

A Pragmatic Study of Intercultural Communication in Kiran Desai

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ABSTRACT

The present study of intercultural communication in literary discourse attempts to foreground the relevance of the study of Indian Diasporic literary texts by analyzing intercultural communication as represented in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai. Desai is an Indian Diasporic writer who introduces words from the Indian languages in particular contexts, and predicates culture specific differences to convey her meaning to the reader. The study aims at providing a contextual framework to the field of literary discourse based upon the tools for analysis of Intercultural Communication enunciated by Allwood (1985).

Keywords: Literary discourse, diasporic literature, intercultural communication, patterns of thought, patterns of behaviour, patterns of artifact, imprints in nature and cultural presupposition

INTRODUCTION

As is well known in today's world, all societies are multicultural in nature and everyone lives within a global village. Culture, which encompasses a particular social group's accepted beliefs and behaviours, has been defined in many

ways. The classic definition most useful in this discussion is one derived from anthropology: Culture is "a way of life of a group of people...the stereotyped patterns of learning behavior, which are handed down from one generation to the next through means of language and imitation" (Barnouw, 1963, p. 4). Similarly, a modern definition is that culture is "the shared ways in which groups of people understand and interpret the world" (Trompenaars & Woolliams, 2003, p. 53).

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An increase in international business, caused by more efficient transportation and advanced communication technology, has led to an increased need for effective intercultural communication, often referred to as global communication. Effective intercultural communication assists in eliminating communication obstacles like language barriers from international business which allows workers from different cultures to work together as a group. It can be achieved through learning about other cultures and implementing communication strategies such as reflective listening and being open-minded. The need for a successful intercultural communication can be found in all aspects of a business, from internal communication to marketing and advertising. Additionally, poor translations in marketing and advertising can lead to poor sales internationally. Ineffectual intercultural communication can lead to accidentally offending another individual; the consequences for such an accident can range from an embarrassing moment to the collapse of an entire business deal. Hence, the understanding of diverse cultures is imperative in order to survive in the present world. The present study of intercultural communication in literary discourse attempts to foreground the relevance of the study of Indian Diasporic literary texts by analyzing intercultural communication as represented in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai. Desai is an Indian Diasporic writer who introduces words from the Indian languages in particular contexts, and predicates culture

specific differences to convey her meaning to the readers.

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard is the story of the Chawla family of Shahkot comprising Mr. Chawla, his mother Ammaji, his wife Kulfi, their son Sampath (who is the protagonist) and daughter, Pinky. The entire family is eccentric. For instance, Kulfi has an undefined longing which she fulfils by consuming large quantities of food and roaming aimlessly. Mr. Chawla is a go-getter who, instead of caring for his son, thinks solely of his status. He capitalizes on Sampath's fleeing to the guava orchard and turns it into a religious act. It is a captivating book about what happens in an Indian small town when an ordinary post office clerk does the unexpected, and how the town reacts - in equally unexpected ways. The portrayal makes living in India, an entertaining event. For the reader who is unfamiliar with India, Desai provides a context to facilitate understanding. Her characters are detailed and well thought out; their flaws and their eccentricities are portrayed vividly and with clarity. In particular, characters such as Kulfi and her son, Sampath Chawla, provide an excellent medium through which to see the world of Shahkot.

Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai takes place largely in West Bengal's Himalayan region, near Nepal and Bhutan, inhabited by people of many ethnicities. The story revolves around the main character Sai, an orphan living with her grandfather, a retired judge, in the Himalayan city of Kalimpong. The judge's household is assisted by a cook, whose son Biju goes to the United States and

struggles to make it there. Desai explores complicated questions of assimilation, class, race, nationalism and family with humour. She exposes difficult and sometimes ugly truths about human nature in a political and complicated world where history stays with us, while not rendering the characters themselves as simplistic villains or virtuous heroes. In both the novels, Kiran Desai's language is rich and nuanced. This is largely a result of the fact that she uses words from the Indian languages to describe and refer to typically Indian food items, as well as certain specific terms used in India to address people who are older as well as terms of endearment used for one's offspring or for those who are younger. The words and phrases from the Indian languages that she uses are culture specific and go a long way in conveying certain aspects of the culture to the readers.

