



MULTICULTURALISM ISSUES IN THE KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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ABSTRACT

*The Inheritance of Loss as a whole is a wonderful depiction of multicultural global society. The fabric of its themes is uniquely woven from the threads of globally mingled cultures and races challenging all colonial, neo-colonial traits of cultural and racial discrimination. Though, having pangs of its own, migration has played wonders mitigating the pangs of such discrimination from the face of the globe. With the issues and episodes related to human and cultural hybridity, global multiculturalism, global fraternity, consciousness and wisdom of the masses of this era, Desai presents a wonderful, happy and positive response to colonialism, neo-colonialism. By spreading the message of multiculturalism through her *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai is an Indian by blood and spirit, is spreading the message of 'Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam' the whole Earth is a family, the age-old concept of Indian philosophy and a universal value established by our ancestors. Desai writes the saga of the losses of decades, amidst wonderful and globally shining gains of humanity at large, and creates encouraging response to colonialism.*

Key Words- Multicultural, issues, Multiculturalism, Desai.

Introduction-

Kiran Desai was born in India in 1971; she lived in Delhi until she was 14, and then spent a year in England, before her family moved to the USA. She completed her schooling in Massachusetts before attending Bennington College, Hollins University and Columbia University, where she studied creative writing, taking two years off to write *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. Her mother is Anita Desai, author of many books, three of which have been short listed for the Booker Prize *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). Anita Desai currently teaches writing at MIT. Her maternal grandmother was German, but left before the World War II and never returned. Her grandfather was a refugee from Bangladesh.



Her paternal grandparents came from Gujarat, and her grandfather was educated in England. Although Kiran has not lived in India since she was 14, she returns to the family home in Delhi every year. She first came to literary attention in 1997 when she was published in the *New Yorker* and in *Mirrorwork*, an anthology of 50 years of Indian writing edited by Salman Rushdie - *Strange Happenings in the Guava Orchard* was the closing piece. In 1998, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, which had taken four years to write, was published to good reviews. She says, "I think my first book was filled with all that I loved most about India and knew I was in the inevitable process of losing."

It was also very much a book that came from the happiness of realizing how much I loved to write." Eight years later, *The Inheritance of Loss* was published in early 2006, and won the 2006 Booker Prize. When talking of the characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, and of her own life, she says, "The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys (of her grandparents) as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is this I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance."

The Inheritance of Loss is set partly in India and partly in the USA. Desai describes it as a book that "tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant," and goes on to say that it also explores at a deeper level, "what happens when a Western element is introduced into a country that is not of the West" - which happened during the British colonial days in India, and is happening again "with India's new relationship with the States." Her third aim was to write about, "What happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one. How does the imbalance between these two worlds change a person's thinking and feeling? How do these changes manifest themselves in a personal sphere, a political sphere, over time?" As she says, "These are old themes that continue to be relevant in today's world, the past informing the present, the present revealing the past."

Multiculturalism

From the political point of view, the term multiculturalism can be perceived as the best way of reacting on cultural differences. It works on an assumption that minority groups are not treated on the same level as other citizens. Multiculturalism also serves as an instrument of political and economic interests. Some critics contend that the multicultural argument for the preservation of cultures is premised on a problematic view of culture and of the individual's relationship to culture. Cultures are not distinct, self-contained wholes; they have long interacted and influenced one another through war, imperialism, trade, and migration. In the latter respect, multiculturalism is closely allied with nationalism.

The Inheritance of Loss and Multiculturalism-

Kiran Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss* addresses variety of postcolonial issues such as cultural hybridity, nationalism, identity and the connection between place and culture. Most characters of the novel experience great influence of the Western culture. The author shows various aspects of the postcolonial reality on a different life stories faced by people who are trying to come to terms with a strong foreign influences. The characters of the novel are representatives of various issues dealt with by people from the formerly colonized countries the story is set in a small Indian town Kalimpong in Northeast Himalayas where the author grew up.

The novel is a compound of the life stories of the main characters and gradually discloses their lives, as well as the environment in which they grew up and which shaped them. Even though all the characters are from one small town in the mountains their stories spread as far as Britain and the USA. The time scale is also quite wide as the stories reach from 1940's until 1980's, when most of the story takes place. The novel shows not only the lives of the main characters but also the development of the region with growing social unrests of Nepali nationalists who are a large diaspora living in the region, and also the impact of such changes on the inhabitants of the region. The beginning of the novel introduces a retired judge who lives with his granddaughter and his cook. The judge is an old man who was as a young bright man sent to Britain to become a judge to serve the British government. However, the British society of 1940's was not prepared to encounter foreign culture and young Jemubhai Patel had to face racist behaviour which had devastating effect on his self-esteem.

For entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things, and elderly ladies, even the hapless blue-haired, spotted, faces like collapsing pumpkins 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. The young and beautiful were no kinder; girls held their noses and giggled, "Phew, he stinks of curry!" Eventually he felt barely human at all," The change he went through led into great changes in his behaviour which is well demonstrated on the relationship towards his wife.

A month before leaving for Britain his parents married him to a fourteen years old girl. The judge was then so gentle and shy that he was not able to consummate his marriage as he was afraid of hurting his young wife. After his return from Britain, where he after a great struggle became the judge, he violently raped his wife for stealing his powder puff. This event shows that after the humiliation he had to face he is taking his anger out on those who are in his power. Another aspect of this story is what does the powder puff represent; the judge used it to powder his face to lighten his complexion in order to assimilate better in Britain, and his wife, by discovering the puff, also uncovered his humiliation.

