

ASPECTS OF IMMIGRATION AND DIASPORIC SENSIBILITY IN

KIRAN DESAI'S THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

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Kiran Desai, the winner of the prestigious Man Booker Prize, 2006, for her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) created literary history by becoming the youngest ever woman to win the prestigious prize at the age of thirty-five. In *The Inheritance of Loss* Kiran Desai treats with tremendous insight, sensitivity, and often piercing irony, topical issues related to politics and terrorism as well as immigration, globalization, multiculturalism, colonial neurosis, identity-formation and subjectivity, and the nationalist, gender, cultural, ethnic and class differences that inform these processes. From a supremely funny and engaging novel in her joyous debut, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), Kiran Desai moved on to write *The Inheritance of Loss* where the prevailing mood is one of implacable bitterness and despair.

The Inheritance of Loss spans two continents and three generations. The story moves between New York and Kalimpong with scenes that contrast the life of illegal immigrants in New York and the growing unrest in Kalimpong. Full of pathos and tenderness, the novel presents its characters as ultimately frail human beings struggling in a search for love and happiness.

Kiran Desai, by setting her narrative in two parallel venues - New York of contemporary America and Kalimpong, a small Indian town at the foothills of Mount Kanchenjunga in the Himalayan ranges - has brought into relief the commonality of problems of the two hubs of human insurgency, one tacit and the other vocal and strident. The aptness of the poem by Jorge Luis Borges, "The Boast of Quietness" which Kiran Desai has chosen as the epigraph for *The*

Inheritance of Loss adds immeasurably to the impact of the depiction of immigrants in the narrative. These immigrants have lost their homelands and have lost their identity and cannot hope ‘to arrive’ anywhere:

...

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

(Epigraph of *The Inheritance of Loss*)

Diaspora can be defined as a community of people who have settled outside their natal country but acknowledge their loyalties towards the ties with the country of their origin by voicing or implying a sense of co-ethnicity with the people of their country back home or as fellow members of their diaspora. Diaspora refers not only to geographical dispersal but also brings in the issues of identity, memory and home which such dispersal causes. There is no denying the fact that migration is a global phenomenon of the contemporary time. Crossing national boundaries has been a recurrent issue of the writers of postmodern literature. In his essay, “The Diaspora in Indian Culture”, Amitav Ghosh, the noted writer, has rightly observed :

The modern Indian diaspora . . . is not merely one of the most important demographic dislocations of modern times; it now represents important force in world-culture.

(Ghosh 243)

Writers of the Diaspora often rewrite history, and frame new narratives of family, society and nation with a desire to revisit the past. It is here that memory and nostalgia play a very important role. The diasporic writer occupies a kind of space that is one of exile and cultural solitude. While immigrant and expatriate writing are more inclined towards the contemporary experience in the host society, diasporic works are more preoccupied with the idea of the deserted or imagined homeland. Kiran Desai, in *The Inheritance of Loss*, has skillfully blended immigrant and diasporic sensibilities.

Alienation and estrangement are inherent aspects of the migrant situation in which the individual's identity is torn between the old and new worlds of experience and "a major feature of post-colonial literature is the concern with placement and displacement" (Ashcroft 8). Set in 1980s of India, *The Inheritance of Loss* recounts an intensely absorbing story. At its centre, is a family of a retired judge and widower, Jemubhai Patel. In Kalimpong, a hill-station in the Himalayan foothills, the retired judge, who was once a student of the Cambridge University presently lives with his sixteen year-old orphaned grand-daughter, Sai. In a painful incident Sai's parents died in an accident in Moscow when she was only five. Jemubhai lives in Cho Oyu, a large dilapidated house built by a Scotsman but now owned by him. Jemu lives in this house with his chatty cook, Nandu whose only son, Biju, works as an illegal immigrant in a restaurant in New York to fulfill a materialistic longing for prosperity. It is really interesting that while the cook always thinks proudly of his son doing job in New York, a metropolis in America, the son more often sadly remembers his father and childhood days in a village in India. As for Sai, she passionately falls in love with her mathematics tutor, Gyan, a Nepali Gorkha. But then, Gyan gets involved in the violent Nepali insurgency for the autonomy of Gorkhaland and is forced to back out from his commitment to love. After undergoing an agonising experience in New York restaurants as a drab immigrant and embittered with the American dream of success, Biju eventually decides to return to his father in India with the humble dream of buying a taxi and a

home of his own. Nonetheless, on his way home from Calcutta, somewhere between Siliguri and Kalimpong, the GNLFF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) militants rob him off all his belongings - his savings, wallet, shoes, clothes and belts. Though Biju is united to his father at the end, the novel leaves a deep impact on the reader's mind.

Biju goes to America to fulfill his “lack”, to be in the position of power. Fanon has also pointed out that, “the white man is not only the other but also the master, whether real or imaginary” (Fanon 138). Whiteness gets equated with power and he aspires to be “*angrez ke tarah*” (Desai 105). At the visa counter in the US embassy Biju exclaims: “I’m civilized, sir, ready for the U.S., I’m civilized man” (Desai 99). But in U.S. Biju found that he is possessed of an awe of white people and realizes the snag of being in an alien culture which is not too kindly to him. In America, Biju has to eke out an existence as an undocumented worker. Stumbling from one low-paid restaurant job to another, living in seedy squalor with groups of other immigrant men, spurred by his father, Biju had come to America to realize the American dream, but the reality had something else in store for him. He recognizes that “it’s a whole world of basement kitchens” and in exasperation dubs it, “they call this first world ??? *Ek dum bekaar!*” (Desai 300).