The study aims at providing a contextual framework for the study of literary discourse based upon the tools for analysis of Intercultural Communication enunciated by Allwood (1985). Although intercultural patterns of discourse are almost inevitably reflected in both spoken and written languages, the focus of this paper is entirely on literary discourse. The study also draws on the Interactive Intercultural Approach postulated by Michael Clyne (1994, p. 3), who examines the discourse of people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds who interact either in a lingua franca or in one of the interlocutor's languages. As aptly pointed out by Bennet in "Intercultural Communication: A Current

Perspective (1998, p. 2)", Intercultural Communication is the communication between the people of different cultures which cannot allow the easy assumption of similarity. By definition, cultures are different in their languages, behaviour patterns, and values. Hence, an attempt to use one's self as a predictor of shared assumptions and responses to messages are unlikely to work because cultures embody such variety in patterns of perception and behaviour. Therefore, approaches to communication in cross-cultural situations must guard against inappropriate assumptions of similarity and encourage the consideration of difference. Thus, it is clear that Intercultural Communication foregrounds cultural difference. Moreover, according to intercultural researchers the cultural presuppositions of an author and his/her reader will always be parts of available discourses in society. 'Cultural presuppositions' (Ping, 1999, p. 133) refers to knowledge, experience, feelings and opinions we have towards categories of people that we do not regard as members of the cultural communities that we identify ourselves with. 'Cultural presuppositions' is a factor which helps in creating awareness in the author about the reader who is outside his/her own social/cultural community and characterizes the choice of language and content in the literary text. Thus, while the authors' understanding is constructed on the basis of discourses in society, cultural presuppositions govern their actual use of discourses in a globalized society.

As an area of study, Intercultural

Communication developed in the 1980s. Its emergence can be traced to scholars such as A. Wierzbicka, C. Goddard, D. Tannen, D. Schiffrin, etc. The basic tenet of intercultural communication is best explained in the following manner:

“In different societies and different communities, people speak differently; these differences in the ways of speaking are profound and systematic, they reflect different cultural values, or at least different hierarchies of values; different ways of speaking, different communicative styles, can be explained and made sense of in terms of independently established different cultural values and cultural priorities” (Wierzbicka, 1991, p. 69).

Drawing upon this observation by Wierzbicka, this paper contends that a literary text written by a contemporary Indian English Diasporic author, who is associated with the interactivity of language and culture during the creation of her literary texts, can be viewed as an example of Intercultural Communication.

In most intercultural analyses of discourse, it is necessary to ascertain both the cultural assumptions being made, the context within which they are made and the value that is attached to the assumptions. These cultural assumptions become important when discussing works created by authors like Kiran Desai, a Diasporic Indian who is a multilingual with equal facility in Gujarati, Hindi and English. Diasporic writing, as has been pointed out by several scholars such as Jasbir Jain, occupies

a significant position between cultures and countries. It generates and defines positions as it constructs a new identity which negotiates boundaries of cultures and languages. Consequently, they are both “bi/multi-cultural” and “bi/multilingual,” with great adaptability to more than one cultural frame, having internalized these cultural frames through language competence. Such writers can completely shift their cultural frame of reference as well as language without much conscious effort as they have retained the ability to function in their own cultures/languages, simultaneously adding the ability to operate effectively in other cultures/languages. Thus, authors like Kiran Desai live on the margins of two societies, both geographically and culturally, and this leads to their having an equal facility in two or more languages, a factor which invariably impacts on their creative output. Further, readers of Diasporic literature belong to the writer’s country of birth as well as the adopted country. This perception is borne out by Vijay Mishra’s observation on Diasporic literature:

‘Postcolonial theory has drawn its source texts as well as its cultural dynamism from diasporic archives. Most of the claims about the need for a vigorous postcolonial intervention into the project of modernity, however, have taken the form of interventions from the diaspora within the West or from what I have called the new Indian diaspora of the border. This diaspora has been seen as a powerful source for diasporic discourses of disarticulation

(abandonment, displacement, dispersion, etc.) as well as the 'site' for the rearticulation of an intercultural formation....' (Vijay Mishra, 1996, p. 426).

