

THE THEME OF CULTURAL CONFLICTS AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN KIRAN DESAI'S "THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS"

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ABSTRACT

Kiran Desai's Inheritance of Loss is one of the best novels of our times dealing with the themes of Culture and Identity crises. It is set in mid 1980s in North India during the Gorkhaland agitation. The novel beautifully delineates the loss of identity and crises of the people.

KEYWORDS: *Inheritance, Cultural crises, Gorkhaland, Kalimpong, natives, guerillas, meaninglessness, etc*

INTRODUCTION

The Inheritance of Loss, Kiran Desai's second novel, explores various issues and themes related to culture and identity crisis. Kiran Desai, born and brought up in India, received her higher education in England and the United States. She came into limelight in 2006 as she won the Man Booker prize for her novel, The Inheritance of Loss. The novel explores the lives of Post-modern characters. These characters give more importance to earning money, their career and social honor. The present paper discusses the novel as a truthful record of the social reality. The hopes and dreams of frustrated people are forcefully conveyed in the novel of Kiran Desai. Many post Independence Indians are trapped in their poverty as well as class and caste system in India. There are both the lower class and the upper class people all over the world. But the condition of the Indian lower caste people is the worst. In the novel, most of the characters are found struggling to find employment. Along with their ultimate dream of immigrating to America or foreign countries for better jobs, they try to settle in foreign countries also. It is hard reality that many Indians have been trying to escape the rigid caste system of their homeland and improve their economic condition.

The story of the Inheritance of loss is set in the mid years of the 1980 in the northern part of India at a place called Kalimpong near Darjeeling. Those were the days of the agitation for Gorkhaland resulting in lots of social and political disturbances among the natives. The novel has variety of characters representing the various sections of the society. The chief among them are Jemubhai Patel, a former judge, Sai, the grand daughter and the cook, Pannalal. There are also the characters like Gyan, the math tutor to Sai, Biju the son of the cook Pannalal, Saeed, Harish and the two sisters Lolita and Nonita.

The question of identity haunted each and every character in one or the other way. Jemubhai Patel, a retired judge is a typical character who has lost his Identity. He hates himself to be an Indian and is the victim of inferiority complex. He went to Europe for higher education, tried his level best to impress the westerns but could not succeed. Although he was very much impressive in his academic pursuits in the Cambridge university, he was not treated equally by the western

pupils. Instead, he was mocked at and insulted. This made him restless and was the cause of his hate for himself to be an Indian. “He retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow” (page 39, *The Inheritance of Loss*). He started disliking everything that is Indian. “He envied the English...He loathed Indians”(page 119)...

Sai, an innocent girl of eighteen years, neither Indian nor foreigner, is restless in her own home. She lost her parents in an accident in Russia. She lives with her grandfather who is somewhat whimsical person. The death of her parents, the shift in the places-all brought lot of havoc in her life. She fell in love with Gyan, her math tutor, who reciprocated the love but in the course of time he developed sympathy for the struggle for separate Gorkhaland and stops coming to see her. Sai tries hard to adjust with the local conditions but in vain. It is an agonizing process of alienation for Sai which affected profoundly her feelings, ideas and thoughts

Gyan’s situation is also as worst as any other natives of the area. Although he loves Sai, he could not continue with the relationship as he develops sympathy for the cause of freedom of Gorkhaland. He found himself guilty for loving the girl who belongs to the upper class

The characters in the Indian setting-Jemubhai Patel, Sai, Gyan, Lolita and Nonita, Uncle Potty, Princess Mrs. Sen and Munmun –are all the sufferers and in a way or the other all are the inheritors of loss. Being the victims of cultural conflicts in their own homeland, they feel frustrated and displaced at home. Pannalal, the cook, representing the lower class has his own identity crisis. He was laughed at and never considered seriously in any matter. The incident of the attack by Nepalese guerrillas on the judge’s home exposed Indian Snobbery and Corrupt bureaucracy. Poverty of the cook becomes a cause of insult and also big hurdle and Sin

