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The Inheritance of Loss: A Narrative of Displacement

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Abstract:

Displacement and its traumatic experiences form the major corpus of the post colonial literature. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is a significant novel in the sense that it tries to explore the different shades of displacement - physical, cultural, social and linguistic. The paper attempts to discuss the problems of identity crisis, isolation, sense of loss, hybridity and nostalgia resulting from displacement in the lives of Jemubhai Patel, the judge, Biju, the son of Jemu's cook and Sai, the granddaughter of Jemu. The title of the novel points out the sense of loss which all the three characters inherit.

Keywords: hybridity, isolation, nostalgia and identity crisis.

By Bagging the Man Booker Prize in 2006 Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* proved to be a sweet, shocking and unexpected triumph not only of her inherited literary deftness and perfection but also recognition of Indian writing in English on the global literary platform. According to Mrs. Desai, the novel is very peculiar in its revisitation of her past through the lens of Indian sensibility raising its head in her heart. While talking to Laura Barton she says, "As I've got older, I have realized that I can't really write without that perspective."¹ Laura herself remarks, "*The Inheritance of loss* is a sprawling novel that runs from the Himalayas to New York City."² Kiran Desai's journey upon a rich literary career has been carried forward in this moving, lyrical, majestic and engrossing second novel. She shows her craftsmanship in beautiful weaving of the diverse patterns of East and West lives and cultures in the alternate chapters of the novel. Sunita Sinha opines that she has crossed the narrow boundaries of her first novel and reached to the global arena. She aptly comments about the novel:

"Thus we can see that although Desai's second novel focuses on the fate of a few powerless individuals, it manages to explore almost every contemporary international issue; globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality and terrorist violence."³

The novel's wide canvas covers the binaries of regionalism versus nationalism; margin versus centre; diasporas versus natives; servants versus masters; woman versus man; minority versus majority; present versus past; reality versus appearance and East versus West. The post colonial

Indian life and society with all their complexities and challenging issues have become alive in the pages of *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Dislocation and displacement are the most familiar terms in post-colonial literary terminology. In fact, post-colonialism is a discourse of place and displacement. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin write, "The dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of post-colonial societies."⁴ It is a strategic endeavor to subvert the fixed subjectivities and binaries in every field. It also attempts to revise the socio-cultural relationship and thereby to reanalyze history from the perspectives of the displaced and marginalized section of the society. To be very specific, it accounts the physical, social, linguistic and cultural displacement resulting either from enslavement, or settlement, or intervention, or transportation, or voluntary movement to foreign lands. Migration of Indians to England and America and cultural encounter have caused "alienation of vision"⁵ and "crisis in self image".⁶ Like other contemporary Indian novelists such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee and Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai has depicted the issue of cultural displacement in the novel .

The Inheritance of Loss is a heuristic approach of the novelist to the problems of wistful melancholy, loss, alienation, rootless ness, lack of belongingness, hybridity and identity crisis fostered by displacement and cultural encounter of East and West. Gulrez Roshan Rahman writes about the novel that it "unfolds the story of failure, loss, alienation and death in all its lurid colours, even as it is intermeshed with delineation of such political issues as national freedom struggle, colonialism, neocolonialism, balkanism, casteism, communalism, regionalism, globalization, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence." ⁷ Basically set up in remote hilly area of ChoOyu in Kalimpong, the scenes of the novel shift from one pole of India to the other pole of New York to describe the tumultuous lives of diasporas living as alienated and marginalized beings in both the terrains. The novelist illustrates the pangs of displacement and various forms of diaspora with the characters of Jemubhai Patel, Biju, Gyan, Sai and Uncle Booty. She has described what it means to be sand witched between two diverse cultures and how as Salman Rushdie writes, "Migrants straddle two cultures...fall between two stools..."⁸ and how they suffer "a triple disruption"⁹ comprising the loss of roots, the linguistic and also the social dislocation.

Jemubhai Patel, a retired judge , is the central character of the novel and at first he is shown an Indian dispora in England and later he is shown an English diaspora in India. Through him Mrs. Desai shows how far globalization and colonial aftermath have paralyzed the lives of Indian men. The judge enjoyed power during British rule in India, but after independence, he is left incapable of survival .When he left his ancestral home of Piphit in India for Cambridge, he was puffed up with the feelings of pride and assumed himself to be an Englishman, but very soon he faces the bitter reality. While studying in Cambridge, he tries to imitate the superior culture

