

Descriptive Mundanities and Scale in the Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

The rise of the modern novel marked a shift away from description in favor of narrative elements such as the plot. The paradigm shift, while crucial, undermined the critical role description plays in construction of the novel. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006)—an often popular text for postcolonial discourse, has enjoyed underwhelming attention in terms of narratological practices. Hence, this paper examines the relationship between the mundane descriptions and scale to illuminate the novel's exploration of the local class divide and global diasporic aspirations. It uses the descriptive practices that provide narrative space to the character of the Cook, and his son Biju, an undocumented migrant in New York— to regulate and exhibit the scale of their physical and social boundaries. The analysis applies Dora Zhang's theory of description's unassuming political power of foregrounding literary fragments over the text as a whole. The paper also employs close reading strategies (like Erich Auerbach's) to relationally connect the microscale (descriptions of everyday life) and the macroscale (socio-postcolonial framework). This paper, using these narratological frameworks, argues that mundane descriptions in *The Inheritance of Loss*, help negotiate the novel's social and spatial scale by moving between the local and the global. It also ambitiously purports that the narratives of the marginalised can be illuminated through marginalised narratological elements like description.

Keywords: narratology, Kiran Desai, description, postcolonialism, mundanity

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Introduction

Kiran Desai, in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2008), tackles many forms of generational trauma, grief and violence—personal and of a nation’s—through the perspectives of four pivotal characters and their intermeshed lives. Set in the 1980s in Kalimpong, India, where Sai, an orphaned teenage girl lives with her grandfather, Jemubhai Patel, a retired judge embittered by his British education and lost status. They live with a frail, old Cook whose son Biju is an undocumented immigrant struggling to survive in New York. The novel unfolds against the backdrop of political unrest in the region, while exploring the characters’ intimate tragedies through the lens of class, culture and identity. These social issues compounded by postcolonial, diasporic and global concerns manifest in the novel, not only at the macro scale of the nation, but also—possibly primarily—through the quotidian lives of the main characters.

In these mundane moments, description takes over the “action of narration” to build a narrative which is simultaneously granular/microlevel and universal/macrolevel— in essence, these descriptions of mundanity make possible a narrative glocalisation, if you may. Dora Zhang writes: “The ineliminable threat of arbitrariness and excess in any description...these could be read not as symptoms of total reification but rather as challenges to teleology and instrumentality” (p. 17). She also mentions how, contrastingly, novel theory tends to “work at the macroscales” (Zhang, 2020, p. 11). The paper utilises this formulation of description’s marginality and the grandiose of narratives to analyse mundanity’s relationship to narration. More pointedly, it seeks to explore how mundanity in the novel’s descriptive passages negotiates the scale of the novel by constantly moving between the local and the global of the narrative.

The Micro and the Macro of the Mundane

In a scene set in the kitchen of the house, we are introduced to the cook.

Here, at the back, inside the cavernous kitchen, was the cook, trying to light the damp wood. He fingered the kindling gingerly for fear of the community of scorpions living, loving, reproducing in the pile. Once he’d found a mother, plump with poison, fourteen babies on her back. Eventually, the fire caught and he placed his kettle on top, as battered, as encrusted as something dug up by an archeological team, and waited for it to boil. The walls were singed and sodden, garlic hung by muddy stems from the charred beams, thickets of soot clumped batlike upon the ceiling. The flame cast a mosaic of shiny orange across the cook’s face, and his top half grew hot, but a mean gust tortured his arthritic knees. (Desai, 2008, p. 1)

Visually or rather, focally, Desai’s description forces us to look at the mundane. Like any everyday act, cooking takes place in the space of the kitchen, by an individual whose occupation is to cook— the action of the scene is perceptively simple. It is the minute observation, however, of the damp wood, the encrusted kettle, soot-clumped ceiling, further amplified by colour gradients (charred, shiny orange), textural alliteration (singed and sodden) and atmospheric coldness that produce the effect necessary for the readers to understand this narrative world. Monica Fludernik (2009) calls “the story level” the level that “has a combination of setting and actants” (p. 29). She suggests that it is through the interaction of the setting and the actants that the narrative is rendered dynamic. However, one can observe that the mere presence of the objects in their dilapidated states has already led to the creation of a dynamism by description, at the microscale. In description, dynamism can be achieved through

affect, varied temporal scales (human, ecological etc.) or even linguistically through adverbs (Zhang, 2020, pp. 14–5). In the aforementioned paragraph, the mundane invites the reader, then, not deliberately but subliminally, to linger around the descriptive verbs and their implications of class, status quo and submission. Zhang claims that “on a microlevel, almost all language—including verbs of action—has ‘descriptive resonance’” (p. 60). The existence of the cook’s arthritic knees is a sufficient symptom of the various socio-psychological underpinnings of his positionality in the novel. It’s descriptive dynamism precedes the act of torture (by the cold wind), and it is by the virtue of descriptive mundanity that this detail holds its place in the narrative.

