



## GRIEVANCES OF THE IMMIGRANTS IN KIRAN DESAI'S "THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS"

AMARA RAMA DEVI

(Asst. Professor of English, PSCMR College Of Engineering and Technology, Vijayawada-1)



Article Info:

Article Received: 28/11/2014

Revised on: 29/12/2014

Accepted on: 30/12/2014

### ABSTRACT

Ever since Postcolonial literatures have come into existence, the writers have been trying to create a new form of fiction within the English language by incorporating new images and above all new rhythms. One of the major concerns in postcolonial literature is the problem of displacement and its consequences. Uprooting from one's own culture and land and the suffering of re-rooting in an alien land are depicted in many postcolonial works. Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* addresses the postcolonial problems faced by her characters. They often face the problem of identity and alienation and become frustrated at the end. Desai traces the pain, pathology, despair and agonies of Indian immigrants in Europe. It describes how Desai depicts the feeling of humiliation experienced by the immigrants due to the inequality of a system. It explores the significance of immigration for society, politics and economy. Even when they come back to their own country, like the Judge in the novel, they develop a sense of distrust and anger. They are in a state of confusion from which they will find it difficult to come out. This paper aims at focusing on the postcolonial experiences of Jemubhai Patel, the Judge and Biju, the son of the Judge's cook who eventually supposed to have found out happiness in the reunion with his father, though he has lost all that he earned from his brief time in America.

**Keywords:** *Postcolonial, displacement, suffering, alien, frustrated.*

© Copyright VEDA Publication

The *Inheritance of Loss* is the second novel by the Indian author Kiran Desai. It was first published in 2006. It won a number of awards, including the Man Booker Prize for that year, the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award in 2007, and the 2006 Award. It was

written over a period of seven years after her first book, the critically acclaimed *Hullabaloo* in the *Guava Orchard*.

The novel "The *Inheritance of Loss*" is set against the backdrop of the agitation for Gorkhaland in the north eastern hills of

Darjeeling, close to the borderland with Nepal. There are stories within the stories depicted in numerous vignettes. Set in 1980s, the novel gives a graphic account of a cross section of Indian society in characters like Jemubhai Patel, a former judge, his teenaged granddaughter Sai and their cook, Panna Lal who live in a house in the north East Indian town Kalimpong. There are also other characters like Biju, the cook's son, Gyan, Saeed, Haresh Harvy and the two sisters, Lolita and Nonita. All these figures are the inheritors of loss, in terms of dislocation of place, wealth and progress.

The novel speaks of those who are going back and forth between cultures and homeland as characters in the novel, like the Judge (India and England) and like the cook's son Biju to America and then back to India. The longing for another culture other than their own makes them feel alienated and displaced. They are all transformed from their 'native' identity into something quite different, a "Westernized native". Rather, they are negotiating with a state of nonidentity. Caught between two worlds, the characters negotiate a new social space; caught between two cultures and often languages the writer also negotiates a new literary space. They are all haunted by questions often asked by an immigrant: Who am I? Where do I belong?

All the characters in the novel suffer from a sense of ambivalence that eventually leads them to develop a sense of loss. Jemubhai Patel, the former judge, is an embittered person and he often lives in the past. In flashback, we learn that when he was a young man, he was sent to Cambridge by his family to study law. But in England, he was ridiculed for his accent. Young English girls held their nose as he passed insisting he reeked of curry. This rejection fuelled in his soul, a shame and a dislike for his heritage, his culture and the color of his skin. 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. The judge becomes a victim of "double consciousness. The Judge looks at the English as someone superior and this attitude puts him in a postcolonial dilemma that aggravates his ambivalent nature.

The Inheritance of Loss opens with a teenage girl, an orphan called Sai, living with her Cambridge-educated Anglophile grandfather, the retired judge in the town of Kalimpong on the Indian side of the Himalayas. Sai is also a victim of circumstances. She lost her parents in an accident in Russia. Her father was a space scientist, living in Russia, while she herself was living in Darjeeling in a convent. So, from the outset she has tasted bitter feelings of separation and displacement. Sai falls in love with her tutor, whose name is Gyan, and throughout the story they fight to accept the natural love they have created. Their love is doomed from the beginning because he is an ethnic Nepali, and she is an upper-class, Western-educated Indian girl. The cook watches over them to make sure that Gyan does not take advantage of Sai's good heart and at the same time worries about his own son in the U.S., whose name is Biju.

