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Romance and Revolution: A Study of Gyan and Sai's Relationship in Kiran Desai's "The Inheritance of Loss"

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ABSTRACT:

This dissertation seeks to explore the budding romance between Gyan and Sai in Kiran Desai's Booker winning 2006 novel "The Inheritance of Loss". The dissertation examines why and how this romance begins, how it develops, and what leads to a rift between two young lovers. It is a process which takes into account the psychological, historical as well as political aspect of their relationship. The dissertation argues that Gyan and Sai belong to two different historical spaces. Sai has a reclusive existence at Cho Oyu – which is cut off from the historical momentum of the time. Gyan is slowly drawn into the vortex of GNLF movement which sees history being shaped.

This dissertation rests on three theoretical planks: Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea of the "waiting room of history", Benedict Anderson's theory of nationalist simultaneity and Homi Bhabha's theory of colonial time-lag. Depending on these theories, this dissertation tries to analyze this relationship in terms of broader postcolonial issues.

Keywords: GNLF – Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson, Dipesh Chakrabarty

Introduction:

Published in 2006, Kiran Desai's "The Inheritance of Loss" is set against the background of GNLF movement which rocked the valley in the 1980s. Significantly, Kiran Desai begins the novel with a robbery at Cho Oyu and writes: "It was February of 1986. Sai was seventeen, and her romance with Gyan the mathematics tutor was not even a year old."

The sentence suggests how Desai wants her readers to look at the romance of Gyan and Sai. In 1986, the unrest in the hills reached its peak, with the police gunning down 13 GNLF supporters in a Kalimpong meeting. Evidently Kiran Desai chooses to explore a young romance which unfolds as the hill is simmering with unrest and violence.

Oddly enough, when the stories begin, neither Gyan nor Sai is much bothered by whatever is happening around them. Of course, they know of the violence and insurgency, but has little inclination to figure out the problems in depth. Even if they have interest – it is a very superficial form of interest. But at times it is difficult to resist the influence of the time – the influence which looks like peer pressure. The GNLF movement, or rather the moral of GNLF movement changes Gyan and fills him with a sense of deprivation and anger which he never felt was in him.

Gyan might have reasons to be angry with his state of helplessness, but venting it out on Sai hardly seems to be a solution because Sai has little political awareness and is not responsible for the misery of youth like Gyan. Initially, it seems that Desai is writing a novel in which the romance of Gyan and Sai is projected as a calf love story which will give away to politics ethnicity and other more important issues. But Desai seamlessly makes the romance a central part of the narrative. Gyan does not stop loving Sai. Sai doesn't find another guy to replace Gyan. As the novel ends, they are still in love, but the questions of class, ethnicity and privilege have turned them into rivals.

Literature Review

The Inheritance of Loss (2006) is a Booker winning novel and naturally critics and academicians analyzed the novel from different angles.

Pankaj Mishra, reviewing "The Inheritance of Loss" in "The New York Times" called Kiran Desai as a novelist "wounded by the West". This reading is significant because it has projected the romance of Gyan - Sai as an allegory of colonial tension influencing personal space.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's "Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference" has helped to write the dissertation.

Chakrabarty explains that historicist thought places the colonised person to a place where he takes time to act, political maturity or activism eludes him. Historically, a colonised person is sent to a "waiting room". In "The Inheritance of Loss", Cho Oyu is a symbolic waiting room in which Sai is trapped.

Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" provides an interesting theory to explain the narrative. Anderson's theory explains the zone of temporality Gyan chooses to step in. Anderson's writing describes the nation as a community moving through "homogenous, empty time". In this imagined community strangers turn contemporaries. The Gorkhaland Movement provides Gyan the much-needed platform through which he joins that simultaneity.

Literary criticism has largely ignored the regional historiography of Darjeeling, while discussing the novel. Townsend Middleton's "The Demands of Recognition: State Anthropology and Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling" is an interesting work. The work deals with the temporal logic of tribal demands and shows how administration refuses to entertain those demands.

