



Identity and Multiculturalism In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

"The Inheritance of Loss" Desai discusses her post-colonial perspectives and multicultural view point as well. Retired judge rules as a colonist living in post-colonial period. The protagonist Sai represents multicultural class. The reason is that she shifted from her native place, manage in a different place and tries to adjust in a different culture. While the son of cook Biju adjusts in a foreign country for better life style but feel frustrated in a different culture. These are the true example of post-colonial problems and multiculturalism. The protagonist of postcolonial work will find himself/herself in a struggle to establish an identity; feeling conflicted between two cultures – one his own native culture and the other an alien culture. The central theme in post-colonial writing is the transformation of the native into something other than himself – a Westernized native/ a hybrid, or at least one who is in a crisis regarding his/her own cultural identity. The characters in Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* are in such dilemmas. The novel addresses these issues in a direct and poignant way.

Keywords: *Multiculturalism, Identity, Culture, Post-Colonial, Realism*

Full Text

Kiran Desai was born on the 3rd of September in the year 1971 in Chandigarh. She spent the early years of her life in Pune and Mumbai. When she was around nine years old, her family shifted to Delhi. By the time, she turned fourteen, the family moved to England. A year later, they shifted to the United States. Kiran completed her schooling in Massachusetts. She did her graduation from Hollins University and Columbia University. Thereafter, she took a break of two years to write her first book "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard". Her maiden novel "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard" was published in the year 1998. It was an amazing piece of work, for which Kiran received many accolades. Kiran Desai skyrocketed to fame after the publication of her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. She also received the 2006 Man Booker Prize and 2006 National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award for it. Her novel focuses not on an individual's story but on how several people make sense of themselves, view the world around them, and deal with the difficulties that they have with contradictions. "American Dream" is a term not much used for Desai's novels, which tends to be dominated by other themes like post structuralism and hybridity theory. This term is less used by Desai in the novel because she feels that the readers can better understand the conflicts of identity the characters face. Many of the characters of Desai, in fact, do deal with "The Great American Dream" particularly well and prefer not to avoid challenges to the things they believe to be true. It resulted from globalization, economic disparity between nations, and disappearance of culture, identity crisis and consumer-driven multiculturalism.

Colonialism was the one type of system in which the ruler of aristocrat class used to use their power to earn wealth by dominating over the common people. In the beginning when the common people were unable to bear the torture of colonist dictator then they start revolution. But we can't ignore the services rendered by the colonialists. They have promoted in many fields. Colonialism to post colonialism was just a shift of power from the foreign rulers to native rulers so the name of post colonialism came in existence. Later post colonist start same process of earning money and wealth that is called corruption, same as colonist. So during this period so many problems came in existence which is discussed in post-colonial literature. So now the next implementation process is being seen as the name of multiculturalism. There is no boundaries and no specific class, creed and language but mixture of all of them.

Multiculturalism has become a reality now. No nation can exist without a multicultural existence. No race, no religion, no caste, no tribe, no language can claim to be superior to others. The story of the novel is set in northeast India in 1986 -1987 at the foot of the Himalayas against the backdrop of an uprising of

Nepalese and other non-Indians against the Indian government. At the same time, the scene shifts repeatedly to the contemporaneous United States and to flashbacks to other places and times. Colonialism, Immigration and Western exposure transformed their 'native' identity into something quite different. Caught between two worlds, the characters negotiate a new social space; caught between two cultures and often two languages, the writer also negotiates a new literary space. They are all haunted by questions like who are they and where do they belong? Desai's novel takes place in the post-colonial India, an India still tied to the Western world. The novel shows how colonialism affects cultures and societies through generations and that's why the characters of this novel are in a state of constant psychological turmoil searching for an identity torn between two cultures, of which one seems to be superior to the other Euro-centrally.

The major themes running throughout this novel are ones 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. The novel also talks about Exile, Immigration, Diasporic displacement and Globalization. How people from the Third World move to developed countries for making some money face prejudices from multicultural societies living abroad. They never feel at home in a foreign land, and emptiness prevails through their consciousness.

