

MULTICULTURAL REVERBERATIONS IN KIRAN DESAI'S
THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

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Abstract

*This paper seeks to offer discussions on Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* in which the novelist showcases the negative impact of the multicultural aspect of the main character who has experienced the colliding cultures between the East and the West. The main character in the novel has undergone tremendous change in psychological point of view due to rigid rules of the western education system that made him estranged. This paper further offers a critical assessment of different incidents with the special reference to feminist perspectives and cultural aspect of modern India. The impact of westernization in the protagonist results in demeaning the Indian culture as well as its social taboo. Finally the paper argues how the novelist exposes the multicultural reverberations and the cultural aspect of modern India with regard to the main character in the novel.*

Key words: *Multiculturalism, immigrant, The Inheritance of Loss, Westernization,*

MULTICULTURAL REVERBERATIONS IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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I

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) Booker Prize-winning novel examines how immigrants fleeing to England and America from South Asian country to the other parts of the world where the life of Indian is westernized. The experiences of transnational labour in existence in America have not been arranged meticulously in literary terms in a detailed way. The novelty of the novel exposes its literary value in a new type of migrant in a globalized labour market. The novel not only shows the remarkable difference between the poor and rich in the global earth, but also the immigrant experience of racialization of cross-ethnic diasporas in America. By mobilizing dishonest workers from several countries and showing their relating relationships. Desai links unusual geographic of migration and diaspora, showcasing that just as globalization creates new social and economic divided; it also enables migrants to challenge ethnic and social barriers by forging cross cultural connections.

By focusing on the material experiences of various ethnic diasporas and on the phenomenon of diasporic dispersal in the context of late twentieth-century capitalism, Desai departs from earlier conceptualizations of diaspora. Since the 1990s, diaspora has been theorized as the displacement of individuals and groups from their homeland through exile and migration and their re-anchoring in their host countries. Viewed from the perspective of a double national and cultural belonging, diaspora has served to rethink the idea of the nation, whose borders and internal exclusions it challenges. Recent uses of the term, however have moved from the notion of diaspora as an alternative paradigm for the nation, and from a preoccupation with the construction of diasporic identities as culturally hybrid, to the idea that diaspora entails lived and embodied experiences of diasporic subjects and communities, which are predicted on factors such as class, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and sexuality.

Kiran Desai extends this model of diaspora by exploring the material conditions that have given rise to transnational flows of people as well as the ways in which diasporic identities are lived and experienced in the context of global capitalism. In contrast studies of diasporic subjects that tend to celebrate their mobility and hybrid cultural identity, Desai attempts to re-politicize the genre of South Asian diasporic narratives through a renewed attention to topical themes and narrative form.

The novel explores the nostalgia of the writer's childhood being in India. Desai's childhood experiences made her a committed writer to pontificate the memories of the past life in a systematic way in the novel. In the essay "The Anxiety of Indianness," Meenakshi Mukherjee offers interesting debates about the Indian diasporic writers in English. Mukherjee contrasts "the first generation writers from the third generation writers who have perceivable difference in their portrayal of India focusing Indian history." (Mukherjee 86) Desai, in her portrayal of India belongs to the third generation of writers.

Continuing the trend set by the third generation writers, Desai portrays India with a focus on the contemporary history beginning with her debut novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998). Though this novel received literary awards like Man Booker Prize, the national Book Critics Circle Award and Vodafone Crossword Book Award, yet it failed to be popular in the genre of diasporic writing in English. However her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* has been received in the West overwhelmingly for its strength of depiction and narration of the Indian history.

The novelist employs the omniscient narrative technique. By doing so, she helps the readers understand multiple perspectives. The subject matter of the novel attracted the attention of the Western readers. Desai captures the shifts in time with great ease. Events of the past such as the Judge's early life and marriage, or details of Sai's parents and her childhood are treated as flashbacks of the characters. The atmosphere of Kalimpong and of Biju's life in New York is built up through minor characters. Both the strands of the narrative are made to have a psychological realism.

The density of the aspects of the novel is indicated through the title: the

word 'loss' relates to what the people miss in the contemporary life. In the epigraph, Desai states: 'My humanity is in feeling we are all voices of the same poverty...my name is someone and anyone. I walk slowly, like one who comes from far away he does not expect to arrive.' (Jorge 1) The epigraph emphasizes the idea that man's only inheritance in this life is one of the poverty of various kinds, material and spiritual. Ultimately one can only strive for, but never actually attain, fulfillment.

