

Postcolonial and Multicultural conflicts in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

The present paper aims to bring forth Kiran Desai's concept of multiculturalism and postcolonialism as depicted in her Booker Award winning novel: The Inheritance of Loss. The paper seeks to explore the backgrounds of social, psychological, religious, and spiritual events that steadily moulded Kiran Desai's fictional art. The novel is a brilliant study of Indian Culture- the culture in its transitional phase. In fact, craze for the western values, manners, language, and glamorous life-style; impact of modernisation, consumerism, and globalisation is manifest in all walks of Indian life. In her narrative, Desai deftly shuttles between First and Third worlds, illuminating the pain of exile, the ambiguities of Post Colonialism and the blinding desire for a "better life", where one person's wealth means another's poverty. The Inheritance of Loss is a novel about India written from the global perspective through the representation of a variety of characters from different cultural backgrounds and tracing their mental makeup different social strata in India and U.S, Desai throws light on the colliding interest in the globalized world. Despite political freedom, cultural slavery is directly manifested through these characters. Consequently, they can neither assimilate the new culture nor give up their original culture in totality. Desai has portrayed the state of homelessness, displacement, exile, marginalization and lack of belongingness being experienced by the legal and illegal Diaspora communities and individuals in America (transnational land) as well as by the people from other states, regions and communities from India residing in Kalimpong (national land).

Keywords: Colonialism, multiculturalism, the British Empire, the East India Company, independence, immigrant, identity, cultural clashes, religion.

Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* was published in 2006 and it was also awarded the Man Booker Prize for Fiction. The success of this novel was enormous because it describes postcolonial reality after the decline of the British Empire and deals with problems of immigration. This masterpiece still contributes to current discussions relating to the problems of the East and the West. On top of that, this novel leaves an

indelible impression on readers' minds all over the world. An introduction to a history of colonization will show us the purposes of the British colonization of India which reflected in Indian people's behaviour, religion, culture, literature, opinions and finally in the loss of their identity. Influenced by European manners, the situation since India gained independence led to people's schizophrenic perception and confusion in

their own country. Every single culture has its own traditions, habits, religions, languages and many other common features. Crucial condition of peaceful coexistence between various cultures is a mutual respect and willingness to accept the differences. Samuel Huntington, the author of his Clash of Civilizations, predicts a possible course of events: “In this new world the most pervasive, important and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities”(28).

Colonialism

Since the novel is closely related to the British Empire and multicultural clashes, it is quite essential for a reader to be familiar with two key terms - colonialism and multiculturalism.

The power of the British Empire and its extensiveness was build up on colonialism and multicultural clashes are in some measure its consequence. The term colonialism is defined as “a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another” (Kohn). However, the problem in defining colonialism arises when compared to imperialism. These two terms are often used as synonyms because like colonialism, imperialism also involves political and economic control over a dependent territory. The term imperialism,

however, changed its meaning in consequence of historical events. As Britain began to acquire overseas dependencies, the concept of empire was employed more frequently. Thus, the traditional understanding of imperialism was a system of military domination and sovereignty over territories. When looking at justification of colonialism, it was an issue which was in the foreground of many philosophers and thinkers. European rule in the nineteenth century was at its peak but, paradoxically, in the same period when most political philosophers defended the legitimacy of colonialism and imperialism, began to defend the principles of universalism and equality. The combination of these factors caused that Europeans and the British Empire came to believe that they have the obligation to ‘civilize’ the rest of the world. Kiran Desai’ s second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* tackles nearly all the persuasive lingering effects of colonialism on two categories of South Asian people -those who attempt to leave India and those who remain in India. In the novel, the embittered judge is a living testimony to the consequences of colonialism, reflecting unbecoming response to colonialism. The judge traverses the genealogy of a Gujarati family “ from rural self-sufficiency to colonized civility”(Gandhi 13) . He lives in Kalimpong, at the foot hills of the Himalayas with his orphaned grand daughter, Sai and his cook. Born into a

middle-class Patel family, he sails for England in 1939. Feeling lost and scorned for his skin colour and smell, he returns as an ICS officer serving the British. Full of self-hate as well as hate for his family, community and everyone for not being British, which includes his wife, the judge falls victim to alienation. He remains in the dreams of English beauty:

“He saw nothing of the English countryside, missed the beauty of carved colleges and churches painted with gold leaf and angels, didn’t hear the choir boys with voices of girls and didn’t see the green river tremble in with replications of the gardens…….”
(Desai 40).

The make shift family neighbours include a coterie of Anglophiles who might be savvy readers of V. S. Naipaul but who are perhaps, less aware of how fragile their own social standing is , at least until a surge of unrest disturbs the region. Besides threatening their very lives, the revolution also affects the romance between sixteen year old Sai and her Nepalese tutor, Gyan. The cook’s son, Biju meanwhile, lives miserably as an illegal immigrant, “an alien” in New York. All these characters struggle with their cultural identity and the forces of modernization while trying to cling on to their emotional connection to one another. In this alternately comical and contemplative novel, when the GNLF

insurgency spoils Sai’s romance with Gyan and causes their life to descend into utter dismay and chaos, they too are dragged to confront their colliding interests .Through the representation of a variety of characters from different cultural backgrounds and tracing their mental makeup different social strata in India and U.S, Desai throws light on the colliding interest in the globalized world. Desai has portrayed the state of homelessness, displacement ,exile, marginalization and lack of belongingness being experienced by the legal and illegal Diaspora communities and individuals in America (transnational land) as well as by the people from other states, regions and communities from India residing in Kalimpong (national land) .

Multiculturalism

From the political point of view, the term multiculturalism can be perceived as the best. The first multicultural conflict in Desai’s novel takes place in 1986, in Kalimpong, high in the north-eastern Himalayas. The main characters living here are the judge, the cook and Sai. Desai introduces her characters as they live their difficult lives in the background of continuing fights. At the beginning of the story, it is rumoured that the insurrection in the hills changed into resistance movement stockpiling men and guns. “It was the Indian-Nepalese this time,

fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority. Desai describes the humiliation and helplessness of their characters drawing of borders.” (Desai 9) The clash appears between the two cultures of Hindus and Nepalese and it clearly declares the fact that that violence and injustice are skilfully disguised under false pretences of freedom and public interests. Whole multicultural conflict is a description of Biju’s life, divided into separate situations. Biju is an Indian immigrant living in America. He left India with a dream of having better life in America. From the historical point of view, Indians immigrated to the United States from various reasons. Many of them left to study universities; many were dissatisfied with political situation in India or looking for better job opportunities as there were much higher incomes in the United States. Another significant factor of their leavings was to financially support their families from abroad. As Rangaswamy claims, “Of course, the personal circumstances of migration differ from individual to individual, and for Indians, it was not just a matter of personal choice, but involved the entire family”(174).The relationship between Sai and the cook is another multicultural conflict. Sai spends plenty of time with the cook but both of them are aware of the fact that their social status is different. After the incident in Cho Oyu, the

cook’s hut is ransacked by the police. Sai witnesses thoughtless attitude of police towards the cook. “Here they felt comfortable unleashing their scorn, and they overturned his narrow bed, left his few belongings in a heap” (Desai 13). She realizes how big the gap between them is. Desai’s character of the cook represents the lowest class in society. One might say that Desai’s main point is to show complete poverty people live in. Their only hope is dream of better future which is, however, rather insecure. It is again the giant gap between West and East which enables some to live in extreme affluence and some in extreme poverty. This multicultural conflict, describing the judge’s experience from abroad, counts among the most important in Desai’s novel. It is the judge from whom the other characters’ lives uphold. Desai describes the judge as somebody who is strongly affected by his experiences. He leaves his home for the first time at the age of twenty. He isn’t much impressed by the new atmosphere, but he doesn’t make a good expression either. Nobody wants to rent him a room. He must visit twenty-two homes before he finds the accommodation. One can see that this is the first clash with the British culture. He experiences the first feelings of being immigrant and that inescapably forms his personality. The racial tension he feels gradually leads to Jemubhai’s retreat within

himself. He studies twelve hours a day and talks to nobody. These years spent in England made him angry and arrogant man who pretends to be English gentleman but in fact he is Indian who never found his identity.

It is observed that, throughout her narrative that she is critical of this politics of liberalization, there is a collision of the Eastern and Western values the Orient v/s the Occident and the seemingly disparate character are bound together by a shared historical legacy and a common experience of impotence and humiliation. Kiran Desai's comment referring to centuries of subjugation by the economic and cultural powers of the West; "certain moves made long ago had produced all of them" sums it all. Moreover she also hints that the so called leveled field of global economy only manages to scratch the wounds rather than heal them. Desai seems to argue that multiculturalism confined to western metropolis and academe, doesn't begin to address the causes of extremism and violence in the modern world. Nor does the so called positivist claim of 'economic globalization' can ever become a route to prosperity, the

fast track for the downtrodden to navigate their way to prosperity, Desai observes at one point, "could only be harvested in the gap between nations, working one against the other". Thus leaves most people in the post colonial world with only the promise of a shabby modernity, as Desai puts it, 'in its meanest form, brand new one day, in ruin the next.'

Works Cited

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