Research Methodology

The dissertation follows a close-reading approach. It uses two theories, one of Dipesh Chakraborty and the other is of Benedict Anderson. In terms of research methodology, it is qualitative research.

Research Questions: -

The first question is why does Sai fall in love with a jobless youth who, in no way can match her socio-economic background?

How does history and politics come in the way of their blooming romance? Are both Gyan and Sai aware of this historical-political tension in their relationship?

Does Kiran Desai give any hint that they might reconcile in future? Or, are they forever separated?

The Little World of Sai

To understand the dynamics of Gyan and Sai's romance, one must figure out Sai's lonely life. She lost her parents at a young age and lives with a grandfather who is indifferent. Her world means Cho Oyu and Mon Ami—the property of Noni and Lola. And occasionally she speaks with her cook, Panna Lal, Father Booty and Uncle Potty.

In the beginning of the novel, in chapter 12, Kiran Desai explains how reclusive her life is:

"Younger, no doubt, because she'd lived such a sheltered life and older, no doubt, because she spent all her time with retired people."

Thus, Sai has little idea of the goings on in Darjeeling. She reads English novels from the Gymkhana Club Library (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Cider with Rosie*, *Life with Father*). Ironically enough Sai is seen wearing a T-shirt that said "Free Tibet". It is a political and social slogan demanding an end to China's control over Tibet and Tibetan people. The person wearing the T-shirt has zero political awareness, she is cut-off from whatever is happening around her. History, or, rather the making of history does not interest her. Herein lies the basic difference between Sai and Gyan. The girl is blissfully unaware of the historical-political turmoil the valley has been plunged into. The boy wants to witness the process of history in making.

Sai's situation comes close to Dipesh Chakrabarty's theory. According to Chakrabarty historicism often relegates colonized subjects to a 'not yet' situation. Sai's existence at Cho Oyu is a symbolic waiting room. It is a place where political awareness and historical agency rarely develop.

In chapter 18, Kiran Desai captures Sai's sense of disconnect in a beautiful passage:

"The country, Sai noted, was coming apart at the seams: police unearthing militants in Assam, Nagaland, and Mizoram; Punjab on fire with Indira Gandhi dead and gone in October of last year..."

Sai 'noted', but there is no hint that such events bother her much.

Gyan - a rank outsider at Cho Oyu

Gyan is a student of accounting at Kalimpong College. The principal of the college recommends him as a tutor for Sai. This recommendation gives Gyan an entry into the upper-class world of Cho Oyu. Gyan lives in Bong Busti. The name suggests that it is a place for the poor and marginalized.

Initially, Gyan has a completely professional approach towards the tuition. Gyan's father is a teacher at a tea plantation school beyond Darjeeling, despite that the family is not that solvent. Otherwise Gyan would not come to teach Sai at Cho Oyu on a stormy day when it is "hammering down".

At this point in the novel, at Chapter 18, Gyan is driven by the necessity of pocket-money. The idea of romance is yet to cross his mind—:

"He was worried about the tuition and worried his payment might be denied him, that he and Sai had fallen far behind in the syllabus, so he told himself, slipping about the slopes, clutching onto plants."

Sai is 16 and is not much bothered by the ethnicity (Gyan is a Nepali) or the socio-economic status of her young tutor. At Cho Oyu, there is one gentleman who resents Gyan's working-class presence. Jemubhai Patel is a retired ICS. He is Cambridge-educated and has little patience for a young graduate of a local college.

Jemubhai teases and humiliates Gyan — which is a reflection of his colonial arrogance and overconfidence. Instead of praising Gyan for coming in such a stormy day, he humiliates the young graduate:

"You might be adept at mathematics, but common sense appears to have eluded you."

Jemubhai, for no obvious reason goes on insulting Gyan because Jemubhai feels Gyan is a misfit in his colonial bungalow:

"He detected an obvious lack of familiarity, a hesitance with the cutlery and the food, yet he sensed Gyan was someone with plans." Next, he tries to corner Gyan over his knowledge of poems, which is once again an attack on an individual who does not belong to his class —

"So, what poets are you reading these days, young man?" He felt a sinister urge to catch the boy off guard."