Later on the judge divorces his wife and after his retirement lives in secluded place with his cook and later his granddaughter Sai. The judge after the bitter experience in his youth despises everything Indian and clings to British customs as a sign of a higher class. His granddaughter Sai was brought up in a Westernized convent and after her parents' 'death, at the age of seven, moved to Cho Oju to live with her grandfather as he was the only living relative. Sai represents Westernized Indian upper class whose first language is English and who prefers Western traditions to the Indian ones. After her affair with her math tutor Gyan, who is Nepali, she is confronted with his accusations to be a servant of the West.

You are like slaves, that's what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself. Can't think for you. *Copycat, copycat*. Don't you know these people you copy like a copycat, THEY DON'T WANT YOU!!!! Gyan points out Sai's not belonging as she does not belong to Indian culture but at the same time is not part of the British culture either as Gyan believes she will not be accepted by it. The cook, who is actually called by his name only once at the end of the novel, on the other hand represents a person from a lower class that follows Indian traditions but sees the Western world as something of a higher standard and is proud of his son Biju, who lives in New York. The cook had thought of ham roll ejected from a can and fried in thick ruddy slices, of tuna fish soufflé, khari biscuit pie, and was sure that since his son was cooking English food, he had a higher position than if he were cooking Indian.

Biju, the son of the cook represents a person who manages to leave Eastern culture and encounters the Western culture as an illegal immigrant in New York. His story shows "what happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one" which was one of the issues Desai wanted to show in the book. Even though Biju does not succeed in the Western culture as he fails to understand it, and as an illegal immigrant is also in a disadvantageous position, he, unlike the judge many years before him, does not transform his misfortune into hatred. The experience helps him to realize that he belongs into his own culture. Biju went to the USA in hope of financial success and although he does not achieve it as all his belongings are stolen on his return to India, he appreciates being in his own culture, where he can understand its customs and people. Biju stepped out of the airport into the Calcutta night, warm, mammalian. His feet sank into dust winnowed to softness at his feet, and he felt an unbearable feeling, sad and tender, old and sweet like the memory of falling asleep, a baby on his mother's lap.

Biju stood there in that dusty tepid soft sari night. Sweet drabness of home – 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. Nobody paid attention to him here, and if they said anything at all, their words were easy, unconcerned. He looked about and for the first time in God knows how long, his vision unblurred and he found that he could see clearly.



The Western experience helped Biju to understand where he belongs, helped him to find his own cultural identity and it also made him to question some stereotypes, often connected with race or nationality. Gyan, Sai's tutor, represents someone who is looking for his personal identity as he feels that he is being disadvantaged because of his Nepali nationality. When he joins the nationalist movement he at first seems to find his place in the society, but he later starts to question the correctness of his decision. His relationship with Sai represents the conflict between classes and nationalities; when their relationship encounters problems these differences are surfacing and by wording the stereotypes, they actually word the problems and differences between their classes and nationalities. Two sisters Noni and Lola are representatives of a wealthy higher class which is strongly influenced by British culture.

They behave very dismissively towards people who are, in their opinion, of a lower class. Lola's daughter, Pixie, works in England for the BBC and both sisters consider everything British as a sign of higher class so they cook English food, wear Marks and Spencer underwear and read British literature, which was during the colonial period considered as a literary canon even in the colonies. However, their ostentatious richness marks them as an easy target during the Nepali riots in the area. Father Booty is a Swiss priest who came to Kalimpong after Indian Independence on a missionary work but stayed in the area for thirty years. He, on the other hand, is a representative of a person from Western culture who accepted the Eastern culture and even though he brought some Western influences into the area, he assimilated with the local people. He has to leave India during the riots as his visas are expired and experiences the feeling of displacement when he has to go back to his country. Interestingly, the book does not depict traditional Indian lifestyle as all the characters portrayed in the novel are somehow influenced by the postcolonial aftermath.

This supports the view that the author's aim was not to describe the lifestyle of people in a remote part of India with their traditional culture, but rather to show the relationship between East and West as well as the reality of immigrants. On the other hand, Kiran Desai is the product of multiculturalism and post-colonialism, an immigrant, well read, well bred, whose rootlessness itself has become a kind of shelter. She travels amid three geographical locations inheriting different cultures from her kinship with India England and USA which gives her the wide perspectives on the ideas of exile, dislocation and displacement.

It was her own inheritance and disinheritance that has come with globalization of which she talks in her novel, IL. In the modern world, we have moved from an isolated, slow growing economy to one that is growing faster and beginning to integrate with the global economy. The transition began with liberalization but it remains incomplete. Liberalization has benefited only a fraction of India, the organized economy and urban Indians. It has yet to reach the largest part of our country so that the rural Indians can also live with dignity and freedom. So, this is the reason perhaps why Kiran Desai moved towards rural area and tried

to give us a glimpse how these people still struggle to meet even their basic needs as when Sai thinks of Penna Lal, “a few clothes hung over a string, a single razor blade . a broken watch that would cost too much to mend, but was still too precious to throw away”

Conclusion-

The Inheritance of Loss is showing not only the reality of the mutual influences of both the Eastern and the Western cultures but pictures also the very different ways of perception of the Eastern culture in the West and the Western culture in the East. These differences in perception of Westerners in the East and Easterners in the West had an impact on the self-perception of the characters in Desai’s novel. The greatest influence is shown on the characters of the judge who after encountering the Western culture despises himself as an Indian, and in a search for a new identity clings to his former habits, and strangely adopted cruelty .

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