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## Loss, Realization and Redemption of Self in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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### **Abstract:**

Kiran Desai is the most promising young writer of the contemporary arena of Indian diasporic literature. She is a daughter of Anita Desai who is also diaspora writer in Indian English Writing. She came into focus with the publication of *Fifty Years of Indian Writing*, anthology with Salman Rushdie and her second novel '*The Inheritance of Loss*', which won prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2006. She was the third Indian to win the Booker Prize including Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. This novel has been widely admired, reviewed and read by critics throughout Asia, Europe and the United States. At the background of insurgency movement, Kiran Desai unfolds love story of Sai and Gyan with great compassion and intimacy, commenting on many issues of globalization. Marginalization has created many problems of self-consciousness among the third world countries. Loss of self and recovery is the major issue of the narrative. This article examines the major character's loss, realization and redemption of self in the period of globalization.

**Keywords:** Globalization, marginalization, self-consciousness, loss of self, realization, redemption.

Desai's second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* focuses not on an individual's story but on how several people make sense of them. They view the world around them, and deal with the difficulties that they have with contradictions and multiple allegiances. The book is full of color and comedy, even as it challenges all to face the same heart-wrenching questions that haunt the character: Who I am? Where do I belong? The entire narrative unveils the efforts of the various characters to attain a better understanding and meaning of their 'self'.

The narrative deals with the life of Jemubhai Patel, a retired judge lived in Kalimpong along with the Cook. Sai, granddaughter of the judge came to Kalimpong in order to continue her studies. Gyan has been appointed as her tutor to teach science subjects. On the other hand; the Cook's son Biju was in America in search of new heights in his life. Unfortunately, he returns to India leaving behind the great empire of New York. The focus of the novel is, according to Pankaj Mishra, on the "fate of few powerless individuals, it manages to explore, with intimacy

and sight, just about every contemporary international issue; globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality and terrorist violence.”<sup>(1)</sup> The novel deals with the emotional and intellectual losses of the characters as the title of the novel reflects. Almost all the characters in the novel lost something both seeking for money or emancipation from exploitation in the nation-state. They were longing for love, home and acceptance. They lost their background, history and family for the obsession of western values, manners, language and lifestyle. Though, many characters in the novel losses, but novel ends on a promising note of hope and desire. The most touching theme of the novel is ‘Loss’; loss of culture, identity, human relations and above all the loss of faith. The entire narrative discloses the efforts of the various characters to achieve a better understanding and meaning of their ‘self’. Story, Samantha remarks in his review “Characters battle not only with the loss of their freedom and homes but also with the loss of identity.”<sup>(2)</sup> This research paper explores and analyzes the theme of loss, realization and redemption encountered by major characters in the novel.

Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* attempts to elaborate the issues of global problems faced by third world countries. Here, she displays migrant people, who leave their native land in search of global ambition, and face cultural and emotional loss. Leaving behind the money and material, they only get humiliation and frustration. Whipple Marg comments in his review “It presents the social and political history of India in terms of the experiences of the novels character.”<sup>(3)</sup> The characters in the novel are revising, rather than skill oriented, they insist on imitation and loss of self and play the game of hide and seek through the narratives. After lot of struggle, they realize the futility of immigrant life and fight to come out from the dig of money and materialism that was the product of globalization. They came to conclusion that the self of human being is more important than any other thing in world. They tried to recover their mistakes and move in search of emancipation of self. Here Kiran Desai tried to fetch characters from their dilemma of to be or not to be, leave or live. Finally they realize blind following cannot solve their problems. Realities of life are naked like Biju at the end of text, pink powder cannot hide brown skin of Jemubhai, Cooks difference between reality and nightmare, Gyan's economic condition and otherness in own country, Sai's love and frustration is more alive than romanticism of ideas. Robin Cohen pronounces that “people willingly leave their native land either for work or trade or to advance colonial ambitions, and can become both victim and laborer at the other end.”<sup>(4)</sup> It suspends them between home and host countries, native and alien lands, desire and losses.

