

## **Communal Pragmatism in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss***

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### **Abstract**

Kiran Desai's Booker winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* deals basically about the problems of migration faced by her characters, their strains and difficulties. The major concern of diasporic literature is the problem of exile, uprooting and the subsequent outcomes. Evacuating from one's own country is an agonizing process that brings numerous material and emotional traumas in the process of re-establishing in an alien land. The characters are often victims of circumstances and by the time they realize the problems, they are depleted, hopeless and baffled. Even when they come back after their traumatic experiences, they often develop a sense of distrust and anger. They are in a state of confusion from which they find it difficult to come out. True happiness does not lie in material wealth or comforts, but in one's own dignity, identity and sense of belonging is the concept of the book. The characters have to undergo number of traumatic experiences that brought a lot of material loss, but have a spiritual gain- the realization of what brings true joy in life. Kiran Desai manages to explore, with intimacy and insight, just about every contemporary communal pragmatism issue: globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Communal, Identity, Immigrant, Postcolonial, Pragmatism

### **Introduction**

"Indian writing in English is a distinctive literature—a tree that has sprung up on hospitable soil from seed that a random breeze has brought from afar" writes K.R. Srinivasayengar (18). Literary fictions are portrayals of the thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in the society which are treasure-trove of human experience. Kiran Desai is one of the immigrant writers who have chosen materials for their art from contemporary Indian socio-cultural situations. Desai is of second generation of diaspora writing, she has the first-hand experience of cultural differences. Her characters effectively depict varying kinds and levels of discontent at their own personhoods. It is a mix of pathetic illusions of being part of a culture that does not acknowledge them, hypocritical snubbing of one's own culture and journeying into knowing one's real self and true roots. There are various families involved, but there was

a little that was sweet or delightful about marital rape, racism and street massacres. Desai uses rich, mannered, even cute and lucid language to delineate a bleak universe. One of the most powerful threads in the narrative is a tale of domestic abuse.

The main characters are the two Indian youths: Sai and Biju. Sai is an anglicized, independent-minded teenager living with her cranky grandfather. Biju is the son of Sai's cook who has made it to America and works exploited and illegal in New York. Sai's grandfather, usually referred to as the judge, is a dislikeable retired member of the judiciary, and the husband in the abusive marriage. Desai covers a wide variety of countries, the past and the present, and the social, religious and ethnic diversity and also analyzed several current issues of modern civilization. Moreover, she illustrates the clash of two absolute cultures and its consequences. It is set between two main places: Kalimpong, India and New York. Kalimpong is situated at foothills of northeastern Himalaya. It gives a picturesque description of nature surrounding the beautiful snow covered Kalimpong with eco-critical concern in juxtaposition with the cross-cultural issues. These issues affect two main characters Biju and Jemubhai Patel which shows that Kiran Desai is a lover of nature.

Multiculturalism and post-colonialism is the product of Kiran Desai. She is an immigrant, well-read, well-bred, whose rootlessness itself has become a kind of shelter and a form of society. It is her inheritance and the disinheritance that has come with globalization. The victim who has to suffer in cultural encounter is Father Booty, the Swiss Christian. He is running a milk dairy for his livelihood and helps in the development of the hills than any other locals. He did not intend to return to his native, but he is compelled by Gorkhas to run away from thereby depriving his properties to a mere amount. They threaten Father Booty by saying:

"I have arranged it and you have no choice. You are lucky to get what I am giving you. You are residing in this country unlawfully and you must sell or lose everything" (P.222)

The travel between east and west is an accident in this novel. She portrays the lives of Indians who were engaged in struggles to make their lives secure. It is a commentary on postcolonial India with its fading anglophiles, their crumbling edifices and their dwindling power in the face of a modernizing nation's disaffected population. History is another postcolonial issue which is presented through a group of ethnic Nepalese insurgents in this novel. Kiran Desai offers an interpretation of the globalize world which stands out among her contemporaries work as complex and sensitive.

