiar with the face behind the text: *the writer*. Though a little bit of information about the author may be given in the *Pre-probe*, an in-depth detail about their past and their lives, and some of the documented inspirations behind their literary works can be explored. A lot of very famous writers lived rather tragic and scandalous lives. It is always interesting to know about such **biog-backdrop** and it might embellish more meaning to their words with much comprehension.

There is some resemblance between Jemupai Patel and Desai's paternal grandfather who travelled all the way to England for education and became an itinerant civil service judge and typical of Anglicized, middle-class Indian, somewhat estranged from his native culture. The following excerpt from her interview confirms the same:

My maternal grandmother was German, left before the war and never returned. My grandfather was refugee from Bangladesh. On my father's side, my grandparents came from a village in Gujarat. My grandfather travelled all the way to England for an education. The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is I wanted to capture (<http://www.rediff.com/news/2006/jan/30interla.htm>).

The mansion in the novel was inspired by the house of Desai's aunt, a pediatrician, owns in Kalimpong, which was originally called Chomiomo. Named so after a mountain range, it has been rechristened Cho Oyu in Desai's novel, and is home to its protagonist Sai and her grandfather, Jemubhai Patel. Like Sai, Kiran Desai attended a convent school in Kalimpong. When Kiran Desai grew up in an apartment in New Delhi their Bengali cook made Indian and British colonial-style food. Desai said "I always adored him" and he became the model for the devoted cook in her book *The Inheritance of Loss*. The teacher can hint such biographical touch to kindle the interest of the learners. The following links can be suggested to the students to tag biog-backdrop to the text.

<http://ibnlive.in.com/news/kiran-desai-inherited-triumph/23776-3.html>

[http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2006-10-11/rest-of-world/27830156\\_1\\_kiran-desai-booker-shortlist-anita](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2006-10-11/rest-of-world/27830156_1_kiran-desai-booker-shortlist-anita)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/10/magazine/10food-t.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

### Word Sort

Fictional texts provide rich linguistic input and are potential source of learner's motivation. Variety and versatility of sentence structures, metaphors, similes, idioms and phrases are copiously found in novels. So fiction is a credulous component to boost the linguistic competence of the students. Students can be taught how to group the words through this strategy, which can ameliorate the vocabulary baggage of the learners.

**Sort the words by metaphor:** Kiran Desai is an excellent observer of men and manners and the goings-on of the world are revealed many a time in the novel by plenty of metaphors. Metaphor is the imaginative use of the words or phrases to describe something else and to show that two have the same qualities. The teacher proffers the following examples:

1. When Jemupai orders the GNLF activists to leave his property at once, they laughed "a *movie laugh*" (*The Inheritance of Loss* 5) (emphasis added).
2. Noni, advised Piyali Bannerji daughter of Lola to get off India as early as possible because "India is a *sinking ship*" (47) (emphasis added).
3. When Jemupai Patel came out of school as a knowledgeable, promising young boy even his father had some difficulty to recognize his son because, "in the X-ray flashes of his imagination did he see the *fertile cauliflower* within his son's skull" (59) (emphasis added).

There are hundreds of similes in the novel. These similes express the creative potentiality of Kiran Desai. Simile is a term that traces its origin to the Latin root word, which means 'like'. The teacher lends a helping hand by illustrating few examples to **sort the word by similes** from the text as follows:

1. The Nepali insurgents who come to take the judge's hunting rifles are described as screaming "*like a bunch of school girls*" (*The Inheritance of Loss* 4) (emphasis added).

2. When Jemupai was school kid his mother gave him a tumbler of fresh milk sequined with golden fat. His mother held the tumbler to his lips so “he *reemerged like a whale* from the sea, heaving for breath” (58) (emphasis added).

3. Mom Ami’s vegetable patch is described as a “*hut (that) come up like a mushroom* on a newly cut gash (240) (emphasis added).

Various word sorting activities such as *sort the words by parts of speech*, *sort the words by nature*, *sort the words by immigration*, *sort the words by politics* etc. are other reliable activities to hone linguistic competence through the fictional text.

### To conclude

Literary fictions are portrayals of the thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in the society. They are treasure-trove of human experience. Reading stories can fine-tune social skills by helping the learners for better understanding of fellow beings. Entering imagined worlds builds empathy and improves ability to take another person’s point of view. The more the fiction the students read, the better they can perceive and interpret the social cues. It is the onus of the literary teachers to forge emotional intelligence among students through fiction with neoteric and creative pedagogical paradigms.

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