

A Post-Colonial Overview in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

Among the modern Indian writers in English, Kiran Desai occupies a unique place for the diversity of presentation of plots, themes, characters and situations in her novels. She won the Man Booker's prize for her novel 'The Inheritance of Loss.' The novel exhibits the post-colonial sensibilities and dilemmas with the delineation of the characters who are often victims of the alienation and suffer from issues related to personality which leaves them perturbed eventually. Even though the former colonization has ended, it still has great impact on the lives of people involved in the whole enterprise of the colonization. The characters in the novel exhibit the same depressing circumstances as Jemubhai Patel (a retired judge) who had suffered a great deal during his stay in England and when he returned back, he treated his native people in the same manner. Biju is the only son of the judge's cook is another example of it. In the present paper, it is proposed to focus on the post-colonial sensibilities and dilemmas in Desai's novel.

Key Words: Colonialism, Imperialism, Post-colonialism, Alienation, Identity crisis, etc.

Kiran Desai(B 1971) is one of the most talented writers of her generation. She was fifteen years old when she left for England with her mother, Anita Desai, who is also a well known author. After a year they moved to the U.S.A, where Desai has lived till date. She is a part of the Indian diaspora and she is a citizen of India and a permanent resident of the United States.

Her first novel, '*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*' was published in 1995,when she was still a creative writing student at Colombia University. For this novel she won the *Betty Trask Award*. Her second novel '*The Inheritance of Loss*', which appeared in 2006,took her almost eight years to complete. For this novel she won the 2006 *Man Booker* prize, and she is

the youngest female writer ever to win the prestigious prize. Kiran Desai points out regarding the every contemporary international issue: globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality and terrorist violence. The desperate characters of her novels are bound by a shared historical legacy. After the withdrawal of the English, the post-colonial period, countries of the world have suffered.

The novel *'The Inheritance Loss'* is set in the mid-1980s in a Himalayan town in India by the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga and also New York. The story is centered on two main characters: Biju and Sai. Biju is an illegal Indian immigrant living in the United States, son of a cook who works for Sai's grandfather. Sai is a girl living in mountainous Kalimpong with her maternal grandfather Jemubhai, the cook and a dog named Mutt. Desai switches the narration between both points of view. The action of the novel takes place in 1986.

The theme follows the journey of Biju, an illegal immigrant in the US who is trying to make a new life; and Sai, an Anglicised Indian girl living with her grandfather in India. The novel shows the internal conflict between past and present. There is the rejection and yet awe of the English way of life, the opportunities for money in the USA, and the squalor of living India. Many leading Indians were considered to be becoming too English and having forgotten the traditional ways of Indian life, shown through the character of the grandfather, the retired Judge.

II

The story of the novel is set in the mid 19980's in a Himalayan town in India by the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga and also New York. At the same time it shuttles back and forth between Sai's youth and that of her Anglophile grandfather, Jemubhai Patel. Through Jemubhai Patel, a Third World Horatio Alger, we experience the post-colonial era in all the cruelty of its old, grained hatred and prejudices.

The action focuses on the lives of Jemubhai Patel, a retired Cambridge educated judge and his orphaned granddaughter, Sai living in a ramshackled old house in the Himalayan town of Kalimpong near Darjeeling and their cook, who worries over his son, Biju, struggling from job to job as an illegal immigrant in New York city.

On the another side a young Nepali, Gyan, is hired by the judge to tutor sixteen year old Sai in science and mathematics. The tutor gradually becomes attracted to the Nepali insurgency movement gaining momentum in the border region. The novel has one long flash back, which traces the incidents that led up, in the beginning of the story, when a band of young Nepali would be revolutionaries invade the judge's house in search of guns. We come to know that Sai's parents died in Moscow, leaving her an orphan at her boarding school in Dehradun, her grandfather a Cambridge educated judge, is left to send forth the child he has never met. Sai befriends his cook, who lives in a hut near the judge's house *'It pained sai's heart to see how little he had: a few clothes hung over a string, a single razor blade and a*

silver of cheap brown soap, a cardboard case with metal clasps..."The cook is proud of his son, Biju, whom he imagines to be successful in America. His efforts to get a tourist Visa for the United States have been both challenging and humiliating for him, and he is well aware that his only possibility is to stay and work illegally. Where Biju works for a period, the owner's wife prepares illegal workers from the poorer parts of Europe rather than workers from other continents.

