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Editor-In-Chief

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www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

A Study of Westernised Indian Culture in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Bipin Bihari Dash

Lecturer In English

College Of Engineering And Technology, Bhubaneswar

A Constituent College Of B.P.Ut, Odisha

India with its great literary and cultural heritage has uncontestedly made significant contributions to the growth of world literature. Indian literature in English occupies a distinct place in English literature, the world over. The Indian novelists in English find in fiction a genuine medium for revealing their artistic talents and insight. In particular, creative works of contemporary women novelists have been quite commendable. They have achieved distinction in the field of fiction by portraying the diverse manifestations of the rich and valuable Indian heritage authentically and aesthetically. Their novels illustrate multiple traditions and narratives which reveal their freedom of thought and expression. The major themes of their fiction include: quest for dignity and self-identity and problems caused by migration, displacement, cultural dislocation existential dilemmas, and East-West encounter. It is significant that Indian diasporic women writers depict the emotional disquietude and psychological trauma arising out of ongoing migration and the impact of multiculturalism. Outstanding among the women novelists who have enriched Indian English literature and won honours and International acclaim are Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Ruth Prasad Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Santha Rama Rau, Bharati Mukherjee, Vimala Rina, Kamala Das, Veena Nagpal, Rama Mehta, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai.

Kiran Desai, daughter of Anita Desai, is a young and vibrant Indian English novelist with innate artistic talents. Having emerged on the Indian English scene in late 1990s, she has created a distinct place for herself in the galaxy of Indian women novelists in English. Her debut novel "*Hullabaloo In The Guava Orchard*" (1998) artistically presents human foibles and eccentricities in a satirical tone. She has leapt into fame and won international acclaim with the publication of her **The Man Booker Prize winning** novel "***The Inheritance Of Loss***" (2006) which, on the one hand deals with social, political, and economic problems of the people of contemporary society in India and on the other the social and psychological problems faced by Indian immigrant in America and England. It is significant that westernised Indian culture finds most fruitful expression in Desai's "*The Inheritance of LOSS*".

In the present paper I have argued that Kiran Desai's diasporic novel makes a probing study of westernised Indian cultures within the vast campus of diasporic fiction. Kiran Desai's second novel explores contemporary international issues such as globalisation, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism, terrorist violence, immigration, racial-discrimination, post-colonialism, alienation, exile and westernization (Mishra). Like Naipaul, Desai bears witness to the sufferings of the poor and the powerless by holding up an unflinching mirror to their lives (Bilwakesh). As a gifted writer, Desai keenly observes the existing social values, political issues, and ideologies and depicts them through the people of her fictional world with exceptional creative imagination and deep analytical insight. Unlike her mother, Anita Desai, whose, "Preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than outer world of action" and who "has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters" (Srinivasa Iyengar 464). Being a product of intercultural forces Desai's personal, social, and

cultural sides of her personality are very much influenced by her expatriate sensibility. Her profound sense of involvement in the cultural, social and political life of India, her studious observation combined with great judiciousness and feminine sensibility and perception set her apart from other writers. Occupying a vast prominent place in post-colonial Diaspora literature, Kiran's "The Inheritance of Loss" portrays the westernised Indian culture by depicting the lives of a few Indians with fractured identities. The probing analysis of the Anglicised Indian culture in her fiction shows the larger perspective of a globalised world.

"The Inheritance of Loss" opens with a teenage Indian girl, an orphan called Sai, living with her Cambridge-educated Anglophile grandfather, a retired judge, in the town of Kalimpong on the Indian side of the Himalayas. Sai is romantically involved with her math tutor, Gyan, the descendent of a Nepali Ghurkha Mercenary, but he eventually recoils from her obvious privilege and falls in with a group of ethnic Nepalese insurgents. In a parallel narrative, we are shown the life of Biju, the son of Sai's grandfather's cook, who belongs to the "Shadow class" of illegal immigrants in New York and spends much of his time dodging the authorities, moving from one ill-paid job to another. Almost all of Desai's character has been stunted by their encounters with the west.

Justice Jemubhai Patel is educated in the Bishop Cotton School and admired the portrait of Queen Victoria at the entrance of the school building. She looks so plain but is powerful, from that time, his respect for her and the English grows in leaps and bounds (Inheritance of Loss 34). After graduating from Bishop's college, Jemubhai goes to Cambridge for higher studies. Bose, his friend corrects his mistakes in English pronunciation: Jeelee not Giggly, Yorkshire, Edinburgh, John Aae, Jane Aiyer etc. They both read a lot of text books like "A Brief History of Western Art, A Brief History of Philosophy, A Brief History of France etc. While studying, he grows strange to others and himself. He finds his skin tanned and his accent very awkward. He forgets how to laugh or smile. Even if he smiles, he holds his hand over his mouth; he does not want anybody to look at his gums of teeth. He works at 'being English' with fear and hatred, but he wants to maintain the false pride throughout his life by ignoring his real identity at all. Nimi, his young wife whom he barely knew, became the embodiment of everything Indian that he despised.