The retired grumpy judge, Jemubhai Patel studied in a Victorian England, groomed by the Raj, all of which made him rise above his humble roots, to be a revered, fearsome and very confused judge. The Protagonist, Sai, his orphaned granddaughter, exiled from the convent to be home schooled discovering the first flush of youth, the first pangs of love, with her Nepalese tutor Gyan and Biju, the judge's cook's son who is moving from one restaurant job to another, as an illegal immigrant in New York. All these discussion states the core idea of novel that these are the problems which are occurred during the post-colonial Period. The multiculturalism is somewhere responsible for the problem of self-identity. The novel soon reveals that it deals with themes related to the postcolonial period, and that it examines the inheritance from the British Empire in India. It tells the story of those who stayed on in India and those who migrated. The title of *The Inheritance of loss* gives negative associations by use of the word "loss".

Attempting to get into the imperial center, the skin color becomes the eyesore and the biggest obstacle for the judge. He then figures out the disguise, by using powder puff. But back in India, powder is rarely used and if being used, it is only for the women. The family members cannot understand the judge's behavior and some even mock him. He is cut off from the colonial center, on the other he is cut off from his culture and his family. And the double isolation traps him in the "identity crisis". Sai does not dwell in the past and is glad to be out of the convent where she

lived while her parents were abroad. She is young enough to live in the moment, which helps her overlook some of the issues with her boyfriend Gyan (20 years old) issues that lurk just under the surface of their affair. As an Indian of a formerly powerful, educated and western-thinking family, Sai's identity and her relationship to India is very dissimilar from Gyan. Gyan's Nepalese family lives in poverty, struggling to make ends meet while providing him with a good education. Gyan's involvement in the separatist movement is the reflection of young Indians' deep rooted frustration, for which Gyan even sacrifices his love for Sai. A feeling of – “martyrdom crept over him” (TIL175).

Gyan is portrayed as the champion of ethnic rights. He is an activist of the Gorkha National Liberation Front which is fighting for the independence of the Nepali Gorkhas. A conscious awareness of their own rights made them demand recognition of their identity...

There was a report of new Dissatisfaction in the hills, gathering insurgency, men and guns. Their struggle for freedom has its roots in suppression just like Indian Independence movement. It was the Indian Nepalese this time, fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority.

The problem of post-colonial period is Gorkha National Liberation Federation, a Nepalese independence movement which quickly becomes violent. Gyan's commitment to the insurgency offers an ironic contrast with the commitment of his family to the colonial British army in earlier times, just as the judge's hatreds, learned in England, are ironically contrasted with his British affectations in later life.

The cook is as poor as poor could be, with nothing but a thin mattress, a tiny collection of old clothes and his culinary skills to his name. Still he dreams of modern amenities-refrigerators, microwaves, telephones-at night he dreams of mobile phones that fly off just before he presses the dialling pad. His sole hope is in his son, Biju, who flew to America some time back and is playing a cat and mouse game to be ahead of the immigration police as he looks for low-end, employee abusing jobs at fast-food joints. The cook talks a lot and is proud of the judge and Sai, and cooks up fascinating hero-worship stories about working for them.

During colonization, the British developed only that area of India that was rich in resources and could benefit them in some way, thus whole of India was not uniformly developed. Decolonization caused India to go through an abrupt economic depression, and poor people from underdeveloped areas of India had to migrate to other developed countries to earn a living. Biju is one such character from the novel, son of a poor cook who somehow manages to get a tourist visa to

USA. Biju joining a crowd of Indians scrambling to reach the visa counter at the U.S Embassy is one of the most harrowing scenes in the novel. He tells people on the visa counter that he's "civilized" enough to go to USA.

Biju stands for the young crazy men of the Third World who dream of going to West for money making; unflinchingly, they sacrifice their own culture and social convention. Through Biju, Desai explores the pain of the immigrants, the experiences of the world. This is also remarked upon when the man selling Biju his return ticket to India, is trying to convince him that he is making a mistake in going back. To him, it is "still a world ... where one side travels to be a servant and the other side travels to be treated like a king."

Biju, his disillusionment with the American dream, and his deplorable living conditions in America is also very important section of this novel. In his first letter Biju Writes:

Respected Pitaji no needs to worry. Everything is fine. The Manager has offered me a full-time waiter position. Uniform and food will be given by them. Angrezi Khana only, no Indian food and the owner is not from India, He is from America itself. (TIL20).

It describes how he lives like a rat in America, no health insurance when he breaks his arm and having to let it heal by itself, his desperate attempts to make phone calls to his father, and how his dream of making it in America finally dwindles. Mr. Kakkar gives a piece of his mind to Biju. Mr. Kakkar says that Biju is making a big mistake by going to India, where he is going to be treated as a servant; according to him, America is always like a king and those who live in America are kingly whereas all others who are living on the other side of the planet are like servants to that king. Mr. Kakkar tells Biju, "America is in the process of buying up the world. Go back, you'll find they own the business."