Kiran Desai takes up the Cause of the immigrants and studies deeply their characters. Biju, the cook’s Son, lives in New York city, struggles to realize the American Dream. He lives there illegally, did many odd jobs and instead of becoming a mechanic, became a waiter in a restaurant. Biju’s life in America is one of intense suffering and frustrations. Readers witness all the kitchens in the basements in New York city where he has worked like a criminal. Readers also witness the mistreatment given to him by others who seem to despise him because he is from India. Biju realises that his social position is not improved in America and now he is like his father in India. He has no social honor. With no real home and no sense of belonging, Biju excluded himself from his own ethno-national diaspora community of upper and middle class Indians. Even in America he could not be able to escape from the class and caste prejudices. He could not be able to achieve status and economic stability either in India or in any foreign Country. It is the outcome of poverty and subaltern situation of Biju..

The novel depicts quite clearly the identity crisis of the immigrants who have lost their homelands and have lost their identity. Kiran Desai, quite emphatically, brought out this crisis in the Epigraph to the novel itself;

They speak of homeland

My homeland is the rhythm of a guitar,

A few portraits, an old sword,

The willow grove’s visible prayer as evening falls

Time is living me.....

My name is someone and anyone.

I walk slowly, like one who comes from

So far away he doesn't expect to arrive

In the novel, there is a terrific blending of the generation gap and painful experiences. Indian life and culture is contrasted with the life of foreign settlers. The judge when he was at Cambridge, he became negatively obsessed with his Indian identity. Many a times he used to wash himself over and over again. He had been using white powder to hide his Indian feature. It is loss of culture. The man who escorted Sai claimed that the Indian lower class people use the streets as a toilet and have no shame. Interestingly, Sai also feels that she belongs to a higher, elite class. Sai's obsession with her class superiority also turns out to be dubious as she comes down to love Gyan. It is simply a frustrating search for a legitimate identity. Biju is no doubt a typical victim of the so called post colonial dilemmas. Having nobody to take of his safety and security in America, Biju waged a lone battle and was punished for a mistake that he has not committed. Biju has lots of limitations to understand the cultural register of adaptation that the rich migrants quite smoothly practice. His inability is the inability of all the lower class people across the globe. In his suffering Biju becomes an universal character.

Kiran Desai shows her concern for the Nepalis in her vivid description of the struggle for separate Gorkland. The cry of the Nepalis for separate Gorkland is brought with intense sincerity;

"We are laborers on the tea plantations, coolies dragging heavy loads, soldiers. And are we allowed to become doctors and government workers, owners of the tea plantations? No. We are kept at the level of servants.....We are soldiers, loyal, brave. India or England, they never had cause to doubt our loyaltyOur character has never been in doubt. And have we been rewarded? Have we been given compensation? Are we given respect? "No! They spit on us" (page,158)

Hence, the central theme of the novel is the identity crisis i.e existentialism. It is to be noted that all the characters in the novel seek for some clue to the meaning of life, they search for the meaning but the meaning does not appear. Their enquiries, their interrogations-all fail utterly. The characters undergo both internal and external journeys. The judge even with all his material achievements, is not happy. Though he could not change his past, it haunted his present resulting in utter disappointment and frustrations. Biju's position in America is simply hopeless. He is neither Indian nor European. He finds it difficult to have communication even with the Indian girls;

"Oh myee God!! He said. Oh myee Gaaawd! She keep calling me and calling me," he clutched at head, "aaaiii...I don't know what to do!!"

The point is, Biju's failure to adjust with the changing patterns of life, somehow contributed to his tragedy. His struggle is the struggle for finding his own identity

Throughout the novel, this struggle is a common feature of all the major as well as minor characters. Being an exile, Biju confronts with cultural alienation. As Edmund Fuller rightly observes, "In our age, man suffers not only from inner problem- a conviction of isolation, randomness and meaninglessness in his way of existence." Perhaps, Kiran Desai, just like her characters in the novel who caught between two worlds, try to negotiate a new social space, is also caught

between two cultures and often languages try to negotiate with a new literary space. Hence, the reading of the novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, provides us with an endearing existential experience

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