Jemubhai Patel a retired judge, now living in the north-east India in kalimpong in north ranges of Himalayas at the foot of Kanchenjunga, a small place called Cho Oyu. He is educated from Cambridge and worked as a respected judge in Gujarat. Jemubhai is anglophile kind of personality, being high ranked civil servant, he became introvert and did not involve with society. He belongs to the class of persons, “Indian in blood and color but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect.”<sup>(5)</sup> His attempt to behave like British makes him ridiculous as he has imitated the manner and culture of Europe. He was not accepted either the British or the

Indian so he lost his faith and identity. He lost his family and friends, his nears and dears, lived isolated life cut-off from society, rejecting him as a human being. He is closer to his dog named Mutt rather than his cook and other people. His cynical behavior is unpredictable and there is no guarantee how he will behave with others. He recalls memories of his childhood and remembers everything about his mother and father, when he was ready to leave India for abroad. His departure from India to England for studies could not cover his emotional loss. He lost the taste of life and human emotions, sentiments and behavior. His life became dull and less enthusiastic. He was isolated from people, deeply involved in his past and spent his life in solitude.

Thus Jemubhai's mind had begun to wrap; he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his skin old-colored, his own ascent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely manage to lift his lips in a smile and if he ever did, he held his hand over his mouth, because he could not bear anyone to see his gums, his teeth. They seemed too private. (TIL.33)

Jemubhai lost grip and vision of life became hopeless losing future. He cannot find difference between day and night, even he forget cycle of season. Life seemed to be totally meaningless and useless; everything becomes agonizing and disgusting to him. Jemubhai's sense of loss came with his own aspiration to follow colonial mind-set, he is enemy of himself. His encounter with western culture blind's him. He became cynical, self-centered and frustrated. He desperately tries to be very 'Englishman' by imitating British life style and speaking in a "fake English accent". He also tries to hide his Indian complexion by covering his dark brown face with pink and white powder. Even he eats his chapattis, puries and parathas with fork and knife. Lingering effect of colonialism destroys the happiness in the life of old judge. Madhu Shalini draws our attention to the colonial hangover that impacts the judge's behavioral patterns highlighting how the "loss of self-esteem and dignity prepares the scenario for restricting the psychic self."<sup>(6)</sup>Jemu's encounter with Western culture confused him because of the strange feeling for the native land and the failure to mingle with adapted land. Eventually, he feels of being a foreigner in his own country. He stands tragic figure at the end of the novel due to his detachment from wife, people and nation. He is the fine embodiment of cultural fractured personality. The Judge who has become a stranger to himself tries to complete his fragmented self with different ways of behavior. The fragmented and fractured self of the Judge is barren of any human and emotional attachment except for his dog, Mutt. Eventually, he assimilates to his identity after loss of Mutt. Falling down on his knees, 'Jemubhai Popatlal the cynic' who had been embarrassed of his faith and customs prays to God, bargaining to have his animal friend back instead of his transformation into a believer from non-believer.

Sai Mistry, granddaughter of Jemubhai Patel also moves from innocence to the experience of loss, realization and redemption. At the beginning of the narrative she is very innocent, completed convent school education, falls in love with tutor Gyan Nepali boy. After meeting Gyan, her position seems to be changed, she began to retrospect her style of sitting, hair, and beauty etc. she wanted to become more careful about her appearance. A different kind of

fascination began to govern her life. She became imaginative, innovative and enjoys company of each other but she was humiliated, insulted and frustrated by failure and loss in love.

Whatever the ambiguities in her commitments are to the West and East, Sai is not weak to become victim of them. Unlike the Judge's blind imitation of the English or Gyan's hatred of it, Sai strikes the balance of self-perception. Her journey towards a more honest and authentic self-realization is evident in her introspections. She does not try to be someone else; she is in perfect harmony. Being inexperienced and immature, she focused her life on Gyan but at the end of the narrative realizes:

Her crying, enough for all the sadness in the world, was only for herself. Life wasn't single in its purpose...or even in its direction...the simplicity of what she'd been taught wouldn't hold...Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it. (*TIL*, 323)

Sai goes beyond simply steering clear of solid, known and accepted knowledge. She begins to think of herself in relation to other people, rather than a center around which they revolve. She recognizes that she is a part of a larger story, not the subject of it. In the end, she feels "...a glimmer of strength. Of resolve"(*TIL*, 323). She decides to set off on an adventure and follow the incomplete dream of her parent.