Biju's dreams about America are shattered. He was packed into rat infested apartments in Harlem Biju's life is a juggling act and not at all far from the poverty, which his father believed he has escaped. Biju jump from one bad job to another, always staying just a half-step ahead of the INS., in despair for them,

Oh the green card, the green card, the ... On TV: A taxi driver appeared on the screen: watching bootleg copies of American movies he had been inspired to come to America.

Negotiation of national identity, belonging, and co modification are not only features of multicultural formation in the capitalist centers of London or New York, but also in countries often considered on the periphery are shown. Through Biju, Desai shows how migrants, who "work outside" of their home countries, represent the liaisons to global capitalism. Viewing Biju as the bearer of the

commodity, provide through the narrative of Kalimpong's ethnic conflicts, we see that a particular culture is not limited to the nation state. Biju's heart remains in India, he misses his father and family ties even when he's earning dollars, Edward Said in his essay "The Mind of Winter" says that "The achievements of any exile are permanently undermined by his or her sense of loss".

His father boasts about his son being a manager in foreign land, but is unaware how Biju is tormented each day by his status of an immigrant who's discriminated for his color, his nationality and his accent. This is a good example of those immigrants who for earning a living have to see their generation losing ties with indigenous culture and traditions. The sense of loss never goes away, and remains with these characters as part of their displaced living.

"You lived intensely with others, only to have them disappear overnight, since the shadow class was condemned to movement. The men left for other jobs, towns, got deported, returned home, changed names. Sometimes someone came popping around a corner again, or on the subway then they vanished again. Addresses, phone numbers did not hold. The emptiness Biju felt returned to him over and over."

— Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*

The "mist" image is dominant. It is compared to "a moving creature". It has human attributes. It is compared to the "caress" in the hairs of Sai. It gets lifeful comparison when compared to a dragon. It blurs the thieves. It is so powerful, that the Sun is hardly mentioned.

The structural unity starts with the description of the five peaks and ends with the same. Like ants men would make their paths and civilization and their wars once again only to be washed once again. Sai lost her parents. The uprooted revolution gave Gyan loss and affected Sai too. It was an irony that United States, a country built on the finest principles was loss to, immigrant Biju. It is a paradox that the question of homeland was same as in Kalimpong, as is in America.

There is hope too in the novel. Father Booty tells Sai, to always look at the horizon that always helps. The damp wood was not giving right fire, when lit by the cook in the beginning of the narrative. In the end, the soggy match was tried to be lit by Sai and at last, it lit and flared. The beginning and the end with fire shows structure. The juxtaposition of qualities in the images also speaks of the poetic conversions in the famous novel by Kiran Desai.

In this novel we can see the sufferings of Biju who has lost his identity and culture in America and he need to change himself according to his surroundings. Gyan

shows his true patriotism for his identity and culture. Sai has lost her identity whose parents were died in a car accident in Russia. This novel is true representation of post-colonial period and multicultural aspects in true sense. It is simply about “LOSS” the most well-known perspectives of post-colonial period. Biju's frustration on his experience in America is almost similar to the judge's first experience in Britain. He realizes the emptiness and meaninglessness of himself and he likes people who are struggling to eke out a living, leaving their loving families. Sense of place is also immersing problem of multicultural society in which people feel frustrated and unsecure in different cultural and face a lot of problem while adjusting with different culture. It is one kind of loss of their culture and nativity. Multiculturalism can be seen as an ethno-political movement to build against western culture and civilization under the mantle of “cultural diversity” while it also can be seen as a separation or cultural nihilism which deepens the gaps between individuals. The characters in this novel believe that multiculturalism is to blame for ghettoizing minorities and impeding their integration into mainstream society. It has even worsened the situation of racial segregation and apartheid. Their struggle for recognition transcend the narrow confines of their community to give birth to a new culture that will allow them to exist as new beings in a new world order.

Identity is the important thing in the world which decides the value of themselves. In this novel, the character Biju we can see how he fights for his identity in America but he fails in it. In Uma Parameswaran's drama Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees express the loss of identity, culture, etc. In the drama everyone loses their hope in living in alienated society but Jayant is the character who withstands the situation and persuades to live in the alienated society without any identity like Boulevard tress. I compare the Bjiu with Jayant because he stands and finds his own identity but Biju fail in it if Biju understand this he would have survived in the alienated society.

“Face the world with what you are..!!”

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