This situation is humiliating for Gyan and embarrassing for Sai. Gyan does not respond much at that moment, but he remembers the insult and it keeps ranking in his mind. In Chapter 22, at Thapa's canteen, with his friends Chhang, Bhang, Owl and Donkey, Gyan mimics the old anglophile patriarch:

"Everyone in the canteen laughed as he mimicked the accent:

"What poets are they reading these days, young man?"

Gyan mimics the retired judge to entertain his friends, but he remembers the insult and later on plays a key role in the robbery at Cho Oyu, during which Jemu Bhai's BSA-five shot-barrel pump gun is looted along with other guns.

Thus, Jemubhai's colonial-snooty attitude drives a wedge between the young lovers, although they are unaware of it. It is ironical that colonial hangover is such a powerful factor even in 1986, Darjeeling, almost four decades after India became free of the British colonial rule.

Romance and Revolution in the hill

Sai's blooming love for Gyan is an important part of the narrative. At the same time it is worth exploring what draws Sai to Gyan. It is not that Gyan is the most handsome young man in the town. But it is true that he is the only individual from the opposite gender who is around her age. Sai is 16 and Gyan is 20. At 16, one cannot call a girl a child anymore. Sai is a teenager and seeking approval from the opposite gender. Gyan, in the form of her mathematics tutor, provides her with the approval. Kiran Desai brilliantly portrays the tension in Sai's mind. At chapter 18, Sai repeatedly apologizes to Gyan for her grandfather's behaviour. Desai notes:

"For the first time his eyes rested directly upon her as if he were eating her alive in an orgy of the imagination—aha! At last, the proof."

Desai details every small talk they have and show how Gyan slowly begins liking this convent-educated, westernised girl despite having so much inhibition in his mind. Even normal conversation reflects the tension in Gyan's mind — As Sai says she uses Lux and Sunsilk, Gyan realizes she belongs to a different economic background, but he is unable to reveal that he is not from a wealthy background:

"He couldn't admit that his mother bought the homemade brown soap that was sold in large rectangles in the market, blocked, sliced off and sold cheap."

Up to a certain point in the novel political tension fails to cast its shadow on the young lovers. Desai describes their first kiss in an almost lyrical manner:

"A fine drizzle spelled an ellipsis on the tin roof... Moments clocked by precisely, and finally she couldn't bear it—she closed her eyes and felt the terrified measure of his lips on hers, trying to match one shape with the other."

Like any young lovers, they give each other cute names like Momo-Kaju and Kishmish and move around the town as if there is no tomorrow. At Gompu, they eat together. Although Gyan uses his fingers, Sai uses a tablespoon.

But they are too much in love to notice such differences which Desai memorably calls '... dumpling stage of love!' The passage will explain —

"But during the time they ate together at Gompu's, Gyan had used his hands without a thought and Sai ate with the only implement on the table — a tablespoon, rolling up her roti on the side and nudging the food onto the spoon with it. Noticing this difference, they had become embarrassed and put the observation aside."

They explore all the interesting places like sericulture institute, they take the toy train, visit Darjeeling zoo and Zang Dhok Palri Phodang Monastery on Durpin Dara.

All these things are happening while Darjeeling is burning:

"Gyan and Sai's romance was flourishing and the political trouble continued to remain in the background for them."

Kiran Desai gives a description of the slogans written on the walls to capture the mood of the time:

"Gyan was twenty and Sai sixteen, and at the beginning they had not paid very much attention to the events on the hillside, the new posters in the market referring to the events on the hillside, the new posters in the market referring to old discontents, the slogans scratched and painted on the side of government offices and shops. "We are stateless," they read. "It is better to die than live as slaves," "We are constitutionally tortured. Return our land from Bengal."

Insidiously, questions of politics and history creep between the lovers and things are no longer the same.

Gyan becomes a part of the history

In Chapter 26, Gyan has his tryst with history while buying rice in the market. While buying rice, he watches a GNLF procession and spots his college friends there – Padam, Jungi, Dawa, Dilip. As Gyan begins walking with the procession, he has a thrilling feeling of being a part of history.

