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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Man Booker Prize Novels: A Thematic Study of Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai

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Abstract:

This paper will explore the thematic study of Arundhati Roy who bagged this prestigious prize in last decade and Kiran Desai in 2006. The first Indian citizen to win the prestigious Booker Prize and a million dollar book deal has made Arundhati Roy, a celebrity and a tall literary lioness persona. Now in her late-30s, living in Delhi, Arundhati Roy (One of People Magazine's "50 Most Beautiful People in the World 1998") grew up in Kerala, in which her award winning novel *The God of Small Things* is set. The novel is a poetic tale of Indian boy-and-girl twins, Estha and Rahel, and their family's tragedies; the story's fulcrum is the death of their 9-year-old half British cousin, Sophie Mol, visiting them on holiday.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is set in India during a time of political unrest. The main theme of the novel appears to be the influence of the West on India and Indians, and more specifically, how that influence has oppressed and degraded India. Kiran Desai's extraordinary new novel manages to explore, with intimacy and insight, just about every contemporary international issue: globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence. Despite being set in the mid-1980s, it seems the best kind of post-9/11 novel.

Keywords: Post-Colonialism, Orientalism, multiculturalism, economic inequality

The Man Booker Prize for Fiction, also known in short as the Booker Prize, is a literary prize awarded each year for the best original full-length novel, written in the English language, by a citizen of either the Commonwealth of Nations or Ireland. When the Booker Prize was established forty years ago the aim was to create an English-language Prix Goncourt, an award that would encourage the wider reading of the very best in fiction across the UK and the Commonwealth, says Ion Trewin, Administrator of the Man Booker Prizes. 'The programme for the 40th anniversary is testimony to that aim being achieved - whether you judge the prize by numbers of books sold, the number of

films it has helped generate or the way it has opened our eyes to a range and quality of writing that might otherwise have been ignored.'

Winners of the prize can look forward not only to worldwide recognition but also a place in the history of English literature. Contenders over the years have ranged from well established authors to first time novelists. In the past decade Arundhati Roy for *The God of Small Things* (1997), Yann Martel for *Life of Pi* (2002) and DBC Pierre for *Vernon God Little* (2003) were each unknown authors until winning. As testimony to the enduring quality of the winners, all of the books which have scooped the prize are currently in print, with the exception of only one, something to Answer For. Rights for this are currently under discussion for the anniversary.

The winner of the Booker Prize is generally assured of international renown and success and, for this reason; the prize is of great significance for the book trade. It is also a mark of distinction for authors to be nominated for the Booker longlist or selected for inclusion in the shortlist. In 1993, the Booker of Bookers Prize was awarded to Salman Rushdie for *Midnight's Children* (the 1981 winner), as the best novel to win the award in the first 25 years of its existence. A similar prize known as *The Best of the Booker* was awarded in 2008 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the prize - this was also won by *Midnight's Children*.

The most recent recipient of the Booker Prize is Indian author Aravind Adiga, for his debut novel *The White Tiger*; the winner was announced on October 14, 2008. Kiran Desai has won the UK's leading literary award, the Man Booker Prize, for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006. She picked up the £50,000 prize after being chosen by a panel of judges from a shortlist of six. Desai beat favourite Sarah Waters - shortlisted for *The Night Watch* - and fellow nominees Kate Greenville, Hisham Matar, M J Hyland and Edward St Aubyn. Desai, 35, is the youngest female winner of the prize. *The Inheritance of Loss* is her second novel. She dedicated the novel to her mother and fellow novelist Anita Desai who has herself been nominated for the Booker prize three times, but has never won. Desai told the BBC her win felt like a family endeavour. She said that I wrote this book so much in her company it feels almost like her book.

In this paper I will try to explore the thematic study of Arundhati roy who bagged this prestigious prize in last decade and Kiran desai in 2006. The first Indian citizen to win the prestigious booker prize and a million dollar book deal has made Arundhati Roy, a celebrity and a tall literary lioness persona. Now in her late-30s, living in Delhi, Arundhati Roy (*One of People Magazine's "50 Most Beautiful People in the World 1998"*) grew up in Kerala, in which her award winning novel *The God of Small Things* is set. The novel is a poetic tale of Indian boy-and-girl twins, Estha and Rahel, and their

family's tragedies; the story's fulcrum is the death of their 9-year-old half British cousin, Sophie Mol, visiting them on holiday.

As a Keralite, She had grown up hearing the stories about her mother, Mary Roy who fought against Christian inheritance law, winning a landmark Supreme Court verdict that granted Christian women in Kerala the right to their parent's property. The mother had fought against an archaic law, while the daughter has to fight nuisance litigation about the obscenity in her novel. Following the foot-steps of her mother Mrs. Roy is more of an activist now, championing the cause of the displaced tribals in Narmada Valley.

