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Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*: A Saga of Human Relations

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This paper aims to explore varied facets of human relations in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. This novel tries to discuss, at great length, the grave implications of colonized mindsets for individual, familial and social life. Besides, this paper makes a comprehensive analysis of colonialization, postcolonialism, cultural collisions, cultural encounters, gender bias, immigrants' bitter experiences, insurgency and racial discriminations in respect to the changing pattern of human relations. This, also, shows how human relations, even as influenced by love, longing and crosscultural contacts, are competently handled in a humane manner articulating diasporic experiences of nostalgia and in-betweenness.

Kiran Desai, as the youngest woman to receive the coveted Man Booker Prize, was born in Chandigarh, India on September 3, 1971. Spending her early years in Pune and Mumbai, she had her first education in the Cathedral and John Connon School. After some years of education in Delhi and England, she joined creative writing as though to focus all her attention in the vigorous pursuit of shaping her creative talent.

Built around the fate of a few powerless individuals, Kiran Desai's second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* manages to explore human relations from varied angle. "Human Relationship is what a writer is involved with. Person to person and person to society relationships-these are two primary concern of a certain writer."¹ The story runs parallel to a large extent in Kalimpong, a small city at the foot of the Himalayas and New York in the United States of America. *The Inheritance of Loss* gives a graphic description of richly variegated human relationship- husband and wife, father and daughter, father and son, master and servant, and a young boy and a young girl- with its setting in both the places.

Jemubhai Patel, the retired judge is the central character in the novel. Born to a poor family in a small place, Piphit, he has to fall in line with the driving ambitions of his father. His father, notwithstanding his limited resources, wants his son to acquire higher education in England. He approaches a number of moneylenders to realize his son's dreams but such efforts go in vain as no one comes to their help unconditionally. Perhaps, the only option available to him at present is to get his son married to a rich man's daughter no matter how ugly or uneducated she is, and amass an enormous fortune. Much to his surprise, a wealthy merchant from Piphit expresses his willingness to get his beautiful daughter, Bela, married to Jemu. An ambitious idea comes into merchant's brain that Jemu, if successful, will play a key role to boost his business. Communication starts, the plan takes a concrete shape, marriage takes place and the bride brings tremendous amount of dowry:

The bride was a polished light-reflecting hillock of jewels, barely able to walk under the gem and metal weight she carried. The dowry included cash, gold,

emeralds from Venezuela, rubies from Burma, uncut *kundundiamonds*, a watch on a watch chain, lengths of woolen cloth for her new husband to make into suits in which to travel to England, and in a crisp envelope, a ticket for passage on the SS *Strathnaver* from Bombay to Liverpool. When she married, her name was changed into the one chosen by Jemubhai's family, and in a few hours, Bela became Nimi Patel. (p. 91)

With the selling of jewels, Jemu manages to go to England. After five years' stay in England, when he returns, there is a sea change in his attitude. So dramatically changed is he that, he thinks himself as a foreigner in his own home. He tolerates no one. What is the most familiar before marriage becomes unfamiliar after five years. Even his wife is no exception. She is no longer the center of attraction and he behaves as if unmarried:

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 to water, but now it seemed beside the point. An Indian girl could never be as beautiful as an English one. (p. 168)

It is interestingly paradoxical that the higher studies, the new learning, a different culture and the ability and skills to gain familiarity with the persons of different taste and colour in England, make him a stranger to his own family members and relatives, and eventually pose a dangerous threat to relations he has to foster with various people as time goes by. Contrary to the Judge's expectations, Nimi is simple, docile and illiterate. He wants her to be at home in English, and appoints a tutor to serve his ends. However, it proves to be a Herculean task, may be next to impossible, for a simple lady like Nimi. In a bid to vent his pent up anger, he beats her mercilessly, consequent upon her inability to meet his requirements.

As if to vigorously assert his bruised ego in the form of male superiority, the judge subjected his wife to severe ill treatment, and "cruelty to her became irresistible." When chance comes, he has no qualms about dispensing with her even as he sends her to her home, altogether unaware of the fact that she is pregnant. It adds to his disgust when Nimi gives birth to a girl child for whom he has no feeling of love and affection. His education, money and power make him so heartless that he vehemently rejects his father's idea to bring his wife and daughter back. His heart is not a seat of feelings and emotions for his family and relatives; rather it stores the pangs of hatred, jealousy and unrelenting bitterness.