### **Social Realism**

Kiran Desai has effectively represented the characterization hovering between cultures in the novel. The feeling of inferiority complex grasped them. We find them dwelling between the cultures. Despite all his efforts to refuse his Indian identity, Jemubhai Patel can never belong to English upper-class. On the contrary, Biju leaves western culture. He comes back to India and welcomed by his own people. Sai and Gyan are departed because of cultural differences. The major characters who get trapped in class and cross-cultural conflicts are Jemubhai Patel

and Biju. Both are the victims of racial discrimination and cross-cultural problems. Jemubhai hates the human beings after his bitter racial discrimination he faced during his days. Another parallel story runs through the Gorkhas indomitable fight for their own land where the environment gets completely destroyed.

Sai is the orphaned granddaughter of the Judge. She is exiled from the convent to be home schooled discovering the first flush of youth, the first pangs of love. There are the delightful Bengali sisters Noni and her sister Lola. Sai is with her Nepalese tutor Gyan and Biju. The son of the judge's cook is moving from one restaurant job to another, as an illegal immigrant in New York. The core idea of novel is the problems are occurred during the post-colonial period and the multiculturalism which is somewhat responsible for the problem of self-identity.

*The Inheritance of Loss*, partly set in America, is a sprawling novel that runs from the Himalayas to New York. It offers an insightful and often humorous commentary on multiculturalism and postcolonial society. Plot of the story was the period of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. During these periods, the two superpowers the USA and the Soviet Union had entered into a cutthroat competition in globalizing their respective ideologies. Capitalism and socialism is strongly advocated. These powers directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously affect the social milieu of the immigrants, residents and non-residents of various countries.

Desai has dealt very harshly with the Nepalīs or Gorkhas who want their land and are fighting for their freedom. Originally, they belong to this land and have been through centuries serving as *chowkidars* for English *Sahibs* or anglicized Indians like the judge. They have been taunted to be thieves, their brains thought to be too dull for education. Every struggle for freedom has its roots in suppression. The Nepalese struggle has its roots in their suppression. Gyan's commitment to the insurgency offers an ironic contrast with the commitment of his family to the colonial British army in earlier times.

Desai navigates the disparate worlds of her characters with sensitivity and deep insight, unafraid to leave their bleak lives with a bit of gentle comedy. In the process of this tug of war, the historical period witnessed a process. These two global super-powers are instilling the sense of freedom in many countries across the world to cater to their own vested interest. Desai focuses on the state of immigrant there. In the narrative, the old times of colonialism flow into the new contemporary high modern times of American Hegemony with ambivalent altitudes towards both. The characters – the Judge Jemubhai Patel, Sai, Gyan, Noni, and Lola and Biju – all have experiences where their identity comes in contact with a foreign culture. Unfortunately, each of these experiences results in a strong negative reaction, illuminating the division between cultures that still exists today. She has presented the premise of cultural differences metaphorically by geography and atmosphere of the region.

Desai gives much importance to two places in this novel Kalimpong and New York. She gives two different storyline for two places having a totally a different outlook. The New

York life is remarkably different from the life in India. The Indian part of the story deals with a makeshift family. This family comprises of a grumpy retired judge Jemubhai, his young granddaughter Sai, his old cook and his pet dog Mutt. There is a small coterie of Anglophiles in the wake of a political disturbance. This shakes them out of genteel retirement challenging their older ways of life.

### **Focus on Contemporary Issues**

Kiran Desai highlights most of the outstanding issues and themes of contemporary society in her novel. Her self-confidence, committed views on terrorism and weaknesses of a poverty-stricken society are candid, bold and forthright. In addition, she focuses our attention on alienation, cultural clash, poverty and racial-discrimination. The culture shock and the cultural confrontation, the efforts made for culture assimilation and acculturation all these are portrayed in these novels. Due to Immigration, each character in this novel has to face cultural encounter. The concept of homelessness has attained new dimensions in the skillful hands of Kiran Desai. Desai encompasses broader issues ranging from ills of colonization, Gorkhaland agitation, deportation, refugees, to homelessness by choice and death. The novelist has presented India as a concept, and a land of hope and desire rather than a home. Jemubhai Patel's moral maiming by colonialists made him admire the Whiteman for everything and undervalue India which thwarted him to enjoy the bliss of marital life with Nimi. After banishing every relationship from his life, he is homeless due to his own choice. There are people like Sai, Lola and Noni who harbour the vision of India of cheese toast and rum cake but Sai is homeless through no fault of hers, except that of birth.