Simultaneously, one observes that the mundane continues to associate the granular to the macroscale. In a relatively recently postcolonial India, the wretched conditions of a supposedly stately bungalow of a former Judge Jemubhai Patel, who studied law in England, ties the mundane to the overarching postcolonial narrative of a nation coping with a violent loss of identity and struggling to forge a new one in its aftermath; tussling with a constant “interrogation of its neocolonial present” (Vishwamohan, 2011, p. 261).

In another scene, two young Gorkha militants who forcibly enter Cho Oyu, inspect their surroundings as they wait for Sai to make them tea:

Their noses wrinkled from the gamy mouse stench of a small place, although the ceiling had the reach of a public monument and the rooms were spacious in the old manner of wealth, windows placed for snow views. They peered at a certificate issued by Cambridge University that had almost vanished into an overlay of brown stains blooming upon walls that had swelled with moisture and billowed forth like sails. (Desai, 2008, pp. 13–4)

Here, the juxtaposition of what Ranciere describes as “microsensory events”— of smelling the stench, noticing the colonials and then looking at the decaying degree in simultaneity— acts carried out from the positionality of a violating invader— signals the class conflict implicit in the political undercurrents of the the state as well as the ensuing separatist Gorkhaland movement. It goes back to Zhang’s idea of how “the action at hand is just the labor of perception, which is the ‘story’ these descriptions narrate” (Zhang, 2020, p. 12). While the violating act of intrusion is an indicator of the worsening effects of the separatist movement, it is the mundane act of observation described in the passage that truly illuminates the hauntings of a colonial past in the deterioration of the Judge’s degree, the class consciousness exhibited by young Gorkha boys through their expectations of the house and the palpable power struggle that ensues in the area— which makes this dynamic shift possible in the first place. Both these passages exhibit Erich Auerbach’s (1953) concept of “interior time” where the physical action of intrusion or cooking occupy brief temporal space— or “exterior time”— but the lengthy, observable descriptions represent a “naturalistic rendering of those processes in their peculiar freedom, which is neither restrained by a purpose nor directed by a specific subject of thought” (p. 538). It condenses space and time in a way which makes negotiations of narrative scales possible. Zhang (2020) notes that description functions as a “textual cyst”; a “minor, foreign body” within the narrative “which always aspires to take over the host” (p. 3). Through mundanity, description develops a dual function where it is able to maintain its status as a localised cyst and concurrently, grow out towards the macro or global scale of narration. This is possible due to description’s tendencies for privileging parts over whole, engendering a multiplicity which allows for this simultaneity of being.

The novel's narrative core is imbued and layered with multiplicity. Fludernik (2009) discusses the concept of "plot strands" in narratives, introduced initially in the fairy tale genre, which are characterised as "structure of linear sequences of action" (p. 30). They work towards a cohesive resolution in the end and require a merger. Desai complicates this model with an almost rhizomatic approach towards plot strands. She carves out multiple plot strands for every character, each problematised by overlapping thematic concerns. Vishwamohan (2011), in *Home, Immigration, and Fractured Identities*, writes of this plural tendency of Desai's novel and the South Asian novel, in general:

that South Asian reality tends to be anarchic and defy centralization...South Asia is uniquely placed in a maze of marginalities and it is futile to force it to conform to a monolithic identity-religious, linguistic, or even administrative'... Desai's voice is fierce as she warns that fixation with monolithic ideals and cultural and national purity, while turning a blind eye to plurality, will finally lead toward disharmony and conflict. (p. 271)

The Judge and Sai both experience the void of familial and stature loss, but Jemubhai's colonial promise of education as a means for better life is paralleled not with vivid similarity in Biju's journey as an undocumented migrant in New York. Conversely, the cook's subordination as a function of his class is somewhat mimicked by Sai in her gendered meekness reflected in her inability to openly defy her patriarchal grandfather. Therefore, through mundanity and description, plot strands in the novel converge, diverge, braid and run parallel to ensure a multiplicity which resists wholeness. This decentralised, democratic narrative model creates what Auerbach calls a "multipersonal representation of consciousness" where objective reality is regulated by various subjective impressions which resists the governing authority of a unipersonal narrator.