Poor and lonely in New York, Biju remembers his village. Lying on the basement shelf in sordid squalor he thought of his village where he had lived with his grandmother:

. . . Biju and his grandmother with her sari tucked up . . . on diwali the holy man lit lamps and put them in the branches of the people tree and sent them down the river on rafts with marigolds - how beautiful the sight of those lights bobbing in that young dark . . . how peaceful our village is. How good the roti tastes there . . . fresh roti, fresh butter, fresh milk. Still warm from buffalo . . . (Desai 102-103).

In New York Biju feels tormented by the crass commercialism, rampant racism and rapacious ruin perpetuated by the neo-colonial exploitation. He eventually comes back to India robbed of his belongings. All his NRI dreams of “holding green cards and passports . . . *dollars me kamaenge, pum pum pum*” (Desai 298) comes to naught. But yet the reader finds a quaint satisfaction in the union of father and son in the backdrop of a disturbed Kalimpong. At last Biju

feels safe and at peace compared to his lonely life in New York as a waiter moving from one restaurant kitchen to another.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai has tried to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant. The story of The Inheritance of Loss predominantly moves between Kalimpong in India and New York in America. The thoughts, actions, aspirations, dreams, memories and sufferings of the two main protagonists, Jemubhai and Biju, as migrants in London and New York respectively, represent the expatriate consciousness. Jemubhai originally belongs to the famous Patel family in Gujarat. He was a brilliant student in school and got scholarship in College. After the completion of his graduation he went to England for higher education. Jemu's father did not have enough money for sending his son to England so he took loan at a high interest rate. In London, Jemu starts living in the house of one Mrs. Rice but feels acutely lonely and sad. In a completely alien West world he feels hesitant and timid to go out and talk and deal with people comfortably. Jemu actually remains conscious of his brown colour, Indian accents, pronunciation and, above all, the despising as well as discriminatory racial looks of the whites. In him, Kiran Desai has very precisely portrayed the suppressed psyche of a young Indian among the white Britishers :

For the entire day 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 . . . the young and beautiful were no kinder; the girls held their hoses and giggled, "phew, he stinks of curry!" (Desai 39).

Biju migrates to New York for better opportunities, living standards and wealth. In him Kiran Desai has portrayed the impact of the politics of globalization and post colonialism on the economic structure of the once colonized nation. When an advertisement appears in the local paper for drudge staff in America, Biju applies goes through an interview in Kathmandu, Nepal, and finally gets selected. However, while standing in queue for visa processing at the U.S. embassy, he observes the pitiable conditions of her applicants and undergoes feelings of disgrace and humiliations :

Standing there, feeling the enormous measure of just how despised he was, he would have to reply in a smart yet humble manner . . . In this room it was a fact accepted by all that Indians were willing to undergo any kind of humiliation to get into the States. You could heap rubbish on their heads and yet they would be begging to come crawling . . . (Desai 184).

In New York Biju works in different restaurants as an illegal immigrant and thus encounters unhappy social as well as cultural experiences in the West:

Biju joined a shifting population of men camping out near the fuse box, behind the boiler, in the cubby holes, and in odd-shaped corners that once were pantries, maid's room, laundry rooms, and storage rooms. (Desai 51-52).

Biju's failure is the failure of the downtrodden in the land of plenty. He goes to New York with all dreams of economic freedom and opportunities but his hopes are belied. Biju epitomizes the plight of the illegal immigrant who has no future in his own country and who must endure deplorable conditions if he is to work illegally in the United States. Always on the run from immigration and often cheated by his employers, Biju suffers furthermore because his father is so proud that his son is doing well in America, and writes to him constantly asking him to help the children of his equally poor friends to find work in the United States. Biju's friend Saeed, from Zanzibar, faces similar pressures from his family, though in his case these young men arrive at his place of work and apartment demanding help and a place to live. His avoidance of these people provides scenes of dark humour. In *The Inheritance of Loss* Kiran Desai has not only portrayed how Americans look at the people from Third World countries but also how the immigrants view the Americans. Racial situations and reactions have come up at many places in the narrative. Biju has inherited feelings of nationality and hatred for the subjugating white world as such:

This habit of hate had accompanied Biju, and he found that he possessed an awe of white people, who arguably had done Indian great, harm, and a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India. (Desai 77).

Other minor characters who, in some way, share the sense of “loss” alluded to in the title of the novel include Father Borty (a Swiss priest who runs an unlicensed dairy) and Uncle Potty. Everyone is in some way alienated by their environments and experiences, clinging on to aspects of the colonial past while not belonging entirely to the “old ways” and not filling in with the new.

Desai explores the pain of the immigrant, and the unfairness of a world in which one side travels to be a servant, and the other side travels to be treated like a king. India is both the place that Biju, an Indian, dreams of escaping and where Father Booty, who is not an Indian, longs to remain. In New York Biju is not immune from nostalgia. Longing is perhaps the only thing that the characters in this novel do best - they long for home, love and acceptance, but rarely achieve it. Sai and Gyan inherit the loss, referred to in the title, as do the cook and Biju.

What Kiran Desai ultimately highlights is not just individual experiences, but rather the relations of recognition between immigrants, exile, and foreigners who all grapple with the weight of history. Kiran Desai’s realistic portrayal of life on two continents, diasporic on multiple levels, demonstrates a deep concern from the human condition.

Works Cited

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