



## MODERNIZING INDIA: A STUDY OF KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

**Dr. Parneet Jaggi**

Associate Professor, English, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Government College, Sri Ganganagar, Rajasthan.

### **Abstract**

*The Inheritance of Loss* ponders upon the questions of nationhood, modernity and class in a moving and revelatory way. It also takes on the binary oppositions of land and belonging, home and exile, poverty and privilege, love and the longing for it. Kiran Desai's portrays the story of a modernizing India- a nation looking forward and backward at once, with its people trying to find their space and identities in a new world of new opportunities. She deftly unfurls piece by piece the stories of each of the lost souls searching for connection. There is a constant oscillation in the novel between the sense of loss and the sense of possession, between the big notion of colonialism and small notion of intimacy. My paper attempts to analyze that to what extent the novel exemplifies post coloniality as a locus of enunciation, constantly animated by an impossible desire for decolonization. It also looks into the way the novel enhances our understanding of the multiple layers of meaning congealed in the term we take so much for granted- the nation. The identity of a nation depends a great deal on who is thinking about it and how.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Modernity, Nation, Postcolonialism, Gorkhaland Movement.

### **Introduction**

The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai was published in 2006 and won the Man Booker Prize in the same year. The novel is set in mid 1980s India on the cusp of the Gorkhaland movement for an independent state. Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a retired Cambridge-educated judge, lives in an old house Cho Oyu in Kalimpong in the foot of the Himalayas with his orphaned granddaughter Sai and his cook. The dilemmas of post colonialism are well discernable in Jemubhai. His perfect manners and demeanor is very much British but he cannot get himself free from the shackles of traditional Gujarati and Indian mentality. He feels guilty of ill-treating his wife Nimmi, of shoving away the "Holy coconut throwing in the water custom". He seems to be a man who is caught between the past and the present, between his days in London and his slow and mundane life in the crumbling house, between his daughter and his granddaughter Sai, between the Nepalese struggling for their land and freedom from his own British world of thick volumes of English literature. He is perpetually in search of his true, pure identity, and this search continues till the end.

The Nepalese struggle for their rights and land creeps into the lives of the characters and questions their very being. Characters like Father Booty and Uncle Potty who have been living there for years and never bothered to ponder upon their rights to live in this very land, are very much caught in the dark. The middle aged sisters, Noni and Lola, who, polished with an education and books on literature get a rude shock when the GNLf leader molests Lola with his vulgar words and mocks her middle agedness.

The revolution also stymies the fledgling romance between the sixteen years Sai and her Nepalese tutor Gyan. Her yearning and passion for Gyan, the long wait, the conflict of English values and Nepalese struggles only make her realize the urgency of her search for a stability. Jemubhai observes, at a point in the novel that Sai, like him is an "estranged Indian living in India."

Sai thought of how it had been unclear to her what exactly she longed for in the early days at Cho Oyu, that only the longing itself found its echo in her aching soul. The longing was gone now, she thought, and the ache seemed to have found its substance. (223)

In the character of Sai, we encounter a different female at different stages in the subtle, complex and traumatic process of becoming a woman. In each stage the exhilarating sense of possibility clashes with the debilitating sense of loss. She feels lonely, alienated and yearns to be a part of a family full of love, warmth and activity. In



a restaurant, “ Sai felt suddenly bereft and jealous of these children ....why couldn't she be part of that family? Rent a room in someone else's life?” (213).

What needs to be mentioned here at this juncture is that the problem of human identity has been a pricking question from times immemorial. Despite historical fluctuations, the answer to the question “ who am I?” or “ who are we?” – has never been stable. At the beginning of the Christian era, St. Augustine voiced existential anguish by stating “ I have become a question to myself ( questio mihi factus sum)”. In the present times, the stakes of advancement have been tremendously raised by the relentless process of globalization which today holds the entire world in its grip. Therefore the question of human identity becomes even more significant.

The aching quandary stemming from the impulse to immigrate and the ensuing crisis of identity leave the characters in *The Inheritance* alienated and embittered. The novel is most compelling in the description of Biju's tale. The son of a cook, hopscotching from one miserable New York restaurant to another as an illegal alien, is forced to consider his country's relationship with the wider world. Through this character, Kiran Desai shuttles between first and third worlds illuminating the pain of exile, the ambiguities of post colonialism and the blinding desire for better life, when one person's wealth means another's poverty. Towards the end of the novel, this pain is meticulously brought out.

Here he was on his way home without name or knowledge of the American president without the name of the river on whose bank he had lingered without even hearing about any of the tourist site- no Statue of Liberty, Macy's, Little Italy, Brooklyn bridge.... He returns over the lonely ocean and he thought that this kind of perspective could only make you sad. Now, he promised himself he would forget the insight, begin a new. (286).

