

Living on the Margins: Diaspora, Identity, and Gender in the Novels of Kiran Desai and Monica Ali

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Article Received: 26/11/2025

Article Accepted: 27/12/2025

Published Online: 28/12/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.12.445

Abstract:

Marginalisation has been the centre of discussion in the academic sphere for the last few decades. It is considered to be a universal phenomenon. Marginalization can be understood as a process of being marginal. In general, the term marginalisation refers to the exclusion of certain groups based on gender, race, culture, and religion in a South Asian context. It can refer to religious minorities, cultural minorities, and women in general.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* present the impact of colonial dominance on the individual psyche, which creates a sort of inferiority complex in them. People enter the belt of marginalisation because of the confrontation between two cultures or their position of in-betweenness. They possess the right to choose the dominant culture living behind their own. They can even choose their own original culture out of fear of domination and exploitation by the dominant culture. This creates a conundrum for those on the margins who choose to live between two cultures. These writers have shed light on marginality, migration, nostalgia, identity, alienation, and displacement. These writers have given a cognizant voice to the sufferings of the diasporas living in hostland and have talked about issues like socio-economic imbalance, absence of education.

This paper traces the marginalisation of South Asians living in America and Europe and the forms of subjectivity that they elaborate as a response. It also discusses the immigrant experiences and marginalisation within the umbrella term of diaspora and the problems the diasporas face in hostland and in their homeland.

Keywords: South Asian, Diaspora, Marginalisation, Homeland, Hostland

Introduction:

Marginalisation is a process by which a group or individual is denied access to important positions and symbols of economic, religious, or political power within a society. (encyclopaedia.com) It can be looked at from various perspectives. People enter the belt of marginalisation because of the confrontation between two cultures or their position of in-

betweenness. They possess the right to choose the dominant culture, leaving behind their own. But by entering a new social structure, they identify themselves with a means to a new bounded entity that will lead to the death of their own identity of origin. They can even choose their own original culture out of fear of domination and exploitation by the dominant culture. As a result of this quandary, the marginals choose to live between two cultures. Collective subjectivity refers to the way that people define their group's essence and represent it to others. The condition of marginality is one of ambiguous belonging. For diasporas, subjectivity grows out of the experience of marginalisation and unstable relations of difference in the dominant society where they currently live. Contemporary South Asian writers have highlighted various chronic issues. Writers like Kiran Desai, Monica Ali, Chitra Banerjee, Diwakaruni, Jhumpa Lahari, and others have shed light on marginality, migration, identity, and isolation in their writings.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* presents the picture of illegal immigrants in the USA. Biju, the son of Patel's cook, is marginalised in America. He doesn't have a green card. Therefore, he remains in disguise in the American underground, moving from one basement to another. For people like Biju, America is hell. At any rate, he makes up his mind to return to India. But in India, he becomes a victim of the GNLf men, who rob him completely. Biju's father, the cook, is also a marginalised character. He is treated very badly by the judge. The cook is a victim of an identity crisis. He is a representative of the lower-class people who are being denied any dignity by the higher classes. It is a common notion among people that it is the servant who always steals. He has unconsciously accepted this fact. While the police check his belongings, the cook justifies the action of the police. He also believes in the fact that in such cases, the prime suspect is always the servant. He defends the act of the police: "Were they having to search everything... naturally. How do they know that I am innocent? Most of the time it is the servant that steals." (Desai, 2006:19)

After being humiliated at the hands of the police, the cook is optimistic about his future. He believes that his son, who lives in America, will become rich. He often dreams of his son's successful life and getting him married to a suitable girl. He also dreams of leading a comfortable and happy life with his grandchildren. Later, however, he is disheartened when he sees his son Biju's plight, as he returns home penniless. Biju does not have a good academic record to be qualified for a well-paid job. When he applies for a tourist visa, its validity period is already over. He can neither live peacefully in America nor return respectfully to his homeland.

Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a retired judge, lives with his granddaughter Sai in Kalimpong, a small town near Darjeeling. The judge had a humble early life as he was from a poor, low-caste family. His father, who owned a profitable business procuring false witnesses to appear in court, made sure that his son had to get all the best in life at the cost of his sister's deprivation of anything. It is generally seen in Indian rural families that money

is spent on the son's studies rather than fulfilling their daughter's basic needs. Marginalisation is most visible in sociocultural and political contexts, where disadvantaged people fight for access to resources and full participation in social life. The judge ill-treated all the female characters. He treated his wife, Bela, very badly. She was the most beautiful daughter of a rich businessman. As his wife was the daughter of a rich man, he was able to move to England to study. Still, he had no regard for her. The judge's attitude towards his wife is unpardonable. Even though it was the dowry from his father-in-law that realised his dream of completing his ICS exams. He becomes ungrateful not only to her but also to his sisters, his mother, and everybody else. He doesn't even seem to have felt the slightest pain over his daughter's death. His granddaughter Sai's arrival at his house was also a major challenge for him. Similarly, Lola and Noni are being ill-treated by GNLF men. When Lola goes to Pradhan, the head of the Kalimpong wing of the GNLF, he proudly tells her that he has already had four wives and mockingly says that she can be his fifth. In the same way, Sai is also deceived by her lover, Gyan, who rejects her. Throughout the novel, female characters are depicted as being marginalised and ill-treated by the male characters.

