



## 'ALMOST THE SAME BUT NOT WHITE' ANGLICIZED GENDER IN *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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### ABSTRACT



Kiran Desai's second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), winner of Man Booker Prize for 2006, received wide acclaim for its concerns and the power of narration. The chairman of the Booker Judges, Hermione Lee commended the novel: "A distinctive, original voice, an audacious imagination that takes readers to undiscovered countries of the mind, a strong power of story telling and a historical truthfulness" (Lee). True to his judgment, the novel is distinctive for its narration, language and thematic concerns. Though the novel is significant for its representation of the nation, it can as well be read in terms of the gender. The motif of the novel is indicated in the epigraph: 'my humanity is in feeling; we are voices of the same poverty... my name is someone and anyone. I walk slowly, like one who comes up, in the epigraph, the chief philosophical concern of the novel. The novel has nuanced concerns like nation, nationality, gender among others.

**Keywords:** *Inheritance of Loss, Gender, Humanity.*

### Citation:

**APA** Kathy, Y. (2018) 'Almost the same but not White' Anglicized Gender in *The Inheritance of Loss*. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 5(1), 269-272.

**MLA** Kathy, Yakaiah. " 'Almost the same but not White' Anglicized Gender in *The Inheritance of Loss*." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.5, no.1, 2018, pp.269-272.



Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* was conferred the Man Booker Prize for the year 2006. The short list for the year include such novels as *In the Country of Men* by Hisham Matar, *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville, *Carry Me Dow* by M. J. Hyland, *Mother's Milk* by Edward St Aubyn and *The Night Watch* by Sarah Waters. The chairman of the Booker Prize panel Hermione Lee sums up the reasons for choosing it for the award: "This is a magnificent novel of humane breadth and wisdom, comic tenderness and powerful political acuteness." (Lee web) He further added that "felt strongly about" and "admired" all the entries and that *The Inheritance of Loss* was not a "compromise" choice" (Lee). Desai's narrative provides the freshness and newness to the readers:

A distinctive, original voice, an audacious imagination that takes readers to undiscovered countries of the mind, a strong power of storytelling and a historical truthfulness and it is a magnificent novel of human breadth and wisdom, comic tenderness and powerful political acuteness. (Mahadev web).

In her reception speech, Desai expresses a sense of overwhelm: "I didn't expect to win. I don't have a speech. My mother told me I must wear a sari...a family heirloom, but it's completely transparent! I'm Indian and so I'm going to thank my parents" (Desai Web). Commenting on Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, John Sutherland, Chairman of man Booker Judges 2008 aptly points out: "Desai's novel registers the multicultural reverberations of the new millennium with the sensitive instrumentality of fiction" (Sutherland xv). The multicultural reverberations are produced by the dual operations of colonization and globalization.

The citation of the jury and the commendation by a member of another jury of the Booker Prize seem to concur that the main concern of the novel is multiculturalism vis-à-vis immigrant experience. An attempt is made in this chapter to examine *The Inheritance of Loss* from this perspective.

I

Desai explores the aspects of 'inheritance' and 'loss'. Set in the mid 1980's Kalimpong, which is situated at the foot of amount Kanchenjain the North-eastern part of Post-Independence India, the story moves back and forth. Numerous incidents take place against the backdrop of the regional disputes about the India-Nepali insurgency. The Novel depicts contrastive cultures of the West and the East. The first strand moves from India to America; and the other moves from England to India.

As the agitation for Gorkhaland continues, the retired judge, Jemubhai Patel loses his clout. His residence, 'Cho Oyu' is a symbol of the decay. The first wave of migrants reaches there for higher studies. Jemubhai leaves for Cambridge to pursue higher education. He has been to England as a student and it' is in England that he becomes completely isolated because of his westernization. His isolation had to do with his race.

Mala Panduranga in this connection writes: "Yet despite his unhappiness as an alien in England, he envies the English and loathes Indians and grows increasingly embittered by the realization that he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and India both." (Panduranga 94)

The coloured colonizers are compelled in their desperate bid to imitate the white colonizers. They became impoverished specimens of people who are almost the same as the colonial masters, but never exactly the same. In Bhabha's words they are 'almost the same but not white' (Glover IX). The mimic characters, living within the interfaces of two cultures, develop split identities. They hate imitation, but cannot help imitating. The mimetic efforts obviously because frustration among the men and women, who cannot come to terms with themselves as well as with their society.