Biju is the typical Indian immigrant who gets a visa to the U.S. and stays illegally, working for slave wages in the kitchen basements of New York City. There he is used and abused by his bosses and is run ragged by one in particular, who also happens to be Indian. Upset with the way his life is turning out, and by how much he misses his father, he decides to leave the U.S. with his earnings and returns to his home and his father. The displacement of Biju, the son of the cook is more poignant than any other characters in the novel. He manages to get a tourist visa. Biju, joining a crowd of Indians scrambling to reach the visa counter at the U.S Embassy is one of the most harrowing scenes in the novel. However, in the end, Biju becomes an

illegal immigrant in New York, does odd jobs to survive: "Biju changed jobs like a fugitive on the run" (3). The irony is that his father, the cook in the Judge's house thinks that he is doing well and is proud of the fact that his son is in America. "He works for the Americans; the cook had reported the content of the letter to everyone in the market" (14). But, for Biju America is a world of frustration and hopelessness. He was taken to America as a mechanic; but he ends up as a waiter in a restaurant.

On the contrary, his friend Saeed has a carefree life. He has not been affected by the agonies of an immigrant. While Biju is a lost man in the new world, Sayeed is very adaptable and can lead a life of ease without any qualms. Biju's longing for home is continuous while Sayeed never thinks of leaving America. Biju was so restless sometimes; he could barely stand to stay in his skin. Sayeed is, in fact, a foil to Biju. The two characters are juxtaposed together to show the difference between two types of immigrants. Saeed does not react to Biju with suspicion or hate, like the Pakistanis that Biju had worked with.

America is a 'melting pot' for Sayeed. But he is also on the horns of a dilemma as there are conflicts in his mind about his identity. He explains why he does not eat pork, "First I am Muslim, then I am Zanzibari, then I will be American" (136). He is in fact, not a true Muslim. He marries a woman just to get a green card. He then tells Biju that he has met another woman, visiting from Zanzibar, whom he intends to marry. "...in four years I get my green card and ...out there...I get divorced and I marry for real" (318). He is prepared to do anything to get what he wants even at the cost of his self-respect. The irony is that only immigrants like Saeed can survive in a foreign culture when one decides to uproot from one's own culture. Desai compares Biju and Saeed to show how they handle the

dilemmas faced by an immigrant. Sayeed seems to be more pragmatic while Biju is a sort of idealist as he resists the Western culture in which he is trapped in and longs for his homeland India. The writer seems to suggest that people like Biju face repeated miseries and misfortunes and those like Saeed do not bother and they survive in an alien culture at any cost.

Young Sai, who became orphan when her parents were killed in an accident in the Soviet Union, came to live with her grandfather when she was nine. His grandfather never knew that she existed as he banished her mother from his home when she married a man he did not approve of. Sai is very westernized and her grandfather tolerates it. She speaks broken Hindi as she has been exposed to a fabricated English culture. Brainwashed by the people around her, Sai arrives at the house of her grandfather, the retired judge, whom she has never met before. Her displacement from the comforts of a convent school in Darjeeling to the lush, misty Himalayan region of Kalimpong in North Eastern India, where a growing Nepalese insurgency is about to unravel her life further, brings a lot of havoc in her life.

The love between Sai and Gyan, her maths tutor, though flowers in the beginning, it dies when Gyan joins the insurgents and stops coming to see her. Sai eventually goes to confront him, but the meeting ends in disappointment with the result that both of them get alienated from each other. Her desire to achieve a kind of emotional bond with her grandfather, the retired Judge, also fails, for he himself is displaced emotionally and physically the tension between wanting to belong to his own native land and a foreign culture, the usual postcolonial dilemma. The first evening when Sai was at Cho Oyu at her grandfather's home "she had a fearful feeling of having entered a space so big it reached both backward and forward" (34).

Biju becomes very nostalgic when he thinks of his childhood back in his village in India. The Jamuna River and the men traveling downstream on inflated buffalo skins bring nostalgic feelings in him. He remembers his grandmother and how she crossed on market trips into towns and back, with a sack of rice on her head. A hermit also lived on this bank, waiting for the glint of another, on allusive mystical fish. To quote from the novel: On Diwali the holy man lit lamps and put them in the branches of the peepul tree and sent them down the river on rafts with marigolds how beautiful the sight of those lights bobbing in that young dark. When he had visited his father in Kalimpong, they had sat outside in the evenings and his father had reminisced: "How peaceful our village is. How good the roti tastes there! It is because the atta is ground by hand, not by machine... and because it is made on a choolah, butter, and fresh milk still warm from the buffalo..."