Justice Jemubhai is the best example of the Colonial aftermath. One of the ICS men holds on to Colonial past even he lives in independent India. He is embraced the education, manners, and values of Britain. In addition, he is ridiculed because of his westernized way of life and in particular for the obsession with powdering his face. His frustrations, his temperament and his hate destroy Nimi's life, a nineteen year old wife. It is upon his return from England the Jemubhai's action and sadistic mistreatment of Nimi begins, as he also decides to teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself. He also mentally abuses her to an English name in an attempt to change her identity and he forces her to learn English and behave in a western manner even though she does not want to cooperate. Jemubhai himself is a victim of Colonialism. But was affectionate towards Mutt (a dog) but even at last the dog has also gone from his life. At the end of the novel, Sai is able to summon and the cook and Biju experiences a reunion.

III

The title of the novel, is more complex, but still informative and realistic. First of all, the title can relate to the loss, Sai feels as an orphan. Also Sai's mother experienced a corresponding loss when her mother, Nimi died when She was little girl. The novel soon reveals that it deals with themes related to the post-colonial period and that it examines the inheritance from the British Empire.

A 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 sense of loss. Individuals within the text show snobbery at those who embody the Indian way of life and vice versa, with characters displaying an anger at the English Indians who have lost their traditions.

In the novel, Desai constantly juxtaposes two extremes of Indian Society- An example is When Sai turns up at Gyan's home. There she is met by the sights of chickens being hurt and raped by the rooster. This image figuratively refers to the Colonial Situation, where the rooster represents the English and the Chickens the Indians.

Sai and her society with their Anglicized tastes and habits and on the other hand Gyan with his desi habits. *"I'm not interested in Christmas...." he shouted. "Why do you Celebrate Christmas..." she is considered it why? She always had. Not because of the convent..."You are like slaves, tha's what you are running after the west..."* Though the product of free India,

Sai still gazes upon the Colonizer and hence fails to achieve a total liberation. Her eating habits- The use of fork and spoon in contrast to Gyan's using of his fingers etc. highlight this condition. As most of the people in Sai's little world are even influenced by western culture, even Noni, Lola, Uncle Potty and father Booty fall to this category.

Lola and Noni represent the few Indians who have been able to benefit from the British Influence. Before she is widowed Lola was married to Joydeep, they were able to enjoy their life fully without worry about the future. But Joydeep dies then Lola's unmarried sister Noni moves to her cottage and they live on pension of Lola's husband. Even though their income is low they are basically able to maintain their western life style for many years. Noni helps out by starting to tutor Sai, they take trips to England to buy food and clothes, they keep servants, their cupboard is filled with Wedgwood cups and plates and the bakers arrive every afternoon with Swiss rolls and Queen cakes. But carefully their lives are influenced by England. They prefer British authors, they watch programs and news from the BBC and they celebrate English Christmas. In short, their focus is directed towards England and they are able to enjoy the materialism of the west. Thus, in a Post-Colonial setting where the differences between rich and poor, the English and the Indians, the whites and non-whites are distinctive the sisters are privileged.

The characters of uncle Potty and father Booty represent the privileged people from the west living in India. Uncle Potty's background is from English upper class, he is from a famous English family, he has studied languages at Oxford. Uncle Potty now spends the rest of his family fortune on liquor on one hand the declining prosperity of uncle Potty and his family can symbolize the fading Colonial power of the English in India.

Father Booty is from Switzerland and keeps a diary. He and uncle potty are best friends and spend their evening drinking together. Having lived in India for forty-five years, he is suddenly found to lack a valid residence permit, and suddenly he is categorized as an illegal immigrant. At this stage it is interesting to compare Father Booty's situation with that of Biju, who also lives in a foreign country on illegal terms. Their immigrant experiences are strikingly different. Whereas father Booty has been able to live a privileged life in India participating in society, Biju has lived a "secret" life in poverty and humiliation. Biju represents the poor disadvantaged people from the Third World, who has to face oppression when approaching west. As a white, rich man in India father Booty has never even considered the possibility of being excluded. Consequently, father Booty also loses his dignity in the end.

Gyan's post-colonial status makes him perhaps the most complicated. He is a Nepalese descent, living in India and his ancestors fought in the Indian military for the British. His desire for solid knowledge results largely because of his being part of group oppressed by Bengali who in turn had set of sometimes conflicting identities. His desire to escape this complexity and to understand himself more simply greatly contributes to his enthusiasm for

and involvement in the Gorkha National Liberation(GNLF).He joins others with Napalese backgrounds and welcomes their nationalist fervor as a way of simplifying his post-colonial identity.