As has been observed by several scholars, there is a deep connection between culture and language insofar as cultural groups are invariably characterized by distinct languages with subcultures often having dialects within a language. In this context, Sapir aptly states: "Language has a setting. The people that speak it belong to a race (or a number of races), that is, to a group which is set off by physical characteristics from other groups. Again, language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives" (1921, Web). Further, a language cannot exist in a vacuum. It has to perform some functions – be it in spoken or written discourse. This function is closely connected to the speaker's or writer's experiences as well as the context in which the discourse is produced. Thus, context and culture become inseparable from the use of language, which is a unique symbol system that denotes what a culture deems important in its world, i.e., some words exist in some languages and not in other languages, reflecting the fact that different cultures symbolize their worlds differently. In order to identify and discuss the key parameters in intercultural communication in a literary text – this study largely follows the analysis presented in Allwood (1985, pp. 1-2), where he distinguished four primary cultural

dimensions namely: Patterns of thought, Patterns of behaviour, Patterns of artifacts, and Imprints in nature, which he states are the foundation of all human activity in a society. According to Allwood (1985, pp. 1-2), these patterns are one way of expressing culture and may be correlated with human activities in the following manner, "all human activities involve the first two dimensions. Most activities involve the third dimension and ecologically important activities also involve the fourth." The reason behind using the patterns identified by Allwood for the analysis in this study is that they capture the essence of the relationship that exists between culture and language which in turn helps in understanding the nature of the intercultural communication portrayed in the literary texts under discussion. This paper applies these cultural dimensions and predicates a model of intercultural communication in literary discourse. Thus, the analysis has at its core the ability to explicate the language usage in creative writing wherein there is code mixing between English and Indian languages such as Hindi and Gujarati. This explanation is further facilitated by using the assumptions of Intercultural Communication which contends that language usage is governed by cultural factors. This paper further argues that the factors identified by spoken discourse research in relation to intercultural communication in general may be used to discuss strategies that an author adopts in order to engage in successful intercultural communication in a literary text.

In the following examples from *Hulabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss*, the four dimensions enunciated by Allwood (1985) are applied to identify the culture specific nuances which are being mediated through the language used by the author in the two novels being discussed.

A. Patterns of Thought – According to Allwood, Patterns of Thought refer to the common ways of thinking, where thinking includes factual beliefs, values, norms, and emotional attitudes. In the context of this paper, the pattern is applied to human relations as reflected in the manner of addressing, which in turn is based on cultural beliefs and emotional attitudes.

In the following examples from *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss* the inclusion of Hindi terms of endearment and manner of addressing others, intermixed with English enables the author to vividly portray the culture, where an elder person like the mother or the father or someone of the same age addresses the offspring or he or she addresses an older person related or unrelated using such words which may or may not be used for affection. These examples wherein an elderly lady is referred to as *Ammaji* (*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*) or a father calling his son *Biju beta* (*The Inheritance of Loss*) enable the author to portray the customs prevalent in India where people are addressed according to their varying relations with each other and constitutes intercultural communication

in the text. These terms are used in the day-to-day interaction of people and are governed by the social and cultural beliefs and emotional attitudes. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, for example, “*Biju beta*,” he wrote, “*you have been fortunate enough to get there, please do something for the others....*” (T I L, 95), the Judge’s cook has a son Biju who has gone to the USA to earn his livelihood and become ‘rich’ following the path of Eldorado or the true American dream with plenty being the order of things. The other aspect of this path, which becomes apparent while living this dream, is that opportunity too is a discriminating master; so Biju instead of running his own restaurant due to the lack of a work permit can only do odd jobs in restaurants illegally. Biju, with whatever money he gets, sends his father gifts. So, his father is totally unaware of the situation thinking that his son has settled abroad and can help those unfortunates who are left behind. The use of the term *beta* in this example conveys to the reader a father’s pride in his son and his trust in his abilities.