Globalization celebrates, as Frederic Jameson argues, a "difference and differentiation" (Ouzgane). It does so by placing almost all the cultures of the world in contact with one another. The contact, however, is not always direct. Often it acts as a distance. The distance others are of course, the people of the Third World, who come under the influence of the culture of the first world. The immigrants feel the direct influence of



globalization. The immigrants however become fractured images of life in their attempt to come to terms with a foreign culture in a foreign land.

The multicultural reverberations produced by the dual operations of colonization and globalization create that spreads through the web of the novel. Almost all the characters come to know different cultures in different ways. The Anglicized Sai learns at an early age that 'cake is better than laddoos' (33) she interacts with the cook in a shallow mix of English and Hindi and prefers to lunch at Lets B. Veg. Culturally she does not match with Gyan who is more interested in celebrating Guru Nanak's birthday, Durga Puja or the Tibetan new year than Christmas that interests Sai. Desai depicts the cultural collision between Gyan and Sai. The frustrated Gyan explodes: You are like slaves, that are what you are, running after the West embarrassing yourself" (163)

Jemubhai feels that he is forced to live between the culture of the English and Indian. Educated at Bishop Cotton School and having developed a profound veneration for the portrait of Queen Victoria that stand at the school's entrance, Jemubhai has reverence for the colonial masters. Jemubhai's attempt to internalize the culture of the colonizers is worth noting. Since he had Indian culture ready at hand, he could easily have used it as frame of reference to exercise his option.

Jemubhai does attempt to internalize British. This results in the creation of an unauthentic identity. He realizes that in the process of learning a foreign way of life, he has become the mimic man, but he would not acknowledge that his exalted concept of the British had bitten the dust: He would not 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)

He decides to buy 'Cho Oyu' a house built by a Scotsman and tucked away in the northeastern Himalayas. He feels that the location of the house gives him a shelter where he can escape not only from the eyes of his friends but also from himself. He is the tongue of the common people of Kalimpong. He fails to develop any psychic and cultural relation with the people. The ultimate outcome of the Westernization of Jemubhai is the straining leads to

the extent of developing hatred for his wife and becoming a misanthrope. The following section examines the aspect of the negative influence of the Westernization on the man-woman relations as portrayed in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

## II

Desai depicts the suffering of the woman whose husband, Jemubhai developed a sense of hatred towards his wife: 'He did not like his wife's face, searched for his hatred, found beauty, 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). He comes to her with a look of murder, when he takes her to Bonda, his place of posting, his sexual encounters with his wife are compared by the novelist to ' the same blank look of a dog or monkey humping in the bazaar.'(172)

He never speaks to her and looks at her. She was uncared for. Her freedom useless, her husband disregarded his duty. Jemubhai's tortures create dislike to see her in the mirror because she could not see herself in it. 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 face for outside lest people might run from her seeming. This is how the novelist describes Jemubhai as a misogynist. She stays in her sister's house in which she burns herself to death while cooking. The novelist sums up the brutal picture 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, and turned her into the embodiment of their humiliation." (308)

Desai seems to set up an inverse co-relation between the material success and their ethical belief. Jemubhai and Biju are portrayed as the contrastive persons: the former is successful materially and the later spiritually. Biju ends up as the poorest character in the novel, but his love for his father reflects that his heart is in the right place. Characters like Harish-Harry, Gaurish-Gary and Dhansuk-Danny are Anglicized as their names indicate. Harish-Harry, the owner of Gandhi Café, hates his white customers He wants to break their necks though they are his



conflict takes place between the self-reliant Sai, who is Anglicized, and Gyan's interdependent self. Desai shows the mindset of the Anglicized class of the Indian society. The educated sections believe that "cake was better than laddoos..... English was better than Hindi" (65). This is what the female protagonist in the novel, Sai has in her mind.

Thus the foregoing discussion of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* suggests that in the light of globalization, the East-West encounter is inevitable. But the influences between the East and the West are bound to be detrimental to the Indians, especially in terms of spirituality, family relations, social relations, harmony and peace.

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#### BIO-NOTE

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