Kiran Desai manages to tell a coherent tale of many people's interlinked lives across continents. Born in India, Desai moved to Britain at the age of fourteen and was later relocated to the US. The people and the society around her aided well for the creation of such a widely acclaimed novel *The Inheritance of Loss*: Set against the gigantic backdrop of Himalayas, the novel presents lives of people belonging to different cultures, nationalities, religions, language and customs and rituals. (Mishra, Pankaj. 27 June 2009) Desai crosses the international borders (India and USA) to portray the difficulties faced by the Indians who go to foreign country for their survival and who are mentally attacked by the impact of westernization and blindly get attracted towards the west resulting in immigration. Almost all the characters in the novel become victimized and go without identity inside or outside their native land. Biju is a victim of identity crisis. He is a victim of cross-cultural subjugation in Indian-American social set-up.

In this comical and contemplative novel, Desai deftly shuttles between first and third worlds. She illuminates the pain of exile, the ambiguities of post-colonialism and the blinding desire for a better life. This novel presents many postcolonial issues. This is a remarkable novel in the contemporary Indian English writers. Her novel has brought her national and international recognition. It has become a part of the corpus of Indian English literature and has contributed to the enrichment of Indian English novel. Wisdom and subtle parallels are the

greater part of Desai's novel. Therefore, she looks at the consequences of large cultural and political forces for both people and individuals.

*The Inheritance of Loss* is a brilliant study of Indian socio-cultural scenario in its transitional phase. In fact, significant social changes have occurred in India due to the people's craze for western values, manners and life-style, impact of modernization, consumerism and globalization. Desai, a diasporic writer, presents the characters who fail to assimilate new culture and give up their original culture in totality. In her narrative, Desai deftly shuttles between First and Third worlds. She illuminates the pain of exile. She also illuminates the ambiguities of post-colonialism and the blinding desire for a 'better life'. Through the characters, Kiran Desai muses

about her conceptualized status of India in the present globalized world. This world has been compressed with the insurgence of migration, diaspora and transnationalism.

### **Theme of Loss**

The title can be interpreted in alternative way where the loss is passed on. This loss can be carried over from one generation to the other generation. It is witnessed that everyone is experiencing the loss. The word in the title "Loss" gives negative associations. It shows the loss of many Desai emphasizes ideas of inheritance and transmission. Loss, like abuse, can be transmitted from person to person or society to society. It is not an excuse but it is a complicated moral picture. It is a social picture that Kiran Desai wafts in lightly passes over quickly, just as we Passover the wife, Nimi - invalid and invisible. The theme is the loss of identity and the way it travels through generations as a sense of loss. It presents the stark reality of losses that a country suffers when such separatist movements are at work. They affect all progress, peace, normalcy and even everyday life pattern.

The novel begins and ends with the description of mountain Kanchenjunga, as Sai arrives at Cho Oyu. The mountain is described as macabre. It symbolizes the sober mood of child who has lost her parents. The loss in each character's life is warned by the change in nature. Almost all the characters lose what they possessed in the beginning. They experience a heavy loss both in public and private life. The impact of alien culture and the deep rootedness of the native culture run in the blood of all the characters in the novel. Arriving back in India, Biju is immediately engulfed by the local eruptions of rage and frustration from which he had been physically remote in New York. For him and others withdrawal or escape is no longer possible. People in the west are scarcely aware of this overwhelming feeling of humiliation that is experienced by most of the world's population, which neither magical novels that endow poverty and foolishness with neither charm nor the exoticism of popular literature manages to fathom. This is the invisible emotional reality Kiran Desai uncovers as she describes the lives of people fated to experience modern life as a continuous affront to their notions of order, dignity and justice.

