



National Identity and Representation of India in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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ABSTRACT

Kiran Desai, daughter of eminent novelist Anita Desai, is a young and vibrant Indian English novelist with innate artistic talents. She has emerged on the Indian English fictional scene in late 1980s. She has created a distinct place for herself in the galaxy of Indian women novelists in English. In her first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) Desai artistically presents human foibles and eccentricities in a satirical tone tinged with humour. She has won international acclaim with the publication of her Man Booker Prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) which, on the one hand, deals with the social, political and economic problems of the people of contemporary society in India and, on the other, the social and psychological problems faced by Indian immigrants in America and England. At the outset, Kiran Desai presents the vast canvas of her themes and extends the expansive contours of homeland, inheritance, culture, hopes, and aspirations of diasporic characters and their sense of loss in a multicultural world. The present paper endeavours to bring forth the various aspects of India and its people.

Key Words: Identity, National, Representation, Society,

It is significant that Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) is known for its evocative power of English language and clear perception of her characters. It is undoubtedly a vivid creative commentary on modern dichotomies found in contemporary society. Being a product of complex intercultural forces, the personal, social and cultural dimensions of personality were enlivened by her diasporic experience. Moreover, her profound sense of involvement in the social, political and cultural life of India, her studious observation combined with great judiciousness and feminine sensibility and perception set her apart from other writers. Indeed, two worlds, one portraying India and the other English or American jostle together in her mind. But the major scenes in the novel reflect the Indian background, the lost world of rich multi-racial culture that attracts her to the motherland; India. At the same time, the picture of the multi-cultural environment in the West invests her sensibility in an expansive globalised society of new challenges and opportunities.

The Inheritance of Loss also deals with the struggles of underprivileged people of low economic background, at stressful times. The novel is set in 1980s in Kalimpong, a Himalayan town in India's north-eastern corner. The location changes from New York to London, recording racism, the plight of the Asian illegal immigrants in the West and the locale shifts to the insurgency spearheaded by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) in eastern India. Indeed, Kiran Desai's extraordinary new novel explores contemporary international issues such as globalisation, fundamentalism and terrorist violence with perspicacity and power.

The story of the novel revolves around the lives of two central characters - Jemubhai Patel, a retired Cambridge-educated judge, who lives in Kalimpong, in a kind of self-exile and loves only his dog-Mutt and his grand-daughter Sai, a sixteen year old orphan, who comes from St. Augustine's convent in Darjeeling to live with her only relative-her maternal grandfather.

In addition to these central characters there are important characters like Biju, Cook (Biju's Father), Gyan, Lola, Noni whose predicament is powerfully presented in the novel. The situations in Kalimpong are highly tense and explosive due to the political violence and turmoil created by the GNLF. The insurgents are deadly against all the outsiders and especially the Bengalis who according to them they are the root of their distress and hardships. Though the Indian Nepalese youth have been indulging in political violence and pressure tactics they have not succeeded in getting a separate homeland for themselves.

Kiran Desai brings the new idea for her novel by exposing the socio-political conflict in Kalimpong. She narrates the insurgency activities in Kalimpong where the Indian Nepalese demanded a separate state for themselves during the 1980s. The Gorkha National Liberation Front has been formed mainly by the Indian Nepalese youth who are fed up with their minority status in a place where they are in the majority. They want their own country or at least their own state in which to manage their own affairs. Their main grievance is that though they and their forefathers have sacrificed a lot for India they have been treated in the country as slaves. The Gorkhas consider it their birthright to fight for a separate homeland. They still remember how the British Army and later the Indian Army had used the brave Gorkha soldiers for their selfish ends. Therefore, the GNLF has taken a vow to get their demands fulfilled unconditionally. Desai has highlighted this complex picture of terrorism and political self-derivation with considerable clarity and vision:

They wanted their own country, or at least their own state, in which to manage their own affairs. Here, where India blurred into Bhutan Sikkim, and the army did pull-ups and push-ups, maintaining their tanks with Khaki paint in case the Chinese grew hungry for more territory than Tibet, it had always been a messy map. The papers sounded resigned. A great amount of warring, betraying, bartering had occurred; between Nepal, England, Tibet, India, Sikkim, Bhutan; Darjeeling stolen from here, Kalimpong plucked from there-despite, ah, despite the mist charging down like a dragon, dissolving, undoing, making ridiculous the drawing of borders. (IL 9)

Next in importance to the judge and Sai are the cook and his immigrant son, Biju, who also serves as a cook in New York restaurants. He has a peculiar habit of hop-scotching jobs from one New York restaurant to another. Despite living in a turbulent time of change, the judge belongs to a generation for whom identities are fixed and he is referred through most part of the novel as the judge and his cook, as the cook. It is only in the judge's memories of his painful student years in a racist, colonial England that he is referred to by his name, Jemubhai Patel.