In another excerpt from the novel, Sai and the Cook pore over an inflatable *National Geographic* globe, tracing various landscapes as Sai points out Biju's New York to the cook and explains the time difference— as she learnt it through her previous convent education. The Cook notes this phenomenon as a "funny back-to-front fact that didn't seem mirrored by any other circumstance involving the two nations" (Desai, 2008, p. 20). A descriptive passage rooted in mundanity, it reflects a multiplicity of identities, cultures and thoughts. It contrasts Sai's colonial literacy in the English language against the Cook's illiteracy but simultaneously, illuminates his worldly sense of understanding power imbalances. Additionally, while Sai harbors more epistemic knowledge of this world, it is the Cook who's more closely navigating the reality of the world order through his immigrant son. Mundanity aids the co-existence of these multiplicities of being and produces an environment conducive to highlighting "the more elementary things which all our lives have in common" (Auerbach, 1953). Zhang reverberates similar notions when talking about merits of description as a method:

Description constitutes a troublesome kind of part, a fragment that always needs to be subordinated to other ends in order to neutralize its threat of disintegrating the whole...The specter of its autonomy challenges the unity and integrity of the work as a whole. (p. 3)

Thus, Desai's novel is continually fractured, multiple but almost never whole.

The Marginality of the Mundane

The mundane functions at the political margins, just like description manifests itself in narratological margins. Any effort of mainstreaming their efficacy or totalising their experience makes them less impactful. Barbara Johnson (2014) notes how Auerbach's formulations of "minor, unimpressive, events" in Woolf's *The Brown Stocking*, such as "measuring a stocking, conversing with the maid, answering the phone— can all be identified as conventional women's activities" (p. 118). Similarly, Zhang (2020) points to the work done by description as "a profound shift toward the democratization of experience where what is lost is not all sense of human action and significance but instead only one particular understanding of action and one particular way of 'linking action and significance'" (p. 5). That which is female, subaltern, outcast— resistant in any way to the dominant modes of being, finds its place in the narrative within the framework of mundanity and description. It is the marginal tendencies of the mundane and descriptive, then, that makes itself so evident in the novel— especially in instances where characters are rendered powerless by implications of their class, culture or sense of belonging.

We encounter Biju, the Cook's son, as a fully fledged character for the first time when Sai notices his picture in the Cook's quarters. In the picture, she noted that

Biju did not look fearless but appeared frozen, like his parents. He stood between props of a tape player and a Campa Cola bottle, against a painted backdrop of a lake, and on the sides, beyond the painted screen, were brown fields and slivers of the neighbors, an arm and a toe, hair and a grin, a chicken tail frill... (Desai, 2008, p. 16)

In the novel, Biju's inbetweenness: between two nations, the urban and the rural, poverty's limitations and immigration's instability colludes to erase his personhood altogether. His diasporic position signals "the ways in which postcolonial subjects and economic migrants feel marginalized in the Global North" (Sabo, 2012, p. 377). However, Biju's image, sustained temporally through description, humanizes his existence and roots him in reality. He is no longer a diasporic statistic but a real person, dissolving his immigrant status. Zhang (2020) theorises that "The equality of literary democracy is limited to capacities for feeling, breaking down the division between 'life doomed to utility' and 'existences destined for the grandeurs of action and passion'" (p. 7). This mundane act of describing his photograph in a rural setting in India, affords him, and his marginality, narrative space, power and agency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we see that Desai's persistent focus on the mundane and the descriptive redefines the nature of its narration through deliberate fracturing, multiplying and subverting of dominant narratives. Zhang (2020) writes that "attending to description makes us rethink the signal categories of novelistic form" (p. 8) and it is precisely this practice in Desai's novel that connects grand and abstract narratives of colonialism, globalization, and identity to the lived experiences of individuals, negotiated quietly within the details of a quotidian existence—in observing a stained university certificate, disfigured kettles, or a photograph. By consistently disintegrating the whole and privileging the part, *The Inheritance of Loss* makes a profound claim: that immense loss is at once historical and immediate— constantly traversing between local and global scales of human experience.

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