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Reflection of Cultural Incompatibility in *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract:

Kiran Desai has emerged as a glittering figure on the recent literary map. Her fictional works display multitudinous dimensions, and the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* has opened up a new spectrum for the readers to explore something afresh both in its texture and structure. Although its major domains are immigration, social discrimination and segregation, restlessness, nostalgia and estrangement, yet the present study focuses on the socio-cultural difference and conflict between the East and the West. Kiran Desai through her novel suggests that despite loving and venerating English way of life- their culture, colour, language, Indians cannot shed away their indigenous upbringing, and merge absolutely with English people. Their skin and timbre of tongue are so unique that they can never hide their real roots and origin. Moreover, the English people are not inclined to acknowledge the people from Third World Countries equal in terms of sophistication, refinement, logic, and culture.

Keywords: Culture, Difference, East, West.

Introduction

In the whole gamut of Postcolonial Literature and Diasporic Writing, the contribution of women writers both in India and on foreign soil is particularly commendable and worth-evaluating. They have mostly pondered upon the problems of cultural clash, multiculturalism, and intercultural interaction. Man is a social being and is in need of such a social setup facilitating him with security, support, and sense of love and respect. When the social circumstances are not congenial enough, he or she feels a sense of deprivation and uprootedness. The writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai have dealt with such issues in their fiction. The bunch of these women writers has a paramount importance in the immigrant and expatriatic Indian Literature. Their works are multi-dimensional and their subjects and characters are multitudinous. In their aim at self-definition and self-expression on the foreign soil, these writers have poured out their passions through the fictional writing. They have adapted assertive rather than aggressive mode. Their choice of characters and selection of words

are absolutely appropriate for the experiences they want to communicate. They have unraveled the complexes of discrimination and maladjustment of their characters with masterly strokes of language. The other major domains of the said writers are-- freedom of thought and expression, quest for dignity and identity, frustration caused by migration, displacement, existential dilemma, and the East-West encounter.

About the Writer

Kiran Desai, the daughter of much loved Anita Desai, is energetic and enthusiastic Indian-English novelist with inborn literary talents. She has got recognition in the literary world in the late 1980s with the publication of her debut novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1988). The novel projects human flows and foibles in a sarcastic and satirical manner. But it is her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), which has rocketed her into the sky and has achieved for her a universal acclamation. The book was selected for the prestigious Booker Prize. The book on one hand brings out the cultural and psychological turmoil experienced by migrants in USA and UK, and on the other hand, it lays bare social, economic, and political problems rampant everywhere in contemporary India. The novel is dynamic in nature and has diverse issues buried in its texture. Among these migration, racial discrimination, and socio-cultural conflict are at front, and these concerns are worked out with striking and realistic descriptions. Kiran Desai with deep insight and natural knack unveils the seen as well as unseen drives of human beings. Moreover, it is her suggestive style which bestows her writing profundity and variety.

The Inheritance of Loss

Although the setting