The novel is viewed as a polemic with the conception of the positive multiculturalism of Salman Rushdie. It is written in a very interesting way. The narration is somewhat



fragmentary and full of metaphors at the same time. It functions well outside of the Indian context. Its uniqueness is based on the fact that it describes an existential situation of being cast away, homelessness and alienation. The title mentions some loss. The title refers to the richness of some kind balance with the loss. We all search for a wider world or an understanding of the wider world. It certainly has richness to it, a gain to it, but it is balanced by a certain feeling of rootlessness or a loss of connection to something that has gone on for generations and historical debt behind - that is the loss. Thus, the author Kiran Desai delineates the sense of loss experienced by people of different social strata and its inheritance over generations. Anila A. Pillai observes:

“The predominant traits of existentialism are alienation, quest and conflict. Aspects of alienation and conflict are epitomized in the lives of the protagonists. The retired judge, Sai, Gyan and Biju are a study in alienation and existential angst.”(P.172)

### **Socio-Political Issues**

Kiran Desai has powerfully presented the deeply disturbing social and political trends. These trends are signifying the worst social, cultural and political turmoil in the post-modern era. The rebels want ‘Gorkhaland for Gorkhas’. But no such neat solution is plausible in the face of the intricacies of ethnicity, culture, language and class, even in this small piece of India. Desai is more interested in the movement than the movement itself so. It is the poignant story of the common people, the bleakness. It is the story of hope and ultimately resigning oneself to the realities of life in a turbulent society. Being away from one’s home and country forces certain curbs on oneself. There is a loss of certain case. This has an obvious effect on the writing also. The writer of the novel has inherited from her parents certain characters that find their place in the novel in an imperceptible way.

The Nepalis considered that in their own country. They are treated like slave. So they want to fight to manage their own affairs. They want everyone to unite under the banner of Gorkha National Liberation Front. They want to build hospitals and schools, and provide jobs for their sons. They want to defend their own homeland. The crowd gathered there screamed ‘Jai Gorkha, Jai Gorkha’. Some supporters came forward and cut their thumbs with their Kukris and write a poster demanding Gorkhaland in their blood. The national love is aroused in Gyan and Sai when they saw new posters and read the new slogans painted on the side of government offices. “We are stateless, ‘they read. ‘It is better to die than live as slaves.’ We are constitutionally tortured.”(126) Gyan came to senses observing all those things all around him. The barrenness is also evident when the author says: “Time might have died in the house that sat on the mountain ledge, its lines, grown distinct with moss, its roof loaded with ferns.” (17) Kiran Desai presents the post-colonial setting of Kalimpong, its diverse ethnic groups and the ongoing Gorkhaland Agitation of the 1980s. The Indian Nepalese want their own country or state a Gorkhaland where they will not be treated as servants. The young boys roam the mountainside looting houses and collecting ammunition. Their predicament is

contrasted against the Indian who settled abroad. The narratives highlight in the novel her understanding of the socio cultural and economic dynamics operating in the area.

The Gorkhaland Agitation traces its root to the merger of Sikkim into the Indian Union and also the rising insurgencies in the north-east India. Ethnic discontentment in Darjeeling started long before the country saw its independence. The Nepalese struggle with their cultural identity and the forces of modernization while trying to maintain their emotional connection to one-another. The historical backdrop Desai has chosen is that of the Gorkhaland movement of 1980s West Bengal. Throughout the novel, the movement makes the hills a site of violence and torture. Desai attempts to recreate the atmosphere of the uprising which takes place because of the feeling of being orient. Thus, these Nepalese insurgents are the victims of orientalism in India. Through the pasteurization of the Gorkhas and Nepalese and their problems, the novelist depicts their social reality and political riots.

### **Conclusion**

Kiran Desai's realistic portrayal of life on two continents, diasporic on multiple levels, demonstrates a deep concern from the human and social condition. Desai delineates the sense of loss experienced by people of different social strata and its inheritance over generations. Desai's cool scrutiny of society's cruelties has an unabashedly critical and unsentimental edge. It is not just a case of launching diatribes against the West or elitism. She makes it clear that India is wrought by disparity, Biju is full of prejudice and the Liberation Front consists of boys taking their style from Rambo. Kiran Desai has not only portrayed how Americans look at the people from Third World countries but also how the immigrants view the Americans. Racial situations and reactions have come up at many places in the narrative. Desai calls for intercultural interaction which includes interaction with foreign cultures, consciousness of one's own culture, stress tolerance, tolerance of ambiguity, bucketfuls of empathy, dichotomy of social milieu. Desai depicts the overwhelming feeling of humiliation experienced by the people who reach America in search of a better future. Biju's experiences are reflective of the 'shadows class' of illegal migrant workers. Kiran Desai being an Indian might have experienced the same anxiety as a foreigner.

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