1. “Leaving Kulfi and the new baby, he and Ammaji ran to the window to investigate, and discovered that far from being the end of things it was more like the beginnings.” (HGO, 11) ““Stupid monkey, maji, ’....” (HGO, 86)
2. “Loudly. Can’t hear you, huzoor. Say it louder.” (T I L, 7) “Bhai, dekho aisa hai...”he would begin to lecture them. (T I L, 95) “Biju beta,” he wrote, “you have been fortunate enough to get there, please

do something for the others....” (TIL, 95)

B. The second pattern described by Allwood is Patterns of Behavior, which encompasses common ways of behaving, ways of speaking, and ways of conducting commerce and industry, where the behaviour, can be intentional/unintentional, aware/unaware or individual/interactive. In this paper, the pattern is applied to common ways of behaving like speaking, to the ways of preparing food, where the characters convey their cultural background with the help of language, and style of cooking, intentionally or unintentionally.

In the following extracts from the two novels, the author’s use of Indian words for a variety of food items like ‘parathas with radish’ and the phrase, ‘Tikka masala, tandoori grill, navrattan vegetable curry, dal makhni’, represents the culture specific difference very vividly and in turn, acts as a tool for intercultural communication. The pattern of behaviour also has expressions such as ‘Haiii’, ‘Humara kya hoga, hai hai, humara kya hoga’, which capture the essence of intercultural communication and describe in detail the common ways of behaving, such as speaking, cooking, where that behavior can be intentional/unintentional, aware/unaware or individual/interactive. “*I could make you aloo bhaji, she said, ‘if the parathas will not be enough’ (HGO, 25)*” is an example from *Hullaballoo in the Guava Orchard* wherein Kulfi’s mother-in-law and the grandmother of Sampath is enquiring

about his choice of food which not only shows her concern for her grandson but also the use of the Hindi words such as *aloo bhaji* or *parathas* helps us to understand the middle class setting of the novel. The other example is from *The Inheritance of Loss*, “And not enough salt,” they said of the pakoras” (TIL, 7), where ‘they’ refers to the members of the Gorkha Liberation Army who enter the house of Sai and her grandfather, the judge, without invitation and force the cook to make *pakoras*, an Indian snack, instead of their usual menu of muffins and tea. This change from muffins to *pakoras* and the comment about the lack of salt in the *pakoras* foregrounds the cultural and social chasm between the local inhabitants of Kalimpong and the judge’s family, an important sub-theme of the novel.

3. ‘I could make you aloo bhaji,’ she said,’ ‘if the parathas will not be enough’ (HGO, 25)
“‘Haiiii. What did you do?’ shouted the family when Sampath returned home, jobless, sober and soaked to the skin.” (HGO, 41)
4. “And not enough salt,” they said of the pakoras” (TIL, 7)
‘The cook broke into a loud lament: “Humara kya hoga, hai hai, humara kya hoga,” he let his voice fly. “Hai, hai, what will become of us?”’ (TIL, 8)
‘Tikka masala, tandoori grill, navrattan vegetable curry, dal makhni, ppadam.’ (TIL, 145)

C. Patterns of artifacts are what according to Allwood refer to common ways

of manufacturing and using material things, from pens to houses (artifact = artificial object), where artifacts include dwellings, tools, machines or media. The artifactual dimension of culture is usually given special attention in museums. Examples of this pattern are references to dwellings such as such as 'haveli', and a special kind of market named 'haat', in *The Inheritance of Loss*. "Into the top families of Gujarat. Ahmedabad. Or was it Baroda? Huge haveli like a palace" (TIL, 56) is a reference to the cook visualizing the judge's affluent and culturally rich past which he thinks is in consonance with his present taste in food and style of living. However, as the reader soon realizes, the cook is mistaken. The author, with the help of this example, ironically comments on the judge and shows how like this misrepresentation, the judge's entire life is in reality a sham and is built around a false sense of grandeur and need to gain prestige in the society.