In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Bangladeshi immigrant Chanu has high ambitions for establishing a prominent position in London. He considered London "money land." Later, he realises the harsh racist treatment of the whites towards the Muslim outsiders. Chanu suffers many setbacks in London. He could not acclimatise to the British way of life. He had always thought of England as a money land. He dreams of making a mark in London by becoming successful. His high hopes for prosperity were never realised. He becomes dejected and frustrated after struggling for a long period of time. Chanu blames racism as the main cause of his failure. He proudly claims to have received an English education at Dhaka University and attempts to emulate Western culture. He works for a local council in London. He works hard in the office to advance, but he is not promoted. In his conversation with his wife, Nazneen, he blames the racial prejudice of the white natives against the immigrant people like him. His wife Nazneen, shares his feelings about the racist and unfair attitude of white people with her neighbour, Razia: "my husband says they are racist, particularly Mr Dalloway... He says if he painted his skin pink and white then there would be no problem... All the time they are polite... He says that racism is built into the system." (Ali, 2003:72) His conscience forbids him to stay any longer in London. Chanu makes up his mind to leave for his homeland, Bangladesh, with his family.

Marriages are arranged by parents, particularly the father, in South Asian culture; the husband assumes authority over the wife, and the wife is expected to surrender her individual and private identity to the social and cultural patriarchy. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen is married to an NRI who is twice her age. The marriage is arranged by her father. Nazneen is shown battling her delusional husband, Chanu Ahmed, and their two modern daughters. As an immigrant, she is depicted as being trapped by her conflicting desires. In the novel, Nazneen is shown as a submissive girl belonging to a village in Bangladesh. She is depicted

as a postcolonial female protagonist in a patriarchal society who is not a standout. "What could not be changed must be borne," Nazneen said, putting herself in the hands of fate. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be endured. This principle ruled her life. It was a combination of mantra, fettle, and challenge." (Ali, 2003:16) Nazneen was marginalised during her first years in hostland due to her inability to speak English. She is afraid of the social world. The effect of patriarchal ideology and alien culture makes her feel marginalised as a Bangladeshi. Monica Ali exposes the perception of a cultural and feminine outlook through the persona of Nazneen.

Nazneen confronts the unpleasant problem of getting permission to move out of the house. Chanu, her husband, dislikes her leaving the house without him. Despite delivering a lecture to Nazneen about the significance of English, Chanu does not allow her to learn the language. He makes every effort to keep Nazneen under control. Chanu criticises other people for having a cheap mentality, but he uses their example to influence Nazneen's choices. Nazneen engrossed herself in her past to cope with the present's dull and restrictive environment, where there is no source of recreation in terms of outings. Her poor linguistic skills hampered her communication with the outside world. Nazneen is unable to speak English, which is used in the hostland. She is aware of only two words: 'sorry' and 'thank you'. "Chanu also does not want her to learn English because he thinks it is of no use to her." (Ullah, 2015) Chanu did not want his wife to become independent and self-reliant. He followed the eastern tradition of assigning inferior status and role to his wife, like many other Bangladeshi's. Many immigrant women like Nazneen undergo similar problems in adapting to a foreign language, as Wilson views: "Women who cannot speak English cannot communicate with their neighbours, the police, lawyers, doctors, or advocates. They may even become alienated from their children or working husbands who gain fluency in English or may become more dependent on family members to interpret the culture for them." (2006:134)

Nazneen's sister Hasina, eloped with a boy named Malik. The boy was one of her father's field workers. It is not considered right in South Asian culture, where the social norms accept only arranged marriages. Hasina could not live in harmony with Malik as she faced domestic violence. She leaves him and starts working in a garment factory. There she comes under the influence of Mr. Chowdhuri, a businessman. She is raped by him, who regards her as a fallen woman who has no family and is living an independent life. Factory male workers are projected as openly expressing malevolent attitudes and a desire to thwart and injure female co-workers physically as well as mentally. Zainab, who is the neighbour of Hasina, is seen arousing doubt and questioning about the dubious reputation of garment girls. At one instance, Zainab jokingly comments, "Better be careful. Let the jute men discover a garment girl here, and then there will be trouble." (Ali, 2003:106)

Even religious groups exercise power by prohibiting the freedom of women to work outside the home and along with male members who are not members of their families. Beauvoir asserts that religion also shaped men's treatment of women by giving them moral excuses to limit women. (The Second Sex, 2009) In one of the letters written by Hasina, a clear picture of the plight of factory female workers is depicted: "Some people making trouble outside the factory shout out to us, 'here come the garment girls. Choose the one you like.' A mullah organise whole thing. Day and night they playing religious message with loudspeakers. They say it is sinful for men and women working together. But they the one sinning takes God's name give insult to us and tell lie." (Ali, 2003: 106) In these novels, women are expected to be accountable to the values of South Asian society, which in turn controls their sexual identity. Malevolence and indifference on the part of men are presented towards marginalised women like Nimi Patel, Sai, Lola, Nazneen, and Hasina. Simone De Beauvoir holds that the traditional system of oppression continues to this day in the spheres of reproduction, sexuality, and labour. Women are limited in every role they can play in society and are thus forced to adopt certain traits and coping mechanisms that have resulted in their status becoming inferior to men. (The Second Sex, 2009) Marginalisation at every level is keenly seen through the characters in the novels. South Asian women are always cut off from their desires and self-esteem, and this is imposed by a culturally carved unwritten code of behavior. Inheritance of Loss and Brick Lane examine the poor classes of third-world immigrants' feelings of marginalisation in the West, as well as the socio-cultural conflicts between their East and West traditions that they are frequently exposed to. "Having arrived in a new geographical and cultural context, they negotiate two cultures: their own and the new one." (Nayar, 2019: 189) Kiran Desai and Monica Ali try to bring in certain references to racism and the troubled identity faced by immigrants in the West. Thus, the diasporic novels represent the lives of the marginalised community, like women, lower caste people, illegal immigrants, minority communities, and the poor. So, these novels are helpful for the depiction of marginalised cultures.

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