The judge's granddaughter, Sai, also becomes a westernised Indian growing up in the bicultural household. She grows in a Christian convent in Dehradun with a lot of contradictions. She has the English accents and manners. She speaks English, celebrates western holidays like Christmas, eats English food, and lives in Cho Oyo, which is a fairly nice home, with some modern, conveniences. Desai presents the feelings of western culture as:

cake was better than laddoos,
fork spoon knife better than hands,
sipping the blood of Christ and
consuming a wafer of his body
was more civilised than garlanding
a phallic symbols with Marigolds.
English was better than Hindi.

(IL 30)

Just as Nimi was the representation of an idea larger than herself for the Judge, Sai also becomes the embodiment of colonialism and racism for Gyan. The judge saw Nimi as part of the "thieving ignorant" Indian class, while Gyan sees Sai as part of the upper Westernised Indian class that is responsible for the mistreatment of the Nepalese. Sai and Gyan fight and

shout unspeakably cruel and stereotypical remarks at each other. Referring to the oppressive upper class, Gyan shouts at Sai:

“You are slaves, that’s what you are,
running after the west,
embarrassing yourself.
It’s because of people like you
We never get anywhere” .
(IL179)

Sai later retaliates declaring “there is exactly one reason why you will get nowhere because you do not deserve to” (IL 286)

Sai’s first tutor was Noni, the spinster who lives with her widowed sister , Lola. Both Noni and Lola are well-known in Kalimpong for belonging to the same westernised Indian class as Sai. The sisters greatly admire the British and adopt as many English customs as possible . They grow western vegetables like broccoli in their garden, they only wear Marks and Spencer underwear that “Surely the queen” herself must also wear, they drink English tea, eat English Jam and pastries, love manor house novels, and have the complete works of Jane Austen. Part of their obsession with the British is due to Lola’s daughter , Pixie, who lives in England and works for the BBC. Lola beams with pride when daughter’s voice comes over the radio . Lola and a neighbour, Mrs Sen, who’s daughter Mun Mun lives in the United States and works for CNN, participate in intense battles over which country, America or England, is superior. Instead of identifying with their Indian culture these women take an western identities so completely that they battle against their fellow Indians in favour of western cultures they can never truly join. The cook works for the judge for many years in Kalimpong. Biju, the cook’s son, is an illegal immigrant in the U.S, struggling for food and lodging , but the cook boasts to everyone that his son is working in New York. He exclaims that America is the best country in the world, and the people who have gone feel sorry.

Noni and Lola are talking about the riots, Gorkhas, and the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). Desai expresses:

“This state making”,Lola continued,
“biggest mistakes that fool Nehru made.
Under his rules any group of idiots can
Stand up demanding a new state and get it, too.
How many new ones keep appearing?
From fifteen we went to sixteen,
Sixteen to seventeen , seventeen to twenty two.....”
(IL 128)t

The ladies also criticise Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism for they believe that no religion and no government could stop the crimes happening in India. Indians do not buy Indian products . Father Booty supplies homemade cheese to the local restaurant . He persuades the manager of Glenary’s restaurant to switch from Amul products, which come in factory tins with names stamped on them(with lots of advertisement)are considered better than anything made by local products.

‘The Inheritance of Loss’, is filled examples of how different types of people interact, mix, and blend. Unfortunately, the line between cultures is not always easily blurred. Some customs and traditions transcend separate cultures especially in today’s globalised world, but prejudices and hatred based on race and class are often hard to eliminate. Almost the entire novel is dark in its description of colliding cultures , but the last page show a new side to the theme when Biju returns home penniless and broken. As Sai sees Biju and his father “leaping at each other”, overjoyed by their return in Kalimpong , the mountain of Kanchenjunga

appears above the parting clouds. The reality is that the world is full of racism, segregation, and cultural divisions, but it does not mean that hope does not also exist. Happiness is possible, the world is not always submerged in fog and rain. In the end “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”.

“The Inheritance of Loss” is truly a powerful post-colonial novel, in which Kiran Desai clearly presents the ideas of cultural identity, race, and ethnicity; focussing mainly on Indian culture and how it has both integrated with and influenced western cultures. Being an expatriate Desai can very well understand the kind of mental agony and physical sufferings one has to undergo when one settles down in an alien land. She is quite certain that people should not be discriminated against one another based on their race, skin-colour and culture. With great futuristic vision Desai strongly suggest in the novel that tolerance and mutual respect for one another will lead to the abolition of racial prejudice and discrimination. This novel, highlights basic human values such as love, compassion, tolerance, selfless and respect for one another which surpass all social, political, cultural and religious barriers and limitations.

The westernised Indian culture finds expression in most of the novelists who are caught in a diasporic situation. But Kiran Desai’s variety, abundance, and creating of theme and style blend in anew kind of synthesis. She has a firm grasp of the socio-cultural situation in the west and the East. This strength of her insightful portrayals reflects her experiences and narrative perspective. Indeed, that is the major achievement of Kiran Desai.

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