



## FEMININE QUEST IN KIRAN DESAI'S THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

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### ABSTRACT

*Kiran Desai, recipient of the worlds' most prestigious literary award Booker Prize in 2006 for her second novel of The Inheritance of Loss got worldwide popularity for dealing multidimensional concerns. Not gainsaying for achieve this equality and independence women are stepping out of the right sex roles assigned to them traditionally. The novelist has fabricated the three generations to depict feminine quest for identity. Nimi is subjugated and suppressed but other female characters step forward to fly high to achieve the authentic existence. Prime significant female character named Sai, who delineates the picture of a competent and liberated woman. Through all above three generations Desai exhibits women's search for liberty and right in real sense. Women's odyssey from subjugation to liberation is very skilfully dealt with myriad colours. The women of today is a mother, wife and daughter and amidst all she struggles to keep her own identity. They are desirous to exist not to live.*

**Keywords:** subjugation, Hindu culture, liberation, multi-dimensional, odyssey.

The prestigious Man Booker Prize winner Kiran Desai has achieved the world wide praise heaped upon her second novel in 2006. She has made a place for herself, not as Anita Desai's daughter, but as a promising, gifted novelist sharing with the likes of Vikaram Seth, Amitav Ghose and Arundhati Roy. Having gone through this novel it is found that the novelist has raised many burning issues like women's quest for identity including the immigrants' life and struggle on the foreign land. The present research paper is a moderate attempt to trace Kiran Desai's consensus upon the position of women in the society and even in the sophisticated class. She has portrayed the female characters with little meekness and with some sparks too. All women in The Inheritance of Loss are projected as successful in holding their position in a male- dominated set up. But she doesn't fail to show how they are forced to consider subjugation against men. Despite it she has clearly revealed that the Indian woman has succeeded in redefining herself. Consequently women have come a long way indeed, though a lot needs to be done still. She tightly holds the flag of feminism projecting her female



characters with liberty and right .Feminism implies the demand of women for equality-equality for power, right and opportunity.

Opportunities for above have gifted men by birth but women have to struggle to obtain. Sometime they succeed and sometime they fail. Fact that is to mention here that failure should not end in full stop. Will or aspiration should not be tarnished. After failure one should stand formidable to meet obstacles in own way with new guts and confidence. Not gainsaying to achieve this equality and independence women are stepping out of the right sex roles assigned to them traditionally. They are not ready to accept the tennysonian separation of roles:

Men for the field and women for the hearth

Man for sward and for the needle she (The Princess: V: 427)

Above ideas are not advocated by Kiran Desai as such types of thoughts keep women back imparting rights to men to dominate them. A woman is always shown in relationship to man; the husband- wife relationship is given more importance than the daughter- father, sister-brother or daughter- mother relationship. In the light of tradition a good woman is she who is good wife. She is admired and compared to female incarnation of the goddess, never treated as human. In this regard it is mentioned that in the Hindu society, the ideal woman has been personified by Sita, very popular and imitated name in the Hindu culture:

For both men and women in Hindu society, the ideal woman has been traditionally personified by Sita who is portrayed in the Ramayan as the quintessence of wifely devotion. (Chakravarti: 70)

This has resulted in the failure and independent existents. This has not only limited their achievements in many fields but also given ride to pervasive social evils and has had a particularly vitiating effect on the sexual relations between men and women. Man considers himself subject and absolute and woman is the other:

She is called “the sex”, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex absolute sex, no less ..., she is the incidental, the inessential. He is the absolute, she is the other. (Beauvoir:16)

Kiran Desai has portrayed many female characters with various colours that paint the picture of successive generations of women. Description in detail will throw adequate light on Desai’s stances regarding female. The first generation belongs to Sai’s grandmother Nimi, second generation of women include Loli, Nona, Mrs Sen and Sai’ s mother, and Sai comprises the third generation of women in the novel. Desai in the present novel The



Inheritance of Loss has expounded basically two categories of women; one denotes the rustic, illiterate class and second educated and urban ladies. Nimi represents first category and Noni and Lola second, first is shown as subjugated by the patriarchal setup whereas second exhibits life of liberation and meaning. The novelist has touched three generations to depict the odyssey of women from subjugation to liberation. Very skilfully Desai has described that seeking promising career people drifts to England, Europe, USA, London etc. but under the multiculturalism they start to lose their own culture. The best example of such character is Jemubhai, who suffers lots in England. He is humiliated and oppressed there but he always hides his embarrassment behind a facade of “keeping up standards” (119). While fact reveals that he marries Nimi only for financial support to go abroad. So their marriage was negotiated to incur a sumptuous dowry:

The dowry included cash, gold, emeralds from Venezuela, rubies from Burma, uncut kundan diamond, a watch on a watch chain, lengths of woollen cloth for her new husband to make into suits in which to travel to England, and in a crisp envelop, a ticket for passage on Strathnaver from Bombay to Liverpool.(91)

He does not love her wife as she is unable to learn English and he considers English speaking persons are epitome of the sophisticated class. Nimi is victim of patriarchal system. She has lost her self, even her previous name Bela is changed to discard the fragrance of backwardness. She is rechristened Nimi by her husband's family. Nimi was the name of a rich man's daughter who supplies everything to army. She is not welcomed in her laws' house and Jemubhai leaves her when she was not acquainted with them properly. She is projected as a traditional wife for whom husband is everything. With him his wife's life starts and ends too. But husband does not feel any hitch to torture his wife under many illusions. Jemubhai returns home after many years and he has imbibed western hypocrisy and the notion of privacy. When he sees the silly behaviours of his wife he could not control himself and bursts on her caring little about her feeling. His blows become intolerable to her but she doesn't revolt till her last patience. Their marital relationship is not satisfactory as he detests all creatures who as Indians as they are not taken as civilized. His fear, hate and ill treatment of his wife is the result of disintegration of the self under the influence of colonialism. In an interview Kiran Desai has said:

In an awful way, you tend to become what you're called ...I can see it even today, but certainly at that time when India was British India, there was a whole generation of people I think who left for England and studied there and came back despising their own people and their own country to a certain degree...even great freedom fighters, even Gandhi and Nehru, came back and couldn't talk to their wives. (thefreelibrary.com)



In the life of Nimi deprivation, injustice, oppression, alienation and isolation are well discernible. It can be stated that she is completely tied with above. She cannot evade far away. Nimi's character is projected through the lens of recollection of her anglophile husband. Nimi is example which shows how the traditional women are bound to suffer bitter treatment in the name of husband. Obviously this is the lot of average traditional Indian wives. Having no other options Nimi endures and suffers all maltreatment of her husband without little revolt. Judge abuses her as he considers her illiterate, filthy and uncivilized who cannot learn English. With no knowledge of English she is considered that she will be the cause of disgrace to him. Seeing her filthy and unmannered etiquette he loses his control, and she is being insulted treated like animal. Very apt illustration will be suitable to cite here that is incident of her footprint on toilet. He discovers that her footprint on the toilet seat, he lost sense and his rage knows no bound: "She was squatting on it!- he could barely contain his outrage, took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl..."(173). Series of such types of incidents shatter her dream and illusion. She lost her sense of wellbeing. On the trivial issues he creates the fuss and this is because of his segregation from his own culture. He does not like any disturbance in his personal life; he does not allow even her wife who gives a strong financial support to make his career. On other occasion when Nimi went to a meeting of Nehru and was recognized by Jemibhai's boss, he could not digest this and feels very insulted. He takes it that having been acquainted with his wife he would think awkward about him and his all ways of the promotion will be closed. Consequently he kicks and thrashes her blue and black. To get rid of her he could not help him thinking to kiss her: "In purest moment he could imagine himself killing her" (305). Being a woman she suffers all as she is ready to get all blows given by her husband and never opens her mouth against him. She is sent to Gujarat and there she takes the shelter in her uncle house but even there she is not permitted to stay more. As she is with one responsibility in the form of daughter her uncle tells her frankly:

You are your husband's responsibility. Go back. Your father gave a dowry when you married – you got your share and it is not for daughter's to come claiming anything thereafter. If you have made your husband angry, go ask for forgiveness. (306)

Kiran Desai very skilfully has penetrated how after the marriage girl has no right to live in the parents' house and is taught to face everything whether good or bad. Because of that mostly Indian wives are having the life of isolation and loneliness despite having all relationship. They are not treated as human, their voices are not heard.