In the other example from *The Inheritance of Loss*, "It was haat day in Kalimpong and a festive crowd thronged to the market in a high pitch of excitement, everyone in their best clothes" (TIL, 83); *haat* is described in detail where the cook shops for his grocery and narrates his son's success in the USA and plans and wishes for his marriage. The *haat* is an important place for socializing in rural areas and since time immemorial has provided a platform for forging relationships.

5. "Into the top families of Gujarat. Ahmedabad. Or was it Baroda? Huge haveli like a palace" (TIL, 56)
 "It was haat day in alimpong and a festive crowd thronged to the market in a high pitch of excitement, everyone in their best clothes" (TIL, 83)
- D. Imprints in nature – The last of Allwood's patterns can be defined as the long lasting imprints left by a group in the natural surroundings, where such imprints include agriculture, roads or intact/ruined human habitations. It is possible to extend Allwood's concept to include religio-cultural perceptions, as well as popular culture. The following examples are evidence of the long lasting imprints left by a group in the natural surroundings, where such imprints include Bollywood songs like 'O, yeh ladki zara si deewani lagti hai...', "Mera joota hai japani..." and "Bombay se aaya mera dost---Oi", a part of the culture of the country as well as time specific constructs like 'purdah' representing a particular period in time. In fact, these extracts used by the author give us a basic understanding about the middle class culture portrayed in the novel. The Bollywood song extracts in the novel are sung by illegal Indian immigrants such as Biju and Saeed Saeed who work as waiters in various restaurants in the USA. They not only reflect the Indian culture but are also an expression of nostalgia and a mark of brotherhood in an alien land. O, yeh

ladki zara si deewani lagti hai....' is sung by Biju to cheer himself up and "Mera joota hai japani..." and "Bombay se aaya mera dost---Oi", are sung by Saeed Saeed from Zanzibar who becomes a friend of Biju in that lonely world. The songs and the act of singing help to create a bond between Biju and Saeed Saeed who are both expatriates in a foreign land.

Jemubhai Patel, the judge treats his wife Pinky with contempt and hatred. The word *pardah* refers to a social custom which was widely prevalent in India and still prevails in some sections of the society wherein the women are made to wear a veil and segregated from the male members of the society and not allowed free interaction. In the novel, the judge not only keeps his wife in physical seclusion and has her locked up in the house, but also by complete lack of interaction with her, he maintains a *pardah* of emotions which in the end kills her.

6. "O, yeh ladki zara si deewani lagti hai...." (TIL, 51)
 "Mera joota hai japani..." and
 "Bombay se aaya mera dost---Oi!"
 (TIL, 53)
 "...Where is your wife, Mr. Patel?
 None of that *pardah* business, I
 hope?" (TIL, 171)

The above examples from both the novels under discussion highlight the fact that the author incorporates the words and phrases from Hindi, which include lexical terms for endearment and addressing others, food and different ways of speaking, in

order to vividly depict and portray the communities which her characters represent. This is a consequence of the fact that the cultural presupposition about the various cultural dimensions internalized by the author is reflected in the characters that she creates and the communities she portrays in the text. Further, when a particular activity within the text lastingly combines several of these patterns, one usually says that the activity has become institutionalized and that it is thus a social institution that the author plans to describe in a text. This provides the context for its interpretation which she intends her readers to identify and consider, and which includes not just a linguistic description, but also cultural and historical information, further supporting the contention of the paper that fictional works are also vehicles of intercultural communication.

As discussed above, an intercultural perspective offers more than an effective way to analyze interaction and facilitate the use of code mixing in a literary text. The intercultural communication as represented in a literary text envisions a reality which will support the simultaneous existence of unity and diversity, of cooperation and competition in the global village, and of consensus and creative conflict in multicultural societies. In this vision, different voices of the characters can be heard both in their uniqueness and in synergistic harmony. While there are many paths which can converge into this understanding, the focus brought by the author through her creation rests on individuals and relationships. She strives to

bring culture into individual consciousness and in so doing bring consciousness to accept on the creation of intercultural relationships. Although the challenges of representing an increasingly diverse world in a literary text are great, the benefits are even greater. This multilingual communication through which relationships with people from different cultures are forged, can lead to a multitude of benefits, including improving communities, increased local, national, and international exchange of ideas.

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