The judge's neighbours include a coterie of Anglophiles-the sisters Lola and Noni; and Mrs. Sen, who is a passionate supporter of the United States, a Swiss National Father Booty, Uncle Potty, a boozier, the Nepali tutor Gyan (Sai's love interest) and several other characters with low income, both in Kalimpong and in the American restaurants. All these characters form a motley assortment of outsiders, retired persons, daydreamers and failures-some like Sai, are still in pursuit of happiness, while others have accepted a life where time stands still. Through the characters of Jemubhai Patel, the judge; and Biju, the cook's son, Kiran Desai wants to portray the dilemma faced by the immigrants. The judge's father sends him to Cambridge to study law, but it was a time when people of colour weren't particularly liked in Britain. He was ridiculed for his English accent; young girls held their noses as he passed insisting he smelled like curry. This rejection by foreigners instilled in his soul a feeling of shame, inferiority complex and a dislike to his heritage, his culture and the colour of his skin. Desai has rightly described it in the following words:

He forgot how to laugh, could barely manage to lift his lips in a smile and if he ever did, he held his hand over his mouth, because he couldn't bear anyone to see his gums, his teeth. They seemed too private ... He began to wash obsessively, concerned he would be accused of smelling, ... To the end of his life, he would never be seen without socks and shoes and would prefer shadow to light, faded days to sunny, for he was suspicious that sunlight might reveal him, in his hideousness, all too clearly. (IL 40)

The major theme running throughout the novel is one closely related to colonialism and the effects of post-colonialism: the loss of identity and the way it travels through generations as a bitter sense of loss. Being a young spirited novelist at the most conscious point of the age she highlights most of the outstanding issues and themes of contemporary society in her novel. Thus, Kiran Desai's self-confidence, committed views on terrorism and weaknesses of a poverty-stricken society are candid, bold and forthright. In addition to this, she focuses our attention on alienation, cultural clash, displacement, exile, exploitation, economic inequality, fundamentalism, globalisation, hybridity, insurgency, immigration, loss of identity, loneliness, multiculturalism, poverty and racial-discrimination.

Kiran Desai presents the miserable life of illegal immigrants in European countries so vividly. She also records the suppressed anguish, agony and sense of loss of the immigrants. Immigration depicted in the novel shows the voluntary emigration to Europe in quest of higher education or better living. In fact, the novel examines the different phases of Indian immigration to European countries. The first wave of immigrants reaches there for higher education. The second wave of immigrants is taken to Europe in quest for better living. Here we would like to quote the opinion of Jhumpa Lahiri : " I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world is more explicit and distressing--- (Sinha 230)."

Kiran Desai's vision of immigrant experience has a comprehensive canvas including the socio-cultural perspective, socio-economic arguments and the awareness of the matrix of home and homelessness. Thus the feeling of oppression is rooted in the psyche of immigrants. The romantic quest marked by nostalgia, glorification of native tradition, lingering shadows of lost relationship and an urge for native food, language and habits, are not the ultimate periphery of the immigrant experience reconstructed in *The Inheritance of Loss*. There is also a reassessment of East in the context of West and expansion of the horizon of Western thought that can accommodate the best of the Orient without a reciprocal interaction of the two currents of human thought, the comprehensive, humanistic and pluralistic vision of the world remains a utopia. The prosperity of humanity at large beyond the national cultural codes, can ensure a more stable and progressive community pacing fast in search of global society. Edward Said suggests: "Nativism is not the only alternative. There is the possibility of a more generous and pluralistic vision of the World (52)."

Actually, the novel is about patterns of loss- the loss of selfhood, identity, nationality and loyalty. Longing is the recurrent theme of the novel. The Indian immigrants in America long for home, they long for love and they long for acceptance.

In this context, Carole Boyce Davies comments:

Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Homesickness or homelessness, the rejection of home or longing for home become motivating factors in this rewriting. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it (*Shameem* 51-52).

Longing is perhaps the emotion that the characters cherish in this novel. They long for home, they long for love, and they long for acceptance- yet rarely are they skilled at locating any of the above.

Desai wants us to explore the pain of the immigrant and the unfairness of a world in which one section of people travel to be servants, and the other section travel to be treated like kings. Writing with wit and perception, Kiran Desai makes an elegant and thoughtful study of diasporic families.

But it isn't only physical poverty that Desai's characters seem to recognise. All of them seem to crave for a sense of belonging. What

binds these seemingly disparate characters are a shared historical legacy and a common experience of humiliation.

The inequalities in economics, culture, quality of life, and ability to maintain relationships with one's family and one's people are perhaps the best examples of the fact that globalisation is not a "new" world system that embraces "positive" ideals such as multiculturalism, progress, and modernity, but is, rather, a newer version of the same form of world domination upon which imperialism and colonialism were founded. Often, theorists of globalisation attempt to posit it as precisely the opposite, the opposite of what Desai's novel presents-as a world system which is somehow different from the ways in which dominant nations of the "past" exploited weaker nations. India is an example.