The basic question is: whose and what kind of identity should be cultivated and by whom ? A more significant question that troubles the mind is – what is identity? Amelie Rorty in her book *The Identities of Persons* defines the central issue as “ what sorts of characteristics identify a person as essentially the person she is, such that if those characteristics were changed, she would be a significantly different person, though she might still be differentiated and re-identified as the same?” (2) In another book, *Multiculturalism, Liberalism and Democracy*, Rajeev Bhargava strikes a similar note when he writes that “ It is commonplace in logic that the concept of identity has to do with sameness...To remain constant over time with herself or him or with others, to possess or share identity, a person must be identical with some of her/ his enduring and relevant attributes. “ (4-5)

These are also called basic or essential attributes, and these can be provided not by particular thing, person or a group in question, but only by a broader framework of significance which prompts our recourse to a universal perspective. In a global situation of structural inequality- between the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, the developed and the undeveloped, universalism is bound to be ambiguously received by the subaltern people who may welcome its emancipatory potential but resist in hegemonic practices.

Biju's subsequent slide from great expectations to downtrodden disillusionment , and his spiritual malaise amid the cult of individuality and materialism is well portrayed as a loss of identity.

Year by year, his life wasn't amounting to anything at all ; in a space that should have included family, friends, he was the only one displacing the air. And yet, another part of him had expanded: his self consciousness, his self pity on the tediousness of it... Shouldn't he return to a life where he might slice his own importance, to where he might relinquish this overrated control over his own destiny and perhaps be subtracted from its determination altogether? He might even experience the greatest luxury of not noticing himself at all. (268).

There is a constant oscillation in the novel between the sense of loss and the sense of possession, between the big notion of colonialism and small notion of intimacy. What surfaces here again is the contagion complicity between universalism and imperialism. Wallerstein says in this context:



“Universalism is a gift of the powerful to the weak which confronts the latter with double bind: to refuse the gifts is to lose; to accept the gift is to lose. The only plausible reaction of the weak is neither to refuse nor to accept, or both to refuse and to accept- in short, the path of the seemingly irrational zigzags (cultural and political) of the weak that has characterized most of nineteenth and especially twentieth century history.” (216-17)

Again, returning home has not been depicted as an instant cure-all for Biju. Biju’s yearning for an idealized image of India – the spiritual motherland, where everything is invariably more authentic and worthy simply by being Indian, is sharply undercut by both plot developments and authorial commentary. He is literally stripped of the trappings of American culture and his remaining dignity, when he is robbed by the insurgents. He finds himself an alien in his own land once again.

One needs to examine here as to what extent does the novel exemplify postcoloniality as a locus of enunciation, constantly animated by an impossible desire for decolonization, marked by alienation from many ‘of one’s fellow citizens and relations with the West marked by a deep ambivalence. Kiran Desai too had her years of struggle, living for years in US on a migrant visa. The hurt and disenchantment that underlie the migrant’s restless transits form the novel’s emotional center. The juxtaposition of the two plot components – the Gorkha movement of the mid 1980s in the Nepalese dominated hill districts of West Bengal in India and the predicament of nomadic migrants in a first world metropolis like New York develops the theme of the story and shape the narrative’s perspective. The loss inherited by the global subalterns is too complex to be sorted out in the emerging world with severe limitations. Not surprisingly, half-educated, uprooted men like Gyan gravitate to the first available political cause in their search for a new identity. He joins what sounds like an ethnic nationalist movement largely as an opportunity to vent his rage and frustration.

On the other hand Jemubhai Patel, right from his early days in London kept up with English standards to avenge his complexes and embarrassments. Desai writes: “he found he began to be mistaken for something he wasn’t- a man of dignity. This accidental poise became more important than any other thing. He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both.” (119)

The author appears to reconfigure hybridity in terms of what Homi Bhabha has called the “third space of enunciations” (37), a state in which the hybridized do not belong clearly to the world of either of the two cultures, they are reduced the ‘other’.”

The novel also enriches and enhances our understanding of the multiple layers of meaning congealed in the term we take so much for granted- the nation. It shows that the nation is as much a fascinating landscape as it is a demarcated territory on a physical planet. The identity of a nation- what a nation is, what it represents and evokes, depends a great deal on who is thinking about it and how.

At this point I would like to quote Raja Rao, who writes in his book, *The Meaning of India* that, “India is not a country (desa), it is a perspective (darsana); it is not a climate but a mood (rasa) in the play of the Absolute- it is not the Indian who makes India but ‘India’ makes the Indian and this India is in all.”

The novel employs a kaleidoscopic technique to illuminate fractured lives. The characters forge a new identity in the process of cultural translation, in which the translated selves suffer greater losses than the gains.



## **References**

1. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
2. Bhargava, Rajiv. "Introducing Multiculturalism". R. Bhargava, A.K. Bagchi, and R. Sudarshan, eds., *Multiculturalism, Liberalism and Democracy*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
3. Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006.
4. Rao, Raja. *The Meaning of India*. New Delhi: Vision Books, 1996
5. Rorty, Amelie. *The Identities of Persons*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
6. Wallerstein, Immanuel. *Geopolitics and geoculture: Essays on the Changing World-System*. Cambridge: University Press, 1991.