Gyan is also in dilemma of to be or not to be. He cannot deceive Sai and also want to join in freedom movement of Gurkha Liberation Front. He feels love and affection about Sai but freedom movement is necessary for his rehabilitation. He is born in poverty and lives in a house made of mud with a thatch roof. He rejects Sai's privileged life when he finds that the Indian-Nepalese are being treated like the minority in a place where they are the majority. He eventually connects with a crowd of angry ethnic Nepalese revolutions. At last he accepted freedom movement as a target of his life. Sai's romance with Gyan, math's tutor, is shattered due to class consciousness and her embracement with the western culture. Gyan thinks that Sai is a part of the upper westernized Indian class and this class is responsible for the brutal condition of the Nepalese. Sai and Gyan's romantic dream of happy married life is confused due to cultural difference, social inequalities and political upheavals.

Gyan was different from Sai in socio-economical as well as in cultural temperament. Gyan struggles for stability. He was frustrated when he realized the contradictions. Gyan's character was the most complex character and revealed insecurities that made desire for knowledge. He was Nepalese, whose ancestors had fought in the Indian military for the British. His desire for solid knowledge results largely because of his being part of a group oppressed by elitist, new-colonial Bengalis who intern had been dominated by the English. His heritage produces a complex set of conflicting identities his desire to escape from complexity and understand himself more simply to contributes his involvement in the Gorkha National Liberation Front. He was a

promising boy, a man of caliber and principle but rejected Sai's love because of involvement in insurgent movement in North-East India. He recognizes the contradiction in himself; at once wanting to be a masculine Gorkha warrior and also a tea party with Sai. He successfully suppressed his feelings for Sai and separated himself clearly with his fellow men. In the end he became disillusioned with his half-hearted participation and tried to reconcile to his love for Sai.

Biju is another outstanding character struggling to find out his self, who used to consider "America the symbol of Utopia and the Promised Land that offers equal opportunity to all".<sup>(7)</sup> He was living the life of underdog in America, working as waiter in the restaurant without proper visa, thinking that it will soon come to end but he has to go through many hardships and perils. He wandered to find suitable job for his settlement but he find himself in complex situation to get a proper job for his earnings. It is American dream for which many colonial migrants are struggling to fulfill. Their journey to the West in search of better life consequently results into depression and meaninglessness. Here Kiran Desai remarks that the people are not ready to work in their motherland are ready to work anything in other country but rather than fine placement they offered with emotional shock for life. At last he decided to leave America and go to India to words his father. He had advised by travel agent don't leave America because it is going to buy all the jobs in the world. At the one side are companies of America on the other side all the world as a consumer, so choose the life of king and not a servant. But Biju leaves the America as early as possible to meet his father. Biju's return from America might be considered as the symbol of the failure of American dream, less importance is given to humanity and sentiments of the people. Biju also realizes the same fact money is not everything. He does not feel any kind of discomfort leaving behind the great empire of luxury. The novelist writes the emotions of the Biju;

In the mirror of this bathroom, Biju saluted himself. 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... He returned 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, began anew. (*TIL*.286)

When he saw in mirror himself, he feels free and happy from all the problems. When he came to India he has to face many problems, in his motherland, he was looted and humiliated in his own country, on the way of Kalimpong. Still he is eager to meet his father as quick as possible. He loosed all his things but the breath of the freedom he feels in India is amazing. Loss of all material things cannot loss his freedom. He moves from disappointment to the emancipation of soul. Globalization cannot solve his problem of poverty maybe that's the reason he lost everything insurgent of Kalimpong, including his self-pride. Globalization and colonialism cannot eradicate the problem of poverty on the other side created dualism, nihilism, void in the conscious of third world countries.

Biju is unique among the immigrant characters because he resists the new culture in which he finds himself and romanticizes India, based mostly on his positive experiences growing up there. He reminisces about India without remembering any of the problems that prompted his migration to America in the first place. His story ends with his arrival at the Judge's house, penniless, limping because of his injured knee, and humiliated. However, Biju realizes the illusory nature of his dreams and abandons his desire for the elusive Green card and money for his true identity. He realizes that:

Year by year, his life wasn't amounting to anything at all; in a space that should have included family, friends..... Clumsy in America, a giant-sized midget... shouldn't he return to a life where he might slice his own importance...(TIL, 268).