Observing the female characters in Indian women Writings, Antonia Tejero in her essay Modern Indian Women Writers in English comments:





The ideal of the traditional, oppressed woman persisted in a culture permeated religious images of virtuous goddesses devoted to their husbands... when looking at these narratives silence/ speech can be a useful guide to interpreted women's responses to patriarchal hegemony. Silence is a symbol of oppression, a characteristic of the subaltern condition, which speech signifies self expression and liberation.

Jemubhai is very sensitive against the filthy manners towards any one whereas he himself hurts his wife with little brooding that whatever she is no matter but is his wife of flesh and blood and should be respected. Nimi in the hand of brutal patriarchal system suffers double loss, loss of her human self and loss of her sanity. Death was the last refuge and the only relief to her whom the patriarchal society crushed all her life. So her journey has been full of challenges and predicaments.

Second important character is Sai whose odyssey is really existential. Through this female character Desai has described the condition of an orphan. She is educated, frank, bold and independent character. Her character inspires weak child to face all challenges with verve and guts. Teenager Sai is hybrid child of her parents. Her mother is judge's daughter who has eloped with a Russian guy. Her father was not give his permission her to go far in this love but she does not care. So Sai's father was a Zoroastrian, mother a Gujarati who admitted her in a convent school. Her upbringing was done in completely secluded and isolated environment. That is why she has made her own world where she finds herself alone. No one is there to share her emotion and feeling. As sudden demise of her parents in an accident, becomes the root cause of her removal from the convent school and she lives with her maternal grandfather Jemubhai, and he likes her as she is educated and can interact in English. So both are leading the life of seclusion in Kalimpong. But space of isolation and loneliness in the life of the judge is reduced to some extent. Her plight reminds one orphaned character named Rahel in Arundhati Roys' *The God of Small Things*. He suffers much and leads a palatable life in which no hope, no colour, but isolation and seclusion only are in. Mothers of both Rahel and Sai go further to make the path for struggle on their own condition but their children suffer the grim consequences of their actions. Nimi's voice is suppressed but Sai's cannot be. Sai also reminds the female character of Manju Kapur named Ida in *The Difficult Daughters*. Ida also struggles but does surrender herself before social system. She believes if structure social system is obsolete should be rectified. Rule are made for human, human is not for rule. In the name of caste, creed and system no one should be oppressed and exploited. She likes to spend her time in reading books. She reads enthusiastically and this stimulates her thinking and her imagination:

She found they affected her so much she could often hardly read the accompanying words – the feeling they created was so exquisite, the desire so painful. She remembered her parents, her father's hope of space travel. She studied the photographs taken via satellite of a storm



blowing a red cloud off the sun's surface, felt a terrible desire for the father she, too, must surely have within her the same urge for something beyond the ordinary. Cho Oye and the judge's habits seemed curtailment to her then. (69)

Sai's life sees some changes coming in the contact of her lady tutor named Noni (Nonita), who is also faced many problems due to having no strong financial support. She lives with her sister Lola (Lalita) and recalls how she has been unable to achieve her goal under the pressure of her father. She inspires Sai to meet her destination desired in life having no letting no chance to spoil her life. She convinces her with her following words:

If you get a chance in life, take it. Look at me, I should have thought about the future when I was young. Instead, only when it was too late did I realize what I should have done long ago. I used to dream about becoming an archaeologist. I'd go to the British Council and look at the books in the King Tutunkhamen ...But my parents were not kind to understand, you know, my father was old- fashioned type. A man brought up and educated only to give orders ... You must do it on your own, Sai. (69)

Noni sees herself in Sai. So feels very sorry for her and have concern about her. Because she has still time to make her career bright. Sai herself could not help to be affected by her bold nature. She manages a nepali Gyan as a math tutor to Sai. Sai falls in his love which could not meet it destination. In the company of her math tutor Gyan, who is educated but could not get job she seeks her success in the love. But she gets him odd many times and on many places. She is rather wise than Gyan. He finds her fascinating in the beginning of their love affairs gradually could not see his match in her. As she has western etiquettes and westernized style of living she would not cope up with life. He takes his steps back in love with her, " Sai was not miraculous; she was an uninspiring person, a reflection of all the contradictions around her, a mirror that showed him himself far too clearly for comfort" (262) . On other hand Sai understands all very well regarding the reaction of Gyan. He never tries to delve deep in Sai's heart and losses her with no pain. Gyan turns on her:

She who could speak no language but English and pidgin Hindi, she who could not converse with anyone outside her tiny social stratum. She who could not eat with her hands; could not squat down on the ground on her haunches to wait for a bus; who had never been to a temple but for architectural interest; never chewed a paan and had not tried most sweets in the mithaishop... she who a Bollywood film so exhausted from emotional wear and tear that she walked home like a sick person and lay in pieces on the sofa ; she who thought it vigar to put oil your hair and used papers to clean her bottom...(176)

Gyan was frustrated and depressed because he could not change his life and his lot. Originally they belonging to this land Nepal and this land to them have been through



centuries serving as chowkidars' for English sahibs. They have been taunted to be thieves, their brains though to be too dull for education and best suited for physical work only. Being educated suited for physical work only. Being educated he could not tolerate such remarks. He burst revealing his emotions in the following words. Why he had no money and no real job had come his way, why he couldn't fly to college in America, why he was ashamed to let anyone see his home (160). GNLF (Gorkha National Liberation from Fighting for Independence) is "to fight to the death for the formation of a home land (Desai: 126) because they feel that they are treated "Like slaves" (159) in the land of their ancestors. Indian Nepalis diaspora have been displaced and marginalized, although being larger in number. They have been employed as "laborers", "coolies" and "servants" called illiterate, bastards" and have been feeling frustrated by the "lack of justice" (157). He fights for him joining GNLF. In case of Sai he feels insecure seeing her frank way of expression and her way of life whereas Sai's behaviour is contradictory. She shows courage to speak the Truth on her lover's face, "You are probably just waiting for your mummy to arrange your marriage. Low class family, uncultured, arrange marriage types..." (262). She is mature due to experience in her life with many ups and down. Desai has depicted the bold character, ready to face challenges through Sai, who holds reality and never sees dream. Even in her defence she boldly reveals with straight forwardness piece of her mind to Gyan's sister, "Good you saw, good that you heard. Go and tell your parents what your brother has been up to, telling me he loves me, making all kinds of promises and then sending robbers to our house. I'll go to police and then let's see what happens to your family" (262). After getting dumped in love she is ripped more than before.

Kiran Desai has endeavoured to discern the effective means of improving the Indian woman's second class social status. Her characters whether male or female are seen keeping their journey from subjugation to liberation. Among other female characters Nonita (Noni) and Lalita (Lola) are also significant who pine to live their lives on their own way. Lola is widow and lives her life with her sister. They are not satisfied with their life for their pangs reveals time to time. That is why Noni suggests Sai to carve her identity and have a meaningful life. Her despondency and discontentment are reflected in her advice to Sai. These women show cosmopolitan views, they belong to a world of information boom. BBC gave them a worldwide coverage of news and they discussed literature amongst themselves. They had well passed their prime age of progress but they wanted the next generation to grasp the opportunity. Therefore, Noni advised Sai: "Time should move...Don't go in for a life where time doesn't pass, the way I did. That is the single biggest bit of advice I give you" (93). They live on the pension and need more money to lead a good life. Lola, Noni, Pixie and Mrs. Sen are also trapped by British ways. Lola advises her daughter Pixie, a BBC reporter. "Better leave (India) sooner than later... India is a sinking ship. Don't want to be pushy, darling, sweetie, thinking of your happiness only, but the doors won't stay open for ever... (47). Lola and Noni are publically humiliated by Pradhan of GNLF, Violate the



dignity of genteel women while both the sisters go to complain against encroachment in Mon Ami. Loss of dignity and dreamland (Mon Ami) make them helpless. A close look at the lives of these middle class urban women reveals that they are free from the shackle of patriarchy and having their own private space lead a comfortable life.

Thus, the present paper has a moderate endeavour to show Desai's female characters' quest for identity shaking the traditional shackles which women are tied with. No matter in the life of few female characters there is aloofness, isolation, loneliness and annui. But other characters are shown with adequate potential and capacity to carve new identity on their own way. People worship goddess who is woman but they treat their wives not as human with flesh and blood. Women's voices are unheard while should be heard. As they are not heard means half population is not heard. They should be promoted and respected. In this regard it can be concluded that feminism has awakened them to proceed to have an authentic life as they have right and liberty which should be given in real sense. They know a little attempt is not less important as that may be just like the stone of foundation. On that new edifice can be erected.

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