Desai illustrates the unfortunate consequences of imperialism. The British influence in India developed a society where the differences between the colonizer and the colonized were distinctive in respect of power and wealth. Desai gives an example of how the difference between England and America can be seen in this novel. For a while Biju works at Brigitte's restaurant in New York's financial district. His fellow dishwasher Achootan,who has also lived in Canterbury for some years, describes the difference like this, *'But at least this country is better than England'* ,he said, *'At least they have some hypocrisy here. They believe they are good people and you get some relief. There they shout at you openly on the street. Go back to where you came from.'* This suggests a direct discrimination against foreigners in England than in America but the intolerance against people from the Third World still seems to be the characters of Jemubhai and Biju are all met with disbelief by their new countrymen, independent of the country they approach.

Through the individual characters Desai lifts the discussion up to a top level-Colonialism and the inheritance from the colonial period of Bangladesh and India. The concept of how the white imperial power of the west has influenced the prospects of former colonized countries is therefore important. Desai emphasizes how essential historical, geographical, cultural and religious aspects are and how difficult and challenging the issues of tolerance, acceptance and integration can be. Throughout the novel, Desai illustrates the significance of personality and how individuals react differently in various situations.

In accordance with traditional post-colonial views, the thought of a strong, developed west associated with masculinity, and a submissive, obedient and poor East linked to femininity, seems to be relevant to the theme of gender. Desai points out that the dynamic and multicultural situation of the world today demands a new way of thinking. In the western tradition, the division of classes has been centered on higher, upper, middle, and lower, where high represents very rich and low poor. Desai makes fun of formal British customs by placing their habits. From the judge's viewpoint, however, his wealth and class identity is important in order to maintain the western oriented life style. He feels he is entitled to and the power he has gained through his profession. Although the wealth and the luxury of the judge gradually decline his status and position remain the same. The cook on the other hand fills the role of the submissive and poor man from the east. Desai shows a parallel to relation between the East and West in accordance with post-colonial theories.

The traditional post-colonial view of a powerful and privileged west and an under developed and oppressed east is present also when Desai discusses the issue of class. In the novel, the characters are influenced from the west are those with financial privilege. Desai

stresses on the point of white privilege or western influence. Access to money and power are the major motivation of the continuous struggle in the competitive class system.

It comes out to investigate the traces of alienation and identity crisis, which are areas of great significance in post-colonial theory. This very paper endeavors to interpret and explore the alienation and identity crisis, while keeping in mind the contemporary post-colonial world. Alienation and identity crisis comprise of that part of literature and theory that have multiplicity of voices and interpretations. These are dominant themes in modern and postmodern literature and theory.

Post-colonial theory is an all-inclusive theoretical approach as it encompasses almost all the areas of human life and comes out to dismantle and interpret numerous established discourses. Young, R(2006) explains Post-colonial theory as: *Post-colonialism claims the right of all people on this earth to do the same material and cultural well being...a politics and philosophy of activism that consists the disparity, and so continues a new way the anti-colonial struggle of the past.(pp.2-4)*'The Inheritance of Loss' gives an insight to these post-colonial issues and challenges. The novel portrays the characters who are the target of post-colonial dilemmas, which lead them towards alienation and identity crisis.

Alienation symbolizes the estrangement and separation of man from some external element, state, philosophy, believe system etc. This present paper comes out to understand the alienation of an Individual from the external world. It focuses on the dichotomy between the inner and outer world and the way in which the inner world is affected and constructed by the outer world. In the novel, almost all the characters suffer from alienation that has become permanent and inescapable for them. The Judge suffered humiliation and disgrace only for being black thus nobody talked to him and he eventually became alienated and cut off from his society. This inhuman attitude has destroyed his personality and he has been robbed off all of his identity and honour.

The title of the novel is quite suggestive in this regard, as it gives a hint of the feelings of alienation and loss of self with which almost all of the characters of the novel suffer. Jemubhai has lost almost everything even his identity. Sai, his granddaughter encounters a dilemma regarding her identity. She speaks English and celebrates Christmas while she is a Hindu girl who is completely unaware of her religion. Biju suffers the embittered feelings of loss during his stay at America where he loses his dream of success and happiness in life. The cook has lost his love and association with his native culture as he feels regret for not being able to serve a white man like his father. He always envied the white and the west.

IV

All the characters in the novel long for identity, for love and acceptance in an alien land. The characters are all victims of the so called post-colonial dilemmas. The novel flits from one point on the globe to another and the narrative in all places is authentic. The after-

effects of colonialism and the effects of globalization are explored through a fresh perspective. The novel generally ends with "losses" in many ways; it also shows glimpses of hope and optimism. Sai loses her lover, but obtains a higher understanding regarding her future and independence. The cook loses his dignity, but gets his back. Gyan regrets his behavior and promises the cook to find Mutt and bring him back to Sai. The denouncement combines betrayal, retribution, and hope in a surprising yet wholly believable outcome.

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