He lived illegal in New York, being illegal immigrant he feel humiliated and leads the life of marginalized. He tries to escape from poverty, hunger and hardships of his own country but the new land offers him nothing but torture, racism, hunger and hardships. Biju's romantic dreams shattered when he encountered with American environment created for others. His homecoming is absurd, he returns in nothing but in a woman's nightie without any savings. He loses his pride, honors and self-respect at that alien land.

The cook's character is quite paradoxical. All the time, like a typical Indian father, he always thinks about the betterment of his son Biju. He has great hopes and aspirations in the future of his son. He thinks his son is a real modern man, enjoying life in west, facing all the facilities of globalization. He was caught between confusion and doubt all the time. He knows very well that it is very difficult to live life in America without good skill which lacks in his son Biju. He belongs to the "second wave of less-skilled Indian migrants".<sup>(8)</sup> Kiran Desai aptly talks about his dilemma.

This the cook had done for Biju, but also for himself, since the cooks desire was for modernity: toaster ovens, electric shavers, watches, cameras, cartoon colors. He dreamed at night not in the Freudian symbols that steel enmeshed others but modern codes, the digits of the telephone flying away before he could dial them, a grabbed television. (TIL.37)

It seems that all the time, he dwells in confusion which always brings more and more complications in his life. He narrates fictitious stories about Jemubhai's past life and wife to granddaughter Sai with self-prides and honors. His dilemma gives us clue of post-colonial concern; people are not ready to accept the transformation of life in the era of globalization. Desai writes at this point:

The cook had been disappointed to be working for Jemubhai. A severe come down, he thought, from his father who had severed white man only the ICS was becoming Indian zed and they did not like it, some of these old servant, but what could you do. He'd even had arrival for the position, a man who appeared with tattered

recommendations inherited from his father and Ograndfather to indicate a lineage of honesty and good service.(TIL.42)

Cook is nameless character in the narrative but link of the narrative from Europe, America and India. His ambition and aspirations are shattered by his son Biju. His dream was, his son should live in a big country like America but unfortunately when his son leaved the America he was shocked very much. He also faces the loss of his dream about his son. He lost his identity in the text, the dog of judge has given name but same identity was rejected to the cook.

It is observed that, through the narrative Desai is critical about the politics of liberalization; characters are bound together by a shared historical legacy and a common experience of impotence and humiliation. Every major character in the narrative faces the loss of emotions, loss of consciousness. Globalization has developed a lot material things, physical infrastructure and high economical volume against the emotion and sentiments of the human life. Globalization cannot overcome the problems of human beings on the basis of economic and technological development. Desai's novel is truly a saga of the marginalized soul, lost in confusion, striving to find the 'self' and reconstruct it in the light of his/her experiences. Kiran Desai in her fiction has given a voice to her true Indian self by the reconstructing her idea of the 'loss' she has left behind. The self-exploration of characters is more authentic and true. Every character in this novel goes through losses, realization and redemption in the world of ravaged by the colonial past and dishonesties of a globalized future, the emotional barrenness of the present is felt in the absence, the lack of the genuine feelings of love, of relations, of losing bonds, of roots and of truth.

Today across the globalized world an anti-immigrant sentiment was sweeping. The perfect situation would be the accessibility of employment opportunities to all sections of society with our country itself, so that there is less pressures to seek jobs abroad. Improving the competitiveness of Indian goods and services, improving a modern robust infrastructure and developing trade practices and support facilities will be the key to face the American challenges. Desai tries to bring forth the issue of loss and hints that globalization is not an easy solution to the problems of the trapped people in the modern complications. *The Inheritance of Loss* depicts in its many details the tragedies of the third world country just liberated from colonialism. The novel also gives the impression that the influence of the European powers in India and how Indians are hunted by the globalization policies. It leads to a loss of self-esteem; but, more importantly, it leads to a loss of mooring. This is a greater loss because the characters feel banished at state-nation. This leads to the loss of identity and self-esteem makes voiceless to characters. The characters are compelled to negotiate new identities in order to realize the meaning of life. Perhaps, Desai wants to prove the lines of Jorge Luise Borges's poem "Boast of Quietness" which refers to the self of people who are in search of true self.

Time is living me.



More silent than my shadow, I pass through the loftily covetous multitude.

They are indispensable, singular, worthy of tomorrow.

My name is someone and anyone.

I walk slowly, like one who comes from so far away he doesn't expect to arrive.

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