"As he floated through the market, Gyan had a feeling of history being wrought, its wheels churning under him, for the men were behaving as if they were being featured in a documentary of war, and Gyan could not help but look on the scene already from the angle of nostalgia, the position of a revolutionary."

It is a defining moment in Gyan's life, as well as in his romance with Sai. The sense of history makes a new man out of him. Desai portrays this change, this transformation in small details:

Sitting in the cramped shack of Ex-Army Thapa's Canteen, he begins to think of the deprivation and neglect his community has been suffering over the years:

"Fired by alcohol, he finally submitted to the compelling pull of history and found his pulse leaping to something that he felt entirely authentic."

Gyan's situation can be described through the theory of Benedict Anderson. This is how Anderson describes nationalism as a shared experience of "homogenous, empty time". It is a time, a moment in which an individual walks through with many compatriots.

It is not necessary for the individual to know his/her compatriot's personality, as long as he/she has the feeling that he is being part of a larger historical movement. In Gyan's case it is not only history, Gyan is also driven by a sense of masculinity — a feeling of finally arriving into adulthood which is not possible in the comfortable world of Cho Oyu.

"It was a masculine atmosphere and Gyan felt a moment of shame remembering his tea parties with Sai on the veranda, the cheese toast, queen cakes from the bakery, and even worse, the small warm space they inhabited together."

The association with GNLF breeds a strange resentment in Gyan. Earlier he was a jobless young man looking for

a steady job. Of course, he was aware of his ancestor's contribution to the army but he never appeared passionate about his Gorkha background. Even the class-difference with Sai didn't come in the way of their romance. But now a feeling of deprivation drives him. The romantic youth turns into an angry young man.

But instead of roaring against an unjust government or administration, he picks up his girlfriend as the punching

bag who has little to do with the unfortunate state of the Gorkhas.

"It maddened him that people lived here in this enormous house and property, taking hot baths, sleeping

alone in spacious rooms, and he suddenly remembered the cutlets and boiled peas dinner with Sai and the judge, the judge's "Common sense seems to have evaded you, young man."

Suddenly, for Gyan, Sai is no longer just a girl. She is a representative of the upper class who is responsible for the poverty and lack of opportunities. It is amusing that Gyan does not analyze any socio-economic factors to blame Sai (As (cut) a student of accountancy he should have a way with logic and statistics). He begins with a question which has little relevance:

"Why do you celebrate Christmas? You're Hindus and you don't celebrate Id or Guru Nanak's birthday or even Durga Puja or Dusshera or Tibetan New Year."

Gyan questions the anglicized, westernized lifestyle of Sai at Cho Oyu, but the deprivation of the Gorkha tribe does not have much link with Sai's lifestyle. If the Gorkha tribe feels neglected it is a case of a long-standing neglect by the Central-govt. It is unfortunate that Gyan's rebellion is misdirected.

It is such a feeling for which he is ready to sacrifice his love:

"But so fluid a thing was love. It wasn't firm, he was learning, it wasn't a scripture; it was a wobbliness that lent itself to betrayal, taking the mold of whatever he poured it into."

Conclusion

This dissertation shows how political tension can bring tension into a romantic relationship. As the novel ends, Gyan still hopes to win back the love of Sai, as he promises to find out the kidnapped dog Mutt - a darling of Jemubhai. But it remains uncertain if things will become normal between them once again. Their relationship falters because they belong to two distinct historical spaces. Sai is stuck in a ahistorical existence at Cho Oyo but Gyan is drawn into the vortex of GNLF movement where, he thinks, history is being shaped. The dissertation shows that history cannot be in placed in different rooms and this gap in history can spoil relationship, even if that is a calf love like Gyan and Sai's. And strangely enough, their souring of the relationship is a classic case of history repeating itself. Something similar happened with Jemubhai and his wife Nimi as well. Jemubhai felt the colonial pressure but

Nimi was stuck in a place where she was unaware of the effects of colonialism or independence. She failed to adapt and they drifted apart. That is the real inheritance of loss Gyan and Sai carry.

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