As regards the relationship between husband and wife, the judge is an utter failure. For him, Nimi is no more than an object for the fulfillment of his carnal desire. Indians, especially Hindus, treat marriage as a sacrosanct institution. "Marriage denotes unequivocally sanctioned union which persists beyond sexual satisfaction and thus come to understand family life."² Instead, he throws the family values to the winds and significantly undermines Indian customs and traditions.

In stark contrast to the tempestuous marriage of the judge, the heavenly bliss in the married life of Joydeep and Lola receives exhaustive treatment in the novel. They were leading a happy married life before Joydeep's untimely death. This incident wreaks havoc on Lola and she has to

live with her sister, heavily dependent on her husband's inadequate pension. The GNLFF inflicts serious damage on the existence of both the sisters in Kalimpong as it makes illegal huts on Mon Ami property. In order to address this concern, Lola approaches Pradhan, the head of Kalimpong wing of GNLFF. Be that as it may, it adds insult to her injury because Pradhan and his men, instead of resolving this urgent issue, holds her upto ridicule as if pushing her to suicide in crying shame. This reminds her of Joydeep and the poignantly happy moments that she had spent with him as his wife:

"Your eyes are lovely, dark and deep."

He used to kiss those glistening orbs when he departed to work on his files

Thus Desai describes in rigorous detail the multilayered relationship in the life of a husband and wife.

Desai gives the parallel descriptions of parents' roles towards their kids. The judge, as a father, fails miserably. When his daughter is born, there is no feeling of ecstasy in him as usually expected from a father. He does not pay a visit nor does he show any sign of love and affection for the baby girl. Even after the untimely death of his wife, he shows no remorse and there is no change in his obnoxious behavior that leads to loveless childhood for his daughter. Owing to this, his daughter falls in love and gets married to a young man, much as they died young in a fatal accident. In the meantime Sai comes to live with the judge much to his considerable angst. Although staying in the same house, the judge can not build any closely affectionate relationship with this teenage girl. Both of them feel profound unease at their individual presence. The judge has almost same laissez-faire attitude for his granddaughter as was previously seen with other family members. Rather, he has found greater affinity and fondness for Mutt, the pet dog, which shows his deeply held belief on British values. Nevertheless, he raises no objection to her stay because "It would be good to have an unpaid somebody in the house to help with things as the years went by."(p.210). In India, granddaughter is a precious and priceless gift for the grandfather but the judge, even as a grandfather, is feelingless, stony hearted and utterly unconcerned. He is a human with a humanless feel and a dust-dry touch of humanity.

The cook's feelings for his kid stand in sharp opposition to that of the judge. The irony is that the cook is "a powerless man, barely learning to read and write, had worked like a donkey all his life, hoped only to avoid trouble, lived only to see his son". In spite of his grinding poverty, precarious existence, fragile health and strenuous schedule at Cho Oyu, he manages to send his son to America. This is possible owing to his intense love for his son. He takes pride in Biju's every achievements. At the early age, Biju loses his mother. The cook tries his level best to do good to his son on all occasions, and deep fatherly love compensate for his mother's loss. Against the instruction of the judge, the cook, as suggested by the villagers, performs certain sacrificial rituals to shield his son from his wife's ghost. This is nothing but the expressionless expression of his genuine love for his son. The judge frowns upon this human feeling, for he never makes an attempt to delve into Sai's heart as and when she runs into terrible trouble.

As an immigrant, Biju has a bitter experience in America. He lives there in appalling conditions mounting relentless struggle to live his dreams and realize his father's expectations. The relations that Biju tries to nurture as an immigrant is anchored in some sort of terms and conditions of self centered gains and unbalanced relationship of sheer one party dominance.

Jorge Luis Borges thought provoking words ‘They speak of humanity. My humanity is in feeling. We are all voices of the same poverty’ set the tone of the novel and aptly suggest Biju’s predicament, the precariousness of his life as an illegal immigrant. Biju observes:

In this room(US embassy), it was a fact accepted by all that Indian were willing to undergo any kind of humiliation to get into the United States. You could heap rubbish on their heads and they would be begging to come crawling...(p. 184)

As an immigrant, Biju had the tenuous and brittle human relations. The experiences of nostalgia and in-betweenness, as an immigrant, spark interest in Biju to return to his country and stay with his father in the hour of need.

The relationship of Gyan and Sai, based on love and physical attraction, lends a new dimension to the novel. Gyan, the tutor, is romantically involved with Sai. Sai also falls head over heels for him. Absence of love, affection and craving for attachment takes her nearer to him and makes her cling on to him for support. Gyan’s arrival breathes a new lease of life into her and for the first time, she feels about herself. Suddenly she ‘had felt so acutely aware of herself’:

That night Sai sat and stared into the mirror.....