Desai explores the aspects of 'inheritance' and 'loss.' The loss that Sai's father, an Air Force officer, who is about to become the first Indian to fly into space is moving. His loss is due to his untimely demise in an accident along with his wife in Moscow. Sai, aged six is admitted to the convent school which she apparently hates. Sai becomes an orphan. Her father, who was brought up in a Zoroastrian charity for orphans, was an orphan.

Sai's mother was disowned by her parents, because she runs away with a Parsi boy and gets married against the will of her parents. Thus the tradition of orphanage continued through three generations in the family. This leads to a sense of rootlessness, which is inherited from generation to generation.

Sai inherits the rootlessness of her parents after their death. She is sent to live with her maternal grandfather, who is a judge. Sai's first night at the grandfather's house in Kalimpong is an insulting and intimidating experience. The novel opens with the sublime description of north-eastern Himalayan scene of India that: "All day, the colours had been those of dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains possessed of ocean shadows and depths. Briefly visible above the vapour, Kanchenjunga was a far peak whittled out of rice, gathering the last of the light." (1)

Set in the mid 1980's at Kalimpong, the novel portrays life at the foot of mount Kanchenjunga in the North-Eastern part of post-independence India. A retired judge, Jemubhai Patel lives with his cook and his orphaned granddaughter Sai and his pet dog, Mutt. Although the novel sets in two different places completely, the action is engineered by the presence of the Judge and cook's Son Biju in New York. He keeps changing the restaurants as a cook. He changes his work places in order to get permanent permission as

resident in the USA.

Numerous incidents take place in Kalimpong due to regional disputes between the Indo-Nepali insurgency. In the beginning, the young Indian-Nepali insurgents enter the house of Jemubhai. They steal the Judge's guns and forced him to offer snacks by humiliating him. The judge is made to say "Jai Ghorkha," "Jai JaiGhorkha." The Indo- Nepalis are tired of being treated as minority in their own area where they are large in number. They want at least their own state if not their own country.

As the police arrive, the cook lives in a small hut in the village. The police trace out a series of letters written by the cook to his beloved son Biju who is in the USA. The letters intrigue the police conveying the pathetic conditions of immigrants who undergo travails and tribulations in search of getting job in America. The reading of the letters has created the awareness about the two contrastive cultures—Indian and American, an aspect explored in a detail way in the following section.

II

This section presents the multicultural concerns of the novel. Multiculturalism dominates different reasonable population consists of "indigenous," "Immigrant," and "refugee" communities with regard to languages, cultures, religious beliefs, and social organization. The renowned literary critic C.W Watson comments on the Multiculturalism: "it compels us to think through the social and collective dimensions of diversity." (Watson 107) Its main objective is to create a comfortable atmosphere in which these different categories can establish close relationship and encourage a new consensual culture in which they distinguish images of their own identity. Multiculturalism further entertains the poststructuralists' refusal of centre, presence and coherence so as to get the close affinity with the postmodernist idea that cultures are not natural but arbitrary products of endless series of concerns and considerations. In a multicultural society no individual and ethnic group is entitled to the dictatorship of either the state or a dominant group within it. This society is likely to hamper racism and other prejudices and seeks

to improve the respect for the identity of the other.

Desai's award winning novel moves back and forth contrasting two cultures. The first strand of the story moves from India to America with a description of the cook's son who stays in America. The second strand moves from England to India dealing with the male protagonist, Jemubhai Patel. The description of Jemubhai's success overwhelms his community because he is the first person from their community to do so. His father, Bamanbhai, a rich man of the Patel community, finds a good looking girl to his son. Married to the Indian girl, Jemubhai turns out to be unhappy due to the negative impact of the multiculturalism. Jemubhai, when he starts working in India, loves the authority and power of his position as a touring official. He would go and measure the fields in style. Though a retired official, his position still gives him authority and power as can be gauged from the remark of the police officer who opines that the robbery of guns from a retired member of the Indian Civil Services cannot be ignored. But as the agitation for Gorkhaland continues and becomes serious, leading even to bloodshed, the established hierarchy is discarded.