The judge's story is mostly told through his memory and brought on by his interaction with his granddaughter, Sai and her maths tutor and lover Gyan. In flashback, he tries to contrast his native Indian scene with that of his stay in England. But the difference is that his attitude is one of ambivalence. He starts his journey from Pilhit to London with the hope of qualifying himself for the ICS. He bought the old house from a Scots man who told him, "it is very isolated but the land has potential" for "quinine, sericulture, cardamom, orchids (28). However, he was not interested in agricultural possibilities" but he could live here "with the solace of being a foreigner in his own country" (29). Patel has chosen to live in Kalimpong not only because of its temperate climate, but also to stay apart from the more tropical India. He imitates the British who built cottages at the hill stations and give vent to their gardening skills. They also needed to be near bakeries that

produced the cakes, breads and biscuits which they need at tea time.

Two elderly Indian ladies, very much like Patel in terms of their obsession with the English culture, take Sai (Patel's granddaughter) under their wings to groom her to be a proper English lady. Lola, a widow, and her sister, Noni, live in a cottage they call Mon Ami. They live like Englishwomen listening to BBC on the radio at night, drinking cherry brandy. They read British novels from the nineteenth century, and not those of a younger breed, because they would like to keep their perception of England static. They avoid books written by Indian writer. Lola hoards English products every time she visits England every two years. She stocks up packet soups. She was ecstatic when her daughter, Pixie, officially became the wife of an Englishman. The sisters are conscious of their class and try to perceive themselves as superior to their Anglophile neighbor Mrs. Sen and affiliated with Father Booty of the Swiss dairy, which makes real cheese and not the processed ones eaten by most Indians.

By purchasing a house, the judge shows his desire to settle in his own country but feeling like a foreigner in his own country shows his sense of alienation. After independence, he found himself on the wrong side of history. The judge's marriage to Nimi was a complete failure. He never had any soft feelings for his wife though her parents had paid for his education in England. He felt guilty after her death. "Now Jemubhai wondered if he had killed his wife for the sake of false ideals (210) Memory of all those past incidents brings a lot of guilt feelings in him.

Desai ends her novel in a shocking scene that suggests a Voltaire like garden in which, like *Candide*, the cook's son and the young heroine Sai assume satisfaction with their biographies circumstance becomes fate. The ending is provocative, since it comments on the paths

facing modern India. Which road will be taken? What will be excluded? Will cosmopolitan, global progress change the fabric of India so that the veils of the past no longer provide alluring shelter? Will India turn from a world view back to an insular nationalism? Sai (and Desai) know these big words cosmopolitanism, globalism, nationalism, materialism are giant and vague concepts that must be personified to have meaning. A mixed horizon awaits Desai's young and new Indians. Freedom is their gain to be shared with a loss of certitude.

Sai comprehends that she has to make the change herself. And finally the novel in general ends with "losses" in many ways; it also shows glimpses of hope and optimism. Sai loses her lover, but obtains a higher understanding regarding her future and independence. The golden peaks of mountains reflects the golden opportunity for a promising and successful life which naturally one longs for the five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it"

All of these characters in the novel "The Inheritance of Loss" struggle with their cultural identity and the forces of modernization while trying to maintain their emotional connection to one another. In this alternately contemplative novel, Desai deftly shuttles between first and third worlds, illuminating the pain of exile, the ambiguities of post-colonialism and the blinding desire for a "better life," when one person's wealth means another's poverty.

## WORKS CITED

### PRIMARY SOURCE

- [1] Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. London: The Penguin Group, 2006.

### SECONDARY SOURCES

- [1] Béteille, André. *Marxism and Class Analysis*. New Dehli: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- [2] Bhabha, Homi K. "The Survival of Culture". Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary studies. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 437-465.
- [3] Lazarus, Neil, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- [4] Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- [5] Puri, Jyoti. *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-colonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- [6] Randle, John. *Understanding Britain: A History of the British People and their Culture*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1981.
- [7] Sakaria, Neela. "Meet the author". June 2004. Bookwire. 14.03.08.  
[http://www.bookwire.com/MeetTheAuthor/Interview\\_Monica\\_Ali.htm](http://www.bookwire.com/MeetTheAuthor/Interview_Monica_Ali.htm).
- [8] Scherr, Rebecca. Conversation. 08.11.07. Singh, Jai Arjun. "Kiran Desai Interview", January 20, 2006, Jabberwock. 10.03.08.  
[http://jaiarjun.blogspot.com/2006/01/kiran-desai-interview\\_20.html](http://jaiarjun.blogspot.com/2006/01/kiran-desai-interview_20.html).
- [9] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry* 12. University of Chicago Press, 1985.