The God of Small Things (1997) is a politically charged novel by Indian author Arundhati Roy. It is a story about the childhood experiences of a pair of fraternal twins who become victims of circumstance. The book is a description of how the small things in life build up, translate into people's behavior and affect their lives. The book won the Booker Prize in 1997.

The God of Small Things is Roy's first book, and as of 2006, is her only novel. Completed in 1996, the book took four years to write. The potential of the story was first recognized by Pankaj Mishra, an editor with HarperCollins, who sent it to three British publishers. Roy received half-a-million pounds (approx. \$970,000 USD) in advances, and rights to the book were sold in 21 countries.

In The God of Small Things, Arundhati Roy paints an elaborate portrait of the lives of twins, Estha and Rahel, growing up in the complex social environment of castes and Syrian Christianity in post-colonial India. Rahel and Estha see the world through the simple, amazingly insightful eyes of childhood and innocence: When people died at sea, they were wrapped up in white sheets and thrown overboard with millstones around their necks. . . Estha wasn't sure how they decided how many millstones to take with them before they set off on their voyage. They pretend to be refined Indian women. There are numerous elements that linger in the memory after reading this novel. Now it hung down like a fleshy curtain. Yet eventually, they only show them death.

Despite the sins they commit, the children are innocent. Yet, despite her daring facility with the language, the usage rarely becomes cumbersome or self-indulgent. The notable exceptions are Ammu, their divorced mother, and Velutha, an Untouchable who works for the family. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. For example, the recurring theme of hopeless love: the hopeless love of Baby Kochamma for Father Mulligan, the hopeless love of Chacko for Margaret Kochamma, and the more than hopeless, but tragic love of Ammu and her twins for Velutha. Most of the adults around them are consumed with society and expectations, and are incapable of getting beyond the small things to the more important issues.

Roy's language is precise and often beautifully metaphoric: "When the car moved, her arm fat swung like heavy washing in the wind."¹ She takes up themes and phrases, repeating them and developing them through the work like a jazz musician in a well crafted solo. The Syrian Christians and the Communists and the Anglophiles fight to redeem them, to teach them how to live properly.

The *Inheritance of Loss* is set in India during a time of political unrest. The main theme of the novel appears to be the influence of the West on India and Indians, and more specifically, how that influence has oppressed and degraded India. The main character is Sai, an orphaned girl raised in a British-style boarding school in India, who goes to stay with her grandfather. Her grandfather left India in his youth to Cambridge to study to become a judge under British colonial rule. Other characters of importance in the novel are Gyan, Sai's tutor and love interest, and the judge's cook whose son Biju illegally immigrated to the US. Through these motley characters the different avenues of Western influence are explored.

This book is amazing in many ways. The picture of India drawn is intricate and fascinating. The characters are complex and the writing is simply stunning. However, the whole book is a big downer. I don't mind a little bit of destitution if it sets off something beautiful, but at the end of the day, the picture painted in this story leaves no room for hope, no room for joy, no room for even a tiny bit of beauty. In the first couple of pages, the following lines caught my attention: "Romantically she decided that love must surely reside in the gap between desire and fulfillment, in the lack, not the contentment. Love was the ache, the anticipation, the retreat, everything around it but the emotion itself."² The presentation of such a pure theme as love in terms of the absence of emotion sets the stage for this novel.

Although it focuses on the fate of a few powerless individuals, Kiran Desai's extraordinary new novel manages to explore, with intimacy and insight, just about every contemporary international issue: globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence. Despite being set in the mid-1980s, it seems the best kind of post-9/11 novel.

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 descendant of a Nepali Gurkha 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.

What binds these seemingly disparate characters is a shared historical legacy and a common experience of impotence and humiliation. Desai writes that Certain moves made long ago had produced all of them, referring to centuries of subjection by the economic and cultural power of the West. But the beginnings of an apparently leveled field in a late-20th-century global economy serve merely to scratch those wounds rather than heal them.

There is no mistaking the literary influences on Desai's exploration of postcolonial chaos and despair. Early in the novel, she sets two Anglophilic Indian women to discussing "A Bend in the River," V. S. Naipaul's powerfully bleak novel about traditional Africa's encounter with the modern world. Lola, whose clothesline sags "under a load of Marks and Spencer's panties," thinks Naipaul is "strange. Stuck in the past. . . . He has not progressed. Colonial neurosis, he's never freed himself from it." Lola goes on to accuse Naipaul of ignoring the fact that there is a "New England," a complete cosmopolitan society where chicken tikka masala has replaced fish and chips as the No. 1 takeout dinner. As further evidence, she mentions her own daughter, a newsreader for BBC radio, who "doesn't have a chip on her shoulder."