which is 'mimicry' according to Homi Bhabha and undergoes the experience of cultural hybridity. He imbibed snobbery, privacy, unanimity and loneliness. He feels humiliated when he is not easily given a room on rent in England and he finds white ladies ignoring his presence. We do not find any pressure of his native culture on his mind; he freely embraces the English culture and style without any repentance, but he is not accepted by it. On one hand, he was ready to adapt to the foreign culture, on the other, he was unable to free himself of black race. To evade from humiliation, he retreated into solitude that grew day by day. "The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man and it crushed him into a shadow." (Desai 39) He left England and returned to India and made impression on Indian men as if he were an English man during British rule. He enjoyed power and status, but as soon as India became free, he found his glorious status crumbling. Being full of hatred for the Indians, he was confined into his shell. "...he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him..." (Desai 40) He feels out of place and alienated even in India. In this way, he is doubly displaced; he is neither fully Indian, nor an English man. He becomes a hybrid man. He suffers from the sense of loss-loss of his wife Nimi, powerful status, peace of mind and his dog Mutt. His sense of loss is intensified when his closest friend Mutt is missing. He groans and bursts out to pour out his agonized feelings. He becomes so much out of control that he beats his cook Panna Lal. Mutt is the symbol of the judge's false glory and its disappearance indicates the disillusionment of the judge. The novelist inflicts irony on modern man through the judge who is so much alienated that he seeks solace only in an animal's company. We observe that Jemu's alienation springs from his own mistakes. He is disturbed by the arrival of Sai, his granddaughter. He is afraid that Sai will incite the dormant hatred in the cook's nature and the cook will try to get rid of his slavery. As Stuart Hall has written that in modern age of globalization, identity is never fixed; it is always changing, we notice that identity of Jemu also undergoes change. At first, he is Indian, later an assumed English man and at last a hybrid. We also find that Jemu himself is responsible for his tragedy because he tries to get rid of his original identity which is not an easy task. He hates his black colour and Indianness from which he cannot escape.

Biju, son of the cook Panna Lal, is second Indian diaspora who suffers from cultural displacement in America. He left India to get a good job and a better life. He is an illegal migrant to America. The novelist makes fun of those foolish Indians who think that getting in America is a heroic task. Panna Lal boasts of his son's bright future in America while he is unaware of the hell over there. The novelist considers migration to America in order to escape Indianness as an act of cowardice. She writes:

"...immigration, so often presented as a heroic act, could just as easily be the opposite; that it was cowardice that led many to America; fear marked the journey, not bravery; a cockroachy desire to scuttle to where you never saw poverty, not really, never had to suffer a tug to your conscience...." (Desai 299)

At one place, Mrs. Desai criticizes those Indian migrants who prefer America and England to their country and remain always ready to bear any kind of humiliation to get over there. She writes;

"In this room, it was a fact accepted by all that Indians were willing to undergo any kind of humiliation to get into States. You could heap rubbish on their heads and yet they would be begging to come crawling in..."(Desai 184) Biju is this type of Indian .He leaves no stone unturned to get into States, but all his dreams of a happy life are shattered when he reaches there and lives a life of a fugitive changing his jobs and residence in order to survive because "Addresses, phone numbers did not hold".(Desai 102)While living in America, Biju feels himself to be an Indian ,an outsider, different and marginalized at every moment. He remains unsuccessful in imitating the American culture. He is always humiliated for his inferior race. So he is seen nostalgic about his homeland. He aspires to return his home. India and her culture are always alive in his memories. His eyes twinkle and mouth water remembering fresh rotis made on choolah, fresh butter, milk and tasty food. He remembers Indian festivals such as Diwali and Holi.

As compared to Jemu, Biju's cultural displacement is temporary because he does not completely cut off himself from India and its culture. He also does not learn to hate Indians as Jemu did. Jemu's displacement is double while Biju's is once. Jemu's diasporic condition is very critical and disastrous for survival while that of Biju is bearable and remediable. Biju's sense of loss is repaired after his return to India while Jemu's is intensified due to his hybridity and hatred for his native culture. Jemu's condition evokes pity rather than hatred in our hearts.

