

Multicultural Perspective: A Study in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

The present paper endeavors to analyze the Multicultural perspectives in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). In this novel, she explores colonial neurosis, multiculturalism, racial discrimination, changing human relations, postcolonial chaos and shares the burden of inferiority in the third world migrants. Multiculturalism is an important characteristic found in this novel. Desai presents a cynical view of multiculturalism which is confined to the Western metropolis. Most of Desai's characters display a constant obsession with western thought. Jemubhai Patel, a living artifact of colonialism, his granddaughter Sai, middle class and westernized, a foreigner in a way to her own culture and country of origin and there is Biju, the cook's son, one of the numerous illegal immigrants in New York, serving in various restaurants, in the hope of securing a Green Card. All these desperate characters have been diminished when they encounter the West. They are in a "to be or not to be" position as they struggle to embrace the new culture and at the same time distancing themselves from their own culture too. Though they try to assimilate and are willing to accept the diversity of new culture, what they finally receive is humiliation and negation. There arises identity crisis which most of the Indian struggling despite Post-colonial reactions in which endeavor to vigor to native culture and its values.

Keywords: Assimilation, Colonialism, Globalization, Immigration, Multiculturalism

1. Introduction

The present paper endeavors to analyze the Multicultural perspectives in Kiran Desai's 'The Man Booker Prize' award winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Kiran Desai, in this novel explores various themes like colonial neurosis, multiculturalism, racial discrimination, changing human relations, postcolonial chaos and other racial ethnic issues. Multiculturalism is the legacy Desai inherited from her parents and grandparents. She has lived abroad and visited Delhi every year. She is convivial with all cultures and slightly explosive to its futility prevalent in them. Multiculturalism is an important characteristic of this novel. Desai presents a

cynical view of multiculturalism which is confined to the Western metropolis. In one of the articles, Pankaj Mishra points out, "Kiran Desai's extraordinary new novel manages to explore, with intimacy and insight, just about every contemporary international issue: globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence" (Times 2006)¹.

This novel is not set entirely in India and is presented with complex structure and multi-layer narrative that takes the reader across the nations. It skillfully presents the nature of life between the East and the West, and the role of an immigrant. Desai tries to expose how Indian immigrants in the quest of better job perspectives and the illusion of the superiority of the West struggle between

their native identities and the myth of globalization. The imbalance between the two worlds changes the thoughts and feelings of the persons concerned.

2. Indian Culture in Transition

The novel is an excellent study of Indian Culture which undergoes a considerable change. *The Inheritance of Loss* weaves several interconnected stories into a composite whole. The stories are about the losses incurred by a set of secluded and displaced people. The feeling of being caught between two continents that creates an “in between” space in the novel. The characters in the novel like Jemu, Lola Pixie, Noni, Biju, Cook, Sai and Gyan reflect the pain of transition. They are in a “to be or not to be” position, fail to assimilate new culture and give up original culture in totality. There arises the crisis of identity which most of the Indians are struggling to cope with despite Post-colonial reactions in an endeavor to revive native culture and its values.

3. Impact of Colonization

The plot begins with Sai, a teenage orphan girl living with her grandfather, a western educated judge, Jemubhai Patel, in a place called Kalimpong, lying in the Indian side of the Himalayas. He is an inheritor of English hyphenated identity. Sai also experiences cultural estrangement as she fails to adjust with the eastern ways. She has a romantic affair with her mathematics tuition master Gyan, who belongs to Nepali Gurkha mercenary, but he moves away from her obvious privilege and falls in with a group of Nepali rebels. There is Jemu Bai's cook's son Biju, one of the numerous illegal immigrants in New York, serving in various restaurants, in the hope of securing a Green Card. All these desperate characters have been diminished when they encounter the West. They are the products of centuries of domination by the privileged powers of the West and abject humiliation seems to be their destined lot.

4. Sense of Loss and Alienation

Sense of loss is one of the important aspects in the plot; as all the characters try their best to survive in the modern world, unsure of whether they will ever see the benefits of globalization and unnecessarily feel inferior due to their

Indian Heritage. The novel also shows that voluntary migration for studies to European countries affect the culture of the Indian people. Jemu, the central character of the novel, originally belongs to Pipit, educated at Cambridge, got through I.C.S to become a judge. In this entire process of making, he goes on adopting the West as a model of excellence; he sacrifices his nativity. He thinks that he is more British than Indian; he regards himself superior to all other people. He does not like his wife because he is of the opinion that Indian women are not as beautiful as their English counterparts. He orders his uneducated cook Panna Lal to prepare and serve food in a western style. The cook often fails to adjust with the judge. He even hates his granddaughter Sai because of his cultural trauma. He is always attracted towards the western values as a result of which he loses his original identity, “The judge could live here, in his shell, this skull, with the solace of being foreigner in his own country” (29)². He is one of the ridiculous Indians who cannot rid themselves of what they had broken their souls to learn and their Anglophilia can only turn into self-hatred. Jammu cannot “free himself from colonial neurosis” (46)². He is not comfortable with either of the language. He would be displaced by absolutely everyone, English and Indian both. The pet dog Mutt is the only companion for Jemubhai. Sai comments, “Grandfather more Lizard than Human, dog more human than dog” (32)².