The People in the postcolonial India need to strive and get their due. They often become aggressive. For example, Lola complains to the head of the Kalimpong wing of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) called Pradhan. When he learns that he has a French name, he retorts: "I didn't know we live in France. Do we? Tell me, why don't I speak in French, then?" (243) He did not look at the papers of her property which gave the measurements of the plot. He told her that his men had to be accommodated. When Lola tried to continue the conversation, he becomes insolent: "I am the raja of Kalimpong. A raja must have many queens" he jerked his head back to the sounds of the kitchen that came through the curtained door. "I have four, but would you," he looked Lola up and down." (244)

The misogyny of Jemubhai Patel needs to be understood as an instance of multicultural influence on him. He feels that he is forced to stay on the interface of English and Indian cultures. Educated at Bishop Cotton School, he developed a profound veneration for the portrait of Queen Victoria that stands

at the school's entrance. Jemubhai's reverences for the colonial masters could be considered one of the reasons for marrying a woman who brings him dowry.

Although he is fond of the colonized life style, he ignores the conjugal life with his wife at home. Jemubhai's attempt to internalize the culture of the colonizers is noted in a transcendental choice-freeze. Though he inherited glorious Indian culture, he does not use it as a frame of reference. Jemubhai instead attempts to internalize the culture of the colonizers. The imitation of the West results in the inauthentic self of Jemubhai. He realizes that in the process of learning a foreign way of life, he has become the mimic man. In this context, Lacan reminds the readers how the immigrants tend to become the mimic men towards the western life. He comments:

Mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends once by displaying it in part, metonymically. Its threat, I would add, comes from three prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory 'identity effects.'

(Lacan 99)

Ever since Jemubhai is transformed into as mimic men, he would not acknowledge the greatness of the Indian culture "He wouldn't tumble his pride to melodrama at the end of his life and he knew the danger of confession- it would cancel any hope of dignity forever." (208) Therefore, he makes up his mind to buy Cho Oyu, a house built by a Scotsman in the northeastern Himalayas. He feels that the location of the house gives him a shelter. The house is a means of escape for him. He is culturally alienated from the native people. He can hardly speak the tongue of the common people of Kalimpong. Therefore he does not develop any psychic and cultural relation with the people. He develops hatred towards his wife to the extent that he became misanthropy: "He did not like his wife's face, searched for his hatred, found beauty, and dismissed it, once it had been a terrifying beckoning thing that had made his heart turn water. An Indian girl never be as beautiful as an English one..." (168-69)

Nimi however begins to protest against the callous attitude of Jemubhai. The hatred needs to be understood as a result of the cultural differences. He never speaks and looks at her. She was uncared for. Her freedom is useless and her husband disregarded his duty. He calls her lazy, wide as a buffalo. These physical and mental tortures make her invalid. She begins falling asleep during day and wakes up in the middle of the night. Jemubhai's tortures create dislike to see her in the mirror because she could not see herself in it. Because of the psychological attack of Jemubhai, her cheeks are erupted.

He considers her fallen beauty as a further affront. He is scared of touching her due to her skin disease. To top it all, he discourages and orders her not to show her for outside lest people might run from her seeming. This is how the novelist makes Jemubhai misogynist and degrading selfish animal. She stays in her sister's house in which she burns herself to death while cooking.

The novelist sums up the human distress of Jemubhai: "Now Jemubhai wondered if he had killed his wife for the sake of false ideals. Stolen her dignity, shamed his family, shamed hers, turned her into the embodiment of their humiliation." (308) As for his daughter: "he had condemned the girl to convent boarding schools. She relieved when she reached a new height of uselessness and absurdity by eloping with a man who had grown up in an orphanage." (308)

Multiculturalism in the context of globalization has such bearing on the urban populace that the inherent conflict between the native culture and the Western culture is difficult to be resolved, and the genre of the Indian English novel represents this aspect effectively. *The Inheritance of Loss* in this respect is a landmark publication in representing the aspect of multiculturalism. Theo Goldberg opines that:

Multiculturalism explores the assertive foundations of disciplines, scrutinizing the boundaries of subjects conceived as agents and disciplines. It pursues the interdisciplinary interpellation of subjectivity from within while transgressively challenging the confinements, the borders, of established institutional structures,

subjects and subjectivities, and imposed disciplinary forms. Themes analysed include the relations between self and other selves and others, subjects and subjects, between knowledges, power, pedagogy, politics and empowerment. (Goldberg 2)

Desai also picks up the concept of multicultural influenced character who has become a poignant image of westernized, is the best epitome of the multicultural reverberations in the novel. His long period of stay in the western country in turn acquired psychological disturbances and unhappy life in terms of family life. Here the novelist proves that how the Indian immigrants lose gratitude towards their mother land and offered a great reverence to the colonials.