Gyan is Mathematics tutor of Sai. He is a Nepali diaspora in India. His whole family migrated to India from Nepal in 1800 and fought for Indian liberation. Since after independence, Nepalis have been marginalized and have not been given any recognition, Gyan feels cheated and displaced in India. He wants to go to America and leave India. He is full of anger and agony against the Indian politicians who have deceived the Gorkhas. He feels himself to be a stranger and alienated in his own country. He is humiliated for his identity by the judge and Panna Lal. In order to express his resentment, he joins the Gorkha Liberation Movement. He gives vent to his sufferings in these words:

"We are stateless. It is better to die than to live as slaves. We are constitutionally tortured. Return our land from Bengal."(Desai 126) Gyan is the mouthpiece of the displaced Gorkhas who are living a neglected and humiliated life in India .Mrs Desai has tried to give a warning against the growing unrest in the Gorkhas. One Nepali says that in 1947 Britishers granted freedom to Muslims, Pakistanis and Hindus except the Nepalis. He says, "And are we allowed to become doctors and govt. workers, owners of the tea plantations? No! We are kept at the level of servants."(Desai 158)

Sai, the granddaughter of Jemu, also feels displaced in Cho oyu. When her parents die in aeroplane crash, she is sent to hostel for studies where she learns English manners and ways of looking at the world and also the contemptuous outlook towards the poor and illiterate Indians. She is a free spirit who does not want to be bound by the strict rules and regulations of the school campus. She leaves her school for her indifferent grand father's home in Kalimpong. She expects to get affection and patronage of her grandfather, but to her utter disappointment, she is overlooked by him. The Himalayan beauty first attracts her, but the oppressive, dominating, passive and rude behaviour of Jemu makes her survival difficult there. Very soon the dark, chill and gloomy atmosphere of the place mixed with the ill temperament of Jemu makes her feel out of place. She finds the judge "barely human at all"(Desai 40) Her friendship with the cook and Gyan temporarily relieves her. As soon as Gyan is involved in The Gorkha Liberation Movement, she feels isolated and displaced. Soon she is disillusioned of her love for Gyan and she decides to leave the place by whatever means possible otherwise "she'd be trapped forever in a place whose time had already passed."(Desai 74)

Despite living in India Sai is a foreigner. The British schooling had made her a hybrid. Gyan calls her a westernized woman. He also makes her aware of her reality which she had unconsciously disguised with her false appearance. He criticizes her for imitating the western style and manners .He calls her as "copycat" for not eating with her hands, for not visiting the temple and for not celebrating Indian festivals. Like her grandfather she makes an impression of being an English woman .Like him ,she uses spoon to eat food, celebrates Christmas and does not like Indian vegetables such as tinda, bhindi and kathal. Gyan observes her hybridity and says to her, "What is the point of teaching you? It's clear all you want to do is copy. Can't think for yourself. Copycat, copycat..."(Desai 164) We find Mrs. Desai criticizing the blind imitation of the West. Gyan says to Sai,"You are like slaves that are what you are running after the West, embarrassing yourself. It's because of people like you we never get anywhere."(Desai 163)

To conclude, Kiran Desai has depicted various shades of displacement such as physical, cultural, social and linguistic, but the most important one is cultural displacement in which a native migrates to a place of different culture and faces many problems. Displacement, voluntary or forced, always is a painful experience. It causes social, linguistic and psychological problems .It depends on the immigrant whether to assimilate the different culture or to maintain the native cultural identity. But, in both the situations, the migrant suffers from alienation, loss, nostalgia, hybridity and identity crisis. While Biju and Gyan feel culturally displaced in America and India, Jemu and Sai feel displaced in their own native country and this is ironical. The novelist has made a parallel study of Indian diaspora through Jemu and Biju and Nepali and Pakistani diaspora through Gyan and uncle Booty. In the novel, we find two types of diasporas-privileged and illegal migrants. Smriti Singh writes, "Desai shows the existence of two types of migrants-privileged and skilled and illegal migrants like Biju. For the former, migration offshore opens a world of opportunities while the latter are left in a worse situation than before."10 Apart from this, there

are Indian as well as Nepali and Pakistani diasporas. While analyzing the psyche of the migrants, she shows that all the displaced characters are suffering from the sense of loss, alienation, hybridity and identity crisis. She also shows that the above problems are intensified due to the lack of adjustment with the present. All the characters except Sai, are occupied with their past and its memories; they do not want to get rid of it. To some extent, they themselves are responsible for their sufferings. After his return to India, Jemu could live a happier life with his wife and later with his granddaughter, but his false glory of British education and manners and desire for superiority over the natives make him a cruel and confined being, for which he himself is responsible. Moreover, he repents for his past misdemeanor with his wife, whereas he was repeating the same with his granddaughter. Instead of learning from his past, he repeats his mistakes. One important point hinted by the novelist is that past is irremediable and it lives in present. It cannot be escaped. Jemu's atrocities upon his wife eat him up and her ultimate death pesters him. On the other hand, Biju does not assume himself to be an American even after his return to India, so he does not hate Indians and is easily accepted. Biju was also distressed in America because he could not forget his native culture and memories of Indian life in villages are still alive in his mind.

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