5. Migration due to Globalization

Globalization and the shrinking of geographical boundaries between countries is a primary factor of widespread emigration. The story also depicts the transitional state India is in and analyses the cause for the need of emigration. The process of globalization however has its anomalies, especially for the poor of the Third World nations who are eagerly waiting for a better future. They are made to struggle in their Homeland and the exile they chose lands them in further suffering. The Immigrants' painful experience is embittered by racial discrimination. Biju, the son of Jemu's cook feels ecstatic when he got selected to work in New York. The cook Panna Lal is a person who never learns to live life with dignity and responsibility amidst his own people. His prime goal is to settle his beloved son Biju in a respectable place. To fulfill this, he sends him to US. Biju's displacement is the impact of globalization. As Tessa Hadley observes, “Kiran

Desai addresses herself to an Indian Culture in which globalization isn't imagined but experienced, whether in exile abroad or as a result of painful social and cultural displacements within the country itself" (25)³.

6. Racial Discrimination

In America, soon Biju encounters the working conditions, racial discrimination and immigration laws; he is enlisted as 'shadow class' (102)². Biju who goes to New York with bright hopes, soon discovers authentic colonial experience as how Third World poor natives are exploited and humiliated in the West as, "They drew the lines at crucial junctures" (23)². The authentic colonial experience is narrated, "on the top, rich colonial, and down below to poor native Colombian, Tunisian Ecuadorian above all the restaurant was French, but the below in the kitchen, it was Mexican and Indian" (21)². It is evident that in the process of shift of culture, there is an unconditional acceptance of American MacDonalization with little space for ethno-centric cultural identity.

Biju spends his early days working as a waiter in New York where, there was "Green Card check" (16)² on employees. He is relieved by a manager, who advises him "just disappeared quietly" (16)² but in reality Indians are discouraged to get immigration lottery and hence Biju continues to struggle by the owners and from one low paid job to that of another one for thirty years. He is frightened to see the lot of illegal immigrants; "there are those who loved and died illegal in America and never saw their families, not for ten years, for twenty years, thirty, never again" (99)². He is overwhelmed by fugitive roll, nostalgic reminiscences and racial discrimination; soon he is disillusioned by the West. Even the glamorous image of the West changes into hatred; "There was a whole world in the basement kitchens of New York" (22)², "..... Biju started to hate the white people to the core of his heart and began to consider them that they had done India 'great harm' "(77)². Jemu also experiences racial discrimination against Indians while he was studying in England thereafter too.

7. Assimilation and Otherness

Though the migrated people try their best to assimilate and are willing to accept the diversity of new culture, what they finally receive is humiliation and negation. Desai

considers that the legal formalities are more complex and challenging in the issues of assimilating with the new culture. She clearly differentiates the rank and privileges of green card holders with that of illegal immigrants like Biju. Harish Sawhney writes: "Desai portrays migration as a universal, multifaceted experience, rescuing it from the clutches of myth and fetishism. Almost fifty years after the judge went to England. Biju, the cook's son leads a grueling existence as an illegal immigrant of New York" (2)⁴. These people try hard to survive even without proper shelter and home. They not only suffer by their nostalgic feelings towards their home land, but also are denied to get proper personal relationship in the alien land, which is the ultimate purpose of any human being for that matter.

8. Return to Native

Biju is unsuccessful as an American because he too remains rooted to his father's love bound by his cultural origins. Biju voluntarily abandons the promise of the new World, the glitz and grime of America, just for the sake of his father. When he hears about the Gurkha insurgency in Darjeeling, he is assailed by misgivings about his father's safety and immediately decides to return, lest he should never be able to see his father again. On his return, the Gurkha movement does not even spare him and he loses all his savings and belongings. But he never worries about his loss because what matters to him is that he is finally at home and his reunion with his father. As Sai looks at the joyful reunion, "the five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly that truth was apparent" (132)².

9. Multiculturalism

Desai asserts that India is a land of Multiculturalism. Most of Desai's characters, display a constant obsession with western thought. Jemubhai Patel, a living artifact of colonialism, his granddaughter Sai, middle class and westernized, a foreigner in a way to her own culture and country of origin. She is the English speaking, abandoned offspring of a scientist couple, "both educated with an eye to the West" who subsequently die in Moscow, leaving her in the care of a hateful grandfather. In the process of academic learning in convent school, Western Christian values enter into her blood. As a result Sai also loses indigenous cultural values. The biggest loss she feels

profoundly is the love of Gyan. Gyan, Sai's tutor and lover, a member of Gurkha National Liberation Front, is an ethnic Nepalee in India. Gyan, who hates western style, hates her for embracing the western style of celebrating Christmas. Due to her convent schooling, Sai has imbibed western manners, but Gyan wants her to respect and follow only Indian customs. So he expresses his contempt by telling her, "You are like slaves, that's what you are, running after the west, embarrassing yourself. It's because of people like you we never get anywhere" (163)². Gyan is frustrated and he breaks her love affair with Sai owing to her hybrid culture.

10. Impact of Globalization

Globalization, instead of leading society to a well organized and balanced fabric, affects adversely the perspectives of personal relationship and human consciousness. What is required is not the 'McDonaldization' of society especially for the Asian countries in which poverty is much more concentrated than in the European countries. In this regard, Robe Pope's words hold true: "In every domain of language, Literature and culture there is an acute tension and sometimes a flat contradiction between globalizing process of standardization and localizing process of differentiation" (139)⁵.

11. Conclusion

The characters Jemu, Biju, Sai and Gyan are all generic in reflecting the dilemma of transition, "All the characters struggle with their cultural identity and forces of modernization while trying to maintain their emotional connection to one another" (Carlisle 34)⁶. It is through these characters Kiran Desai explores the various aspects of Multicultural clashes and globalization. Thus, Multiculturalism in *The Inheritance of Loss* addresses different cultural formations and the dilemma of cultural diversity within and outside the nation.

12. References

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