III

It has been argued in the foregoing sections that Desai portrays in the novel the cultural aspect of the urban India with a focus on the multicultural aspect vis-à-vis the immigrant experience. Her portrayal of the characters explores the multicultural concern and immigrant experience.

To suit her theme and concerns, Desai adeptly employs the experiments in the case of the language. Her creative use of English contributed to the effectiveness of the novel. Sounds are reproduced to create necessary effect. Expressions such as 'the rustling of the wind and grass,' 'the twittering of birds,' 'the croaking of the frogs,' 'the whistling of the owl,' 'the ringing of the phone,' 'the bowling of taxi horns,' among others are effective because of the sound. Besides, Desai employs exclamations from Hindi and other vernaculars: 'Arre, chala, chalo, 'Bilkulbekaar,' 'bepkhup.' Oddities in pronunciation are captured through deliberate mis-spelling as in 'naaty boy,' 'daallars,' 'ahffend,' 'Ah'm,' 'whaat,' 'whaat,' 'deeference,' 'telephone,' 'haeve..'

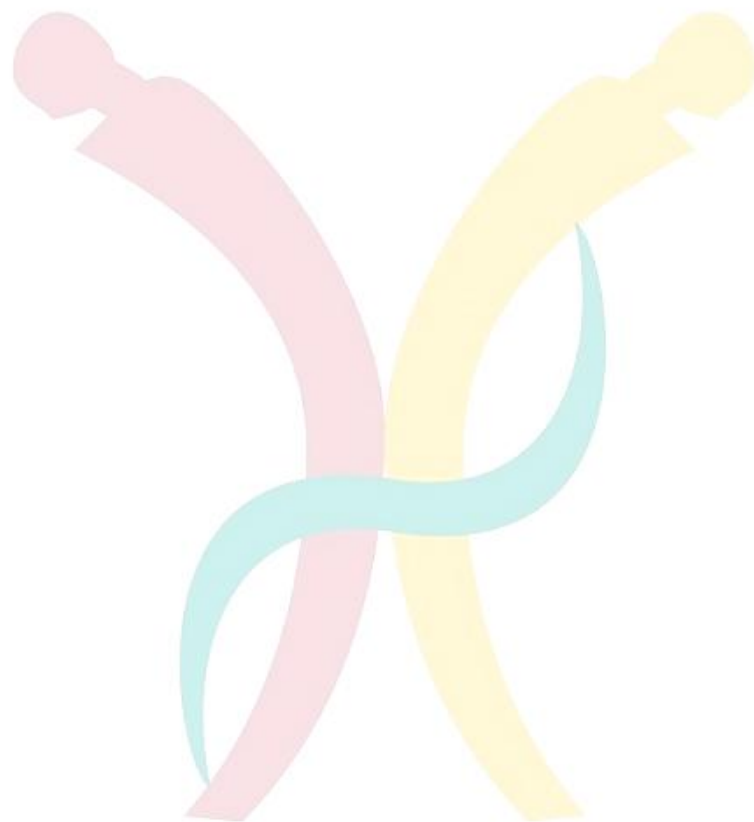
The speech of the English-educated upper class Indian women in America too figures in the story through "*Namaste, Kusum Auntie. Aayiye, baethiye, khayiye*"! (50) Other devices adopted by the novelist to lend authenticity are the use of block letters to indicate high pitched voice and a

deliberate omission of punctuation marks to convey a sense of breathless narration evident in the typical reeling off of the menu by a waiter in a restaurant: 'Mutton curry,' 'mutton pulao,' 'vegetable curry' and 'vegetablepulao.'

The foregoing discussion of Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* with a focus on the portrayal of the cultural aspect of the urban India is suggestive that the novel represents an important aspect of modern India. An attempt has been made to map the multicultural aspect vis-à-vis the immigrants. In this respect, *The Inheritance of Loss* occupies an important place in the genre of the recent Indian English novel.

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