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## Lost in Translation: Narrative Voice and Cultural Dislocation in *In Custody* and the Inheritance of Loss

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### ABSTRACT

Postcolonial Indian English fiction frequently engages with the themes of cultural dislocation, identity crisis, and the lingering effects of colonialism. Among contemporary novelists, Anita Desai and Kiran Desai offer compelling literary representations of individuals negotiating fragmented identities within shifting socio-cultural landscapes. Anita Desai's *In Custody* (1984) presents a deeply personal narrative of linguistic and cultural alienation in post-Partition India, while Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) extends this inquiry into a transnational and globalized context. This study examines how *narrative voice functions as a crucial literary device* to articulate cultural dislocation in both novels. Through close textual analysis (primary data) and engagement with postcolonial literary criticism (secondary data), the paper explores how narrative perspectives, language, and structural choices shape characters' experiences of alienation, displacement, and identity loss.

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### Statement of the Problem

Despite extensive critical attention to *In Custody* and *The Inheritance of Loss*, limited comparative studies focus specifically on the **relationship between narrative voice and cultural dislocation** across generations of postcolonial writing. Existing Researcherhip often examines themes of identity, globalization, or diaspora independently, but insufficient emphasis has been placed on how narrative



strategies themselves mediate these experiences. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how narrative voice becomes an expressive mechanism through which cultural dislocation is represented and intensified.

### Review of Literature

Researchers have consistently identified cultural displacement as a central concern in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. Umme (2015) highlights the novel's portrayal of diasporic alienation and emotional dislocation resulting from migration and globalization. Sanasam (2009) interprets the text as an exploration of transcultural identities shaped by colonial legacies and economic inequalities.

Critical studies on Anita Desai emphasize psychological depth and introspective narration. Jain (2012) notes that *In Custody* reflects the erosion of cultural traditions, particularly the decline of Urdu literature, symbolizing broader cultural marginalization. Critics argue that Desai's use of third-person limited narration enables an intimate portrayal of Deven's internal conflict and cultural anxiety (Desai, 1984). Comparative postcolonial theorists assert that narrative voice plays a decisive role in articulating identity crises in colonized societies (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002). These studies provide the secondary theoretical foundation for the present research, which builds upon existing criticism while offering a focused comparative reading of narrative voice and dislocation.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how narrative voice represents cultural and personal dislocation in both novels.
2. To compare localized dislocation in *In Custody* with globalized displacement in *The Inheritance of Loss*.
3. To analyze the impact of language, memory, and colonial legacy on identity formation.

### Hypotheses

1. Narrative voice significantly shapes the representation of cultural dislocation in both novels.
2. *In Custody* employs an introspective narrative voice to depict internalized cultural loss, whereas *The Inheritance of Loss* uses a polyphonic narrative to portray global displacement.
3. Linguistic alienation functions as a key marker of postcolonial identity crisis in both texts.



## Methodology

The study adopts a **qualitative, descriptive, and interpretative research methodology**.

**Primary Data:**

Close textual analysis of *In Custody* and *The Inheritance of Loss*, focusing on narrative voice, character consciousness, language use, and symbolic representation of dislocation.

**Secondary Data:**

Scholarly articles, books, and journal publications on postcolonial theory, narrative studies, and critical interpretations of Anita Desai and Kiran Desai. The analysis is grounded in postcolonial literary theory and narrative theory, emphasizing textual interpretation rather than quantitative assessment.

## Analysis and Discussion

Narrative Voice and Dislocation in *In Custody*

Anita Desai employs a **third-person limited narrative voice** closely aligned with Deven's consciousness. This introspective style allows readers access to his psychological turmoil and cultural insecurity. Deven's alienation stems from his inability to fully inhabit the linguistic and cultural world of Urdu poetry, which he reveres but cannot preserve. Primary textual evidence reveals Deven's sense of exclusion: "*He had no place in this city, no niche*" (Desai, 1984). This statement reflects both personal failure and cultural displacement. Secondary criticism supports this reading, arguing that the decline of Urdu symbolizes the marginalization of indigenous traditions in postcolonial India (Jain, 2012).

The fragmented narrative structure mirrors Deven's fractured identity, reinforcing the theme of cultural erosion.

Narrative Voice and Dislocation in *The Inheritance of Loss*

Kiran Desai adopts a **third-person omniscient and polyphonic narrative voice**, shifting between multiple characters and locations. This narrative strategy reflects the global reach of cultural dislocation in a postcolonial, globalized world.

Biju's undocumented immigrant experience in the United States exemplifies economic and cultural marginalization, while Jemubhai Patel's internalized colonial mentality reveals psychological dislocation



rooted in colonial education. The detached yet empathetic narrative voice exposes systemic inequalities without privileging a single perspective. Researcher observe that this multiplicity of voices underscores the fragmented nature of postcolonial identity in a global context (Umme, 2015; Sanasam, 2009).

### **Language, Identity, and Colonial Legacy**

In both novels, language functions as a powerful marker of belonging and loss. Deven's estrangement from Urdu signifies cultural disinheritance, while Jemubhai's rejection of his native culture reflects colonial internalization. Narrative voice becomes the medium through which these linguistic and cultural conflicts are articulated.

### **Findings**

- i. Narrative voice plays a decisive role in conveying cultural dislocation in both novels.
- ii. *In Custody* presents dislocation as an internal, localized experience rooted in language loss.
- iii. *The Inheritance of Loss* portrays dislocation as a global, multi-layered phenomenon shaped by migration and colonial history.

*Both texts reveal that colonial legacy continues to shape identity, relationships, and self-perception.*

### **Conclusion**

This comparative study demonstrates that Anita Desai and Kiran Desai employ distinct yet complementary narrative strategies to depict cultural dislocation in postcolonial contexts. While *In Custody* offers an intimate portrayal of linguistic and cultural alienation, *The Inheritance of Loss* expands the scope to include global displacement and diasporic fragmentation. Through nuanced narrative voices, both novels reveal the enduring psychological and cultural consequences of colonialism, emphasizing the complex negotiation of identity in a postcolonial world.

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