Indians, in search of greener pastures or sources of livelihood for subsistence, are ever more than ready to take off to foreign land away from their homes and families, culture and tradition, society and nation, i.e. they perforce or willingly get uprooted from their soil of birth or what is affectionately, called the motherland. This separation from the motherland enshrines the predicament of the Indian diaspora. Richly interspersed with some brilliant passages or lines of life's philosophy inheriting in meanings of rootlessness, alienation, the novel ends on an optimistic note enkindling in the humanity a large-hearted bravado to look beyond all despairs. Modern world changes every second, peripheries change and cultures merge and submerge to create the New World-Sai resolves to be free of past and stay afloat in the present to engrave her future. This reminds us of T. S. Eliot's poetry on the concept of time.

Time past and time future

Allow but a little consciousness

To be conscious is not to be in time

But only in time can the moment in the rose garden,

Be remembered; involved with past and future.

Only through time is conquered. (Four Quartets 16)

Nature promotes that sensibility which is the foundation of human love and can invoke passions that promote human relationship. The love story of Sai and Gyan, her mathematics tutor gets refreshed time to time by the tender touches of nature. Both of them love to enjoy the beauties of nature and feel enlightened in its lap. Even the nick names they selected for each other were taken from the beautiful objects of nature - Sai called Gyan "Kaju" and he called her "Khishmish". Nature is the source of enormous energy, provided we aspire to use it.

The roadside Indian customers who eat in *dhabas* do not have printed menus for their preparations food. On being asked by the customers, the waiter announces rather loudly in a breathless manner, as if chanting a well-memorized Vedic mantra, the items of edible preparations, as if they formed one endless word:

Banana fritter, pineapple fritter, apple fritter, apple surprise, apple charlotte, apple berry, bread and butter, jam of tart, caramel custard, tips pudding, rumtum pudding, jam roly-poly, ginger steam, date pudding, lemon pancake, egg custard, orange custard, coffee custard, strawberry custard, trifle baked Alaska, mango soufflé, lemon soufflé, coffee soufflé, chocolate soufflé, goose berry soufflé, hot chocolate, pudding, cold coffee pudding, coconut pudding, milk pudding, rum habarum cake, brandy snapper, stew guava, stew plum, stew apple, stew peach, stew apricot, stew mango, pie chocolate, tart apple, tart gooseberry, tart lemon, tart jam, tart marmalade, tart bina, floating island, pineapple, upside down, pineapple, upside down, gooseberry, upside down, plum, upside down, peach, upside down, raisin, upside down.-(64)

Desai gives a very faithful portrayal of what is commonly heard in these eating places all over India, which makes the reader initially confused but cheers him up once the puzzling interminable word has been deciphered, and split into many intelligible words after proper spaces and punctuation marks, as is being given below:

Banana fritter, pineapple fritter, apple fritter, apple surprise, apple charlotte, apple berry, bread and butter, jam of tart, caramel custard, tips pudding, rumtum pudding, jam roly-poly, ginger steam, date pudding, lemon pancake, egg custard, orange custard, coffee custard, strawberry custard, trifle baked Alaska, mango soufflé, lemon soufflé, coffee soufflé, chocolate soufflé, goose berry soufflé...(64)

The novel explores the plight of humanity in contemporary times when human lives are determined by foreign forces and political events. *The Inheritance of Loss* is truly a post-colonial novel or more appropriately a neo-colonial novel for its theme of East-West encounter, its urban setting, its use of language, where we find several instances of transliterations and use of multi-cultural language. In the days of internationalization of literatures, it is very apt for Kiran Desai to choose a subject which is 'worldly' acknowledged. The landscape of the place which goes a long way to make *The Inheritance of Loss* a truly evocative novel.

As a gifted writer, Kiran Desai keenly observes the existing social values, political issues and ideologies and depicts them through the characters of her fictional world with exceptional creative imagination and deep analytical insight. She attempts to unravel the hidden as well as complex inner urges of men and women characters and portrays them with evocative power.

Conclusion

Kiran Desai, the winner of the prestigious Man Booker Prize, for her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) explores colonial neurosis, multiculturalism, modernity, immigrants' bitter experiences, insurgency, and the game of possession and impact of globalisation. Desai makes the novel an Indian treating subjects concerning Indian life in India as well as in abroad. Politically, India was hit by insurgency. It imposed a big threat to law and order. The novel portrays the Indian society as poverty-stricken; moreover illiteracy, unemployment, xenophobia, cultural conflicts, traditional values, customs, practices, and multiplicity of languages, religions, faiths constitute the very structure of the society in which the novelist is deeply interested. Desai writes of post-colonial India of its poor as well as its privileged, with a cold eye, and a warm heart.

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