Over the days, she found herself continually obsessed with her own face.(p. 74)

However, beginning with a charming romance where they thrill to the touch of each other, the relationship becomes acrimonious followed by accusations and counter accusations. More often than not, he unleashes ferocious onslaught against the very essence of her life styles. It is noticeable how he objects to the food she eats, the manner in which she eats or the innocent pleasure that she derives from the Christmas party. The very habits which he initially found so endearing and irresistible in her, start to irk him. With the difference of opinion and split of taste coming into the open, she is ‘revolted by his energy and his fingers working the dal, his slurps and smacks’ and he is ‘unsettled by her finickiness and her curbed enjoyment.’ Moreover, the procession, demanding for Gorkhaland, puts Gyan on the horns of Hamletian dilemma as to whether he cements his emotional bond with Sai or fiercely champion the cause of the movement. The latter takes precedence and Sai suffers. Sai could sense the futility of her huge emotional investment and respond in this way:

And how grown-up are you?! Too scared even to come for tuition because you know you’ve behaved nastily and you’re too much of a coward to admit it! You’re probably just sitting waiting for your mummy to arrange your marriage. Low-class family, uncultured, arranged-marriage types . . . they’ll find you a silly fool to marry and you’ll be delighted all your life to have a dummy (p.261)

On the other hand, Gyan, trying to justify his own rudeness tells himself ‘he was sullied by the romance.’ His decision, thus, deals a severe blow to her hopes, breaks her heart, and her love meets its tragic end.

The Inheritance of Loss throws light on the relationship between the master and the servant as epitomized in judge-cook relationship. The cook meticulously takes care of the judge and his household like an Indian middle class wife while the judge is incredibly insensitive to the hardships of the cook. The attitude of the judge to the poor is despicable. The novel depicts Jemubhai Patel as ‘a human artifact of colonial times,’ and the colonial hang over is the sole reason to put in serious jeopardy his familial ties and sociable character in different walks of life. The way he behaves with the cook for Mutt’s disappearance, the manners he shows to his wife for her failure to learn English, and the life styles he likes to enjoy and adhere to, speak volumes of his colonial bent. Consequently, he bears bitter animosity towards those who are simple, docile and straight forward. In an attempt to hide his inferiority complex developed during his stay in England, he resorts to blatant and dangerous hypocrisy that makes him avid follower of gross ‘misanthropy and cynicism.’ He furthers the cause of infamous Macaulay agenda that laid heavy emphasis on building a class of persons Indian only in blood and colour but English in their mental makeup and taste. In the context of Mutt’s disappearance, that the judge violently beats the cook, who serves him obsequiously round the clock, not only shows the sign of an emotional bankruptcy but is willful disregard for humanity of an obnoxiously egotistical Cambridge educated Indian.

In addition, the novel highlights a plethora of other relationships. The relationship of true friendship between Uncle Potty and Father Booty and the feigned friendship of Judge and Bose run parallel in the novel. Desai also makes an in depth analysis of relations, Sai enjoys, in the company of Lola and Noni, Uncle Potty and Father Booty and the cook.

It is imperative to note that Desai is gifted with an especially deft touch when it comes to description of human relations. *The Inheritance of Loss* tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant. The characters placed in Post colonial India and New York endures suffering because of their serious failure to uphold human relationships. Much as relationship proves vitally important in Indian context, it sometimes disintegrates due to pernicious influence of colonized mindsets. Desai tries to suggest that western education, unless ingeniously studied and grasped, may have severe repercussions on human relations. However, despite western education, there are some who values relationship and lead a happy life. The novelist has psychologically probed how human relationship works in constantly changing Indian society. Thus, by rendering to the reader, the infinitely complex society of contemporary times, she delivers to us the very world we live in.

John Sutherland, once the Chair of Judges for the Man Booker Prize and the author of *How to Read a Novel* rightly said:

Desai’s novel registers the multicultural reverberations of the new millennium with sensitive instrumentality of fiction, as Jhabvala and Rushdie did in previous eras....It is a globalized novel for a globalized world.³

Notes:

1. Sashi Deshpande to an interviewer in *Indian Communicator*,

20 November 1994, p.II.

2. R. H. Lowe, *Marriage in Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, Vol. V, p. 146

3..John Sutherland,. Available at <http://book.guardian.co.uk/manbooker2006/story.html>

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