Desai takes a skeptical view of the West's consumer-driven multiculturalism, noting the sanitized elegance of Lola's daughter's British-accented voice, which is triumphant over any horrors the world might thrust upon others. At such moments, Desai seems far from writers like Zadie Smith and Hari Kunzru, whose fiction takes a generally optimistic view of what Salman Rushdie has called hybridity, impurity, intermingling, and the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs.

In fact, Desai's novel seems to argue that such multiculturalism, confined to the Western metropolis and academe, doesn't begin to address the causes of extremism and violence in the modern world. Nor, it suggests, can economic globalization become a route to prosperity for the downtrodden. This leaves most people in the postcolonial world with only the promise of a shabby modernity — modernity, as Desai puts it, in its meanest form, brand-new one day, in ruin the next. Not surprisingly, half-educated, uprooted men like Gyan gravitate to the first available political cause in their search for a better way. He joins what sounds like an ethnic nationalist movement largely as an opportunity to vent his rage and frustration. "Old hatreds are endlessly retrievable," Desai reminds us, and they are "purer . . . because the grief of the past was gone. Just the fury remained, distilled, liberating."³

Desai offers her characters no possibility of growth or redemption. Though relieved by much humor, *The Inheritance of Loss* may strike many readers as offering an unrelentingly bitter view. But then, as Orhan Pamuk wrote soon after 9/11, people in the

West are scarcely aware of this overwhelming feeling of humiliation that is experienced by most of the world's population which neither magical realistic novels that endow poverty and foolishness with charm nor the exoticism of popular travel literature manages to fathom. This is the invisible emotional reality Desai uncovers as she describes the lives of people fated to experience modern life as a continuous affront to their notions of order, dignity and justice. We do not need to agree with this vision in order to marvel at Desai's artistic power in expressing it.

An original and modern aspect of Desai's style is the almost poet-like use she makes of different print forms on the page: she uses italics for foreign words as if to emphasise their exoticness and untranslatability and capitals for emphasis when someone is angry, expressing surprise or disbelief (a natural development of the netiquette that to write in capitals is like shouting). She also exploits our modern mania for lists. In an age where our media is filled with top tens and top one hundreds – most voted-for politician, best-dressed woman, richest man etc. – Desai produces her own array of matter of fact but quite unnerving lists – the parts of their bodies which touch when Gyan and Sai kiss; the free gifts that you get from a charity if you make a donation to a cow shelter; the wide variety of puddings that the cook is able to make, the list rattled off with no spaces as if expressing both the urgency of the speaker to impress and his perplexity at the foreignness of English pudding names.

At last we would like to say that *The God of Small Things* is an ambitious work that addresses universal themes ranging from religion to biology. Roy stresses throughout the novel that great and small themes are interconnected, and that historical events and seemingly unrelated details have far-reaching consequences throughout a community and country. The novel is therefore able to comment simultaneously on universal, abstract themes, and a wide variety of ideas relating to the personal and family history of the members of the Kochamma family as well as the wider concerns of the Kerala region of India. Some of the novel's most thoroughly developed themes are forbidden love, Indian history, and politics. It is in love and politics that Roy's carefully constructed, multifaceted narrative tends to dwell, and it is when love, politics, and history combine that Roy is able to communicate her most profound authorial insights.

The Inheritance of Loss heralds Kiran Desai as one of our most insightful novelists. She illuminates the pain of exile and the ambiguities of Postcolonialism with a tapestry of colorful characters: an embittered old judge; Sai, his sixteen-year-old orphaned granddaughter; a chatty cook; and the cook's son, Biju, who is hop scotching from one miserable New York restaurant to another, trying to stay a step ahead of the INS.

In a crumbling, isolated house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga lives an embittered old judge who wants to retire in peace, then his orphaned granddaughter, Sai arrives on his door step. When a Nepalese insurgency in the mountains threatens Sai's new-sprung romance with her handsome tutor, their lives descend into chaos. The cook witnesses India's hierarchy being overturned and discarded. The judge revisits his past and his role in Sai and Biju's intertwining lives. A story of depth and emotion, hilarity and imagination, *The Inheritance of Loss* tells of love, longing, futility, and loss that is Desai's true territory

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² Desai Kiran. *The Loss of Inheritance* .(New Delhi: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005).12.

³ Ibid. 136.