

Diasporic Dilemmas Inkiran Desai's Inheritance of Loss

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Abstract: Kiran Desai's man Booker prize winning novel "the Inheritance of Loss" is undoubtedly a mind blowing experience of reading wherein exploration on manifold paradigms of colonialism, globalization, post colonial struggles, class based exploitation, feminist issues and misogyny, patriarchal prejudices etc. are vividly carried out. The present article sheds lights on diasporic dilemmas depicted in the Novel and its interconnections and undercurrents, isolation and ambivalence created out of it, issues related to immigration, alienation, identity crises and struggles. In a fragmentary narrative style, Desai challenges her readers to restructure their perspectives on diasporic life and immigration that represents social inequalities and economic imbalances embedding lots of other issues.

Keywords: Kiran Desai, Inheritance of Loss, diaspora, identity crisis, globalization, post coloniality, class struggle, loss etc.

Introduction

Kiran Desai is born in 1971 to another reputed Anglo Indian novelist Anita Desai and moved to England while 14 years old, then to US wherein she is currently settled. Her first novel "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard" having been published in 1998, gained much acclaim. Her second novel "Inheritance of Loss" was published in 2006 and won the Man Booker Prize the same year.

This novel progresses on the backdrop of two historical events. The former is great Indian independence and its chain of struggles to break cruel shackles of British slavery over years and the latter is Gorkhaland movement that was engineered to establish a Nepali state within India bordering Darjeeling in West Bengal.

The story stretches in a once-sturdy house in Kalimpong in lush green Himalayan foothills wherein lives an old judge, Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, who was educated in England and worked as judge in Indian Civil Service under British rule and now leading a retired life, his dog named Mutt and his 17-year-old granddaughter Sai, whose parents killed in car crash in Russia. In a nearby wretched hut lives the cook of Judge's household. The judge and Sai are "estranged Indians" who converse in English, knowing little Hindi. The judge still loves and adores Englishness and British culture while despising Indians and their varied cultural dimensions. The judge from his early life estranged from his culture and identity. His peasant father accumulated money and sent him to UK for studies which he doesn't and doesn't want to recollect. In order to collect money for his passage to England, stay and education, his family got him married to 14 year old village girl named Nimi so that he gains a dowry that will make him financially on safer side to complete his education. He never showed love and affection to his wife and always

treated her as an enemy and even caused her death. He is self hateful of his brown color skin and always uses powder stuff to cover his color. He always envied the English and despised Indians. Being a student at Cambridge, he was humiliated and disgusted by British people due to his ethnic origin and color. Still he loved them and their culture. This may be a kind of mental slavery that got generated due to century-long political and economical monopoly over his home country. His immigration and education in UK led him ultimately to loss of everything. He lost his identity both at English side as well as at his native people. He is a great example for gross inheritance of loss in post colonial India.

Judge is the sad symbol of the debris of India's colonial history. The novel traces the process of the judge's displacement from centers of power to its ignominious periphery in a well-structured combination of stories from his past and the present experiences in India and England. We are told at an earlier point about Jemubhai Patel that on arrival at Cambridge, "he began immediately to study, because it was the only skill he could carry from one country to another". He never got recognition or acceptance in his tenure at England. The British people, whom he adored to the core and whose culture he wanted to embrace, never accepted him at any time. He was all alone during his life in Cambridge. "Despite his attempts to hide, he merely emphasized something that unsettled others. For entire days nobody spoke to him at all ... elderly ladies ... moved over when he sat next to them in the bus, so he knew that whatever they had, they were secure in their conviction that it wasn't even remotely as bad as what he had."

When he returns to India with his Cambridge degree, he is a misfit in more ways than one. He returns as an educated man to a wife who has not progressed from where he left her five years before: "She came toward him with a garland. They didn't look at each other as she lifted it over his head. Up went his eyes, down went hers..."

After having returned to India, once his wife Nimi took his powder puff that he used to whiten his brown skin. As he looked for it, his family ridiculed him for using it. By the time he discovered that Nimi had taken it, he was furious, and he raped her. In the following days, he insisted that she speak English and follow English customs, which she refused to do. He took off her bangles, threw away her hair oil, and pushed her face into the toilet when he discovered her squatting on it. He then left her at their home while he went away on tour.

In the present, the judge is a deliberate, angry old man filled with self-loathing because he is accepted by neither British culture nor his own society. He is anglicized and is not able to assimilate into the cultures of his origin because of ardent desire to mimic the English colonial identity, nor could he fully don the much coveted western lifestyle. He is stuck in between two cultures due to his diasporic existence. His only solace comes from the company of his dog, Mutt. Sai Mistry is his true heir who is too misfit in both east and west and life at Kalimpong fills her with fear of being left on the shelf. Judge tolerates Sai due to her western inclination and lineage. Her westernized parents were killed in an accident in the Soviet Union and she was being brought up in a convent school. On their death, she was sent to her grandfather's house. Her love with Gyan, her Nepali Maths tutor, suffers blow due to Nepali uprising of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) and his loyalty to his ethnic origin and claim for a separate

state for them transcending her love. Gyan even informs some young Nepali-Indian militants who are fighting for their own state who then invade the judge's home and steal his rifles when novel begins in the year 1985.

Their cook, Panna Lal, grudgingly works for the judge and waits to be liberated by his son, Biju, who, he believes, will make it big in America. However, Biju fails to become a successful immigrant worker in US restaurants and returns home to further disappointments in Kalimpong. Biju, an illegal, is doing menial restaurant work; the cook, father of Biju, who clings to old superstitions while dreaming of electric toasters, had pushed him to emigrate to US, at whose urging that is based on hallucination and illusory mentality, Biju travels to New York City in order to accumulate money with an American dream within, and make a better life for family's future generations. He works at Gray's Papaya in the heart of Manhattan, but is asked to leave when the restaurant is inspected as part of green card check. He is shuttling from one restaurant job to another due to various reasons. He is fired from a French restaurant when customers complain about the smell of the food. He doesn't have green card to stay legally in US. At times, customers complain about a bad smell he is having. His Indian owners who have already stick to American culture and values and left their own ethnic values buried, disgust him due to their diasporic existence of long time and allegiance to the life and culture of colonizer.

Biju sees in America the pangs of immigration with his naked eyes and the worst repercussions of diasporic existence and its manifold losses to human life. "Slipping out and back on the street. It was horrible what happened to Indians abroad and nobody knew but other Indians abroad. It was a dirty little rodent secret."

People suffered from burden of life in diaspora. They worked for long hours. They had to cut their living expenses and live in filthy and wretched atmosphere in order to safeguard the interest of their loved ones back home. They are shadow class. "You lived intensely with others, only to have them disappear overnight, since the shadow class was condemned to movement. The men left for other jobs, towns, got deported, returned home, changed names. [...] The emptiness Biju felt returned to him over and over, until eventually he made sure not to let friendships sink deep anymore".

While being disgusted and discriminated by western mindset, Biju himself sees his bias and prejudice on meeting Saeed Saeed, a Pakistani whom he admires. People from different diasporas don't unite against oppressors because incessant oppression and torture have enslaved them in a way that the oppressed likes the oppressor. The hate of oppressor has passed to the behaviors of oppressed too. Indians loves British and colonial powers who has robbed their land for centuries and hate their neighbors and Asian countries like China, Japan etc who have never harmed them. "This habit of hate had accompanied Biju, and he found that he possessed an awe of white people, who arguably had done India great harm, and a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India".

The feeling of being a foreigner made him thoughtful on his identity. "He felt everything shifting and clicking into place around him, felt himself slowly shrink back to size, the enormous anxiety of being a foreigner ebbing—that unbearable arrogance and shame of the immigrant".

After arriving at New York, Biju's life faces a series of challenges. He just enters the alienated world as a migrant, as an exile. His dream of a secure future is defeated by the harsh reality. He

firstly joins a restaurant called Baby Bistro: "Above, the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian." He then joins a restaurant called the Stars and Stripes Diner: "All American flag on top, all Guatemalan flag below. Plus one Indian flag when Biju arrived". Biju's daily life in America reflects his insight of being an exile. He begins to think himself as an unexpected individual. "Biju felt he was entering a warm amniotic bath. But then it grew cold." After his duty in restaurant he crossed the river and walked to the far end where the homeless man often slept in a dense chamber of green that seems to grow not so much from soil as much from a fertile city crud. A homeless chicken also lived in a park. Every now and then Biju saw it scratching in a homey manner in the dirt and felt an urge for village life. This was his first realization Biju became nostalgic and felt that his own country owes something special to him than the developed and flourishing America.

"He walked to where the green ran out into a tail of pilings and where men like himself often sat on the rocks and looked out onto a dull stretch of New Jersey." Biju started repenting and developed a spark "of anger at his father for sending him alone to this country". A sense of alienation starts haunting him continuously just after arriving in America. He frequently changes the restaurants one after another to adapt himself with the cultural and linguistic differences. Inside him he nurtures the very Indianness. Biju can't leave his age old customs and traditions and his family principles and religion. Exhausted of the immigrant's life in US, Biju returns to India, with loads of disappointment and desperation in mind, having struggled a lot to realize the American dream as an immigrant in New York.

Like Biju, there is another character in this novel namely Father Booty, a Swiss national, who goes through this kind of alienation after a certain period of time in exile. He opens a Swiss style dairy and produces cheese, curd and chocolate cigars for the entire locality. He has never thought himself as none but an Indian. When he has to leave his property and home, shuklara, and back to Switzerland, he one way or another loses his faith and discovers himself as an alien for the first time in his life in a foreign land. It is the crisis moment in Father Booty's life when his ideology has started to be changed. He becomes nostalgic and strongly feels for his homeland, Switzerland. People of diasporic experiences always have to face identity crisis at different levels.

The identity crisis and alienation formed out of diasporic dilemmas and immigrant life brings about a kind of ambivalence in the personality of human beings which surrounds and traps them in each and every point going forward. All characters such as Jemubhai Patel, Panna Lal, Gyan, Biju, Saeed-Saeed, Sai Mistry, Haresh Harry and the two sisters, Lolita and Nonita are undergoing ambivalence which ultimately leads to loss of self esteem and self loathing. Living in between different cultures affects people's character and self perception.

Desai, portraying different types of characters, depicts the reality of Indians after moving abroad and how they move on from the Indian culture and society. She delineates both merits and demerits of diasporic life and immigration related matters. She concludes the novel with a note of hopes. "Kanchenjunga appeared above the parting clouds, as it did only very early in the morning during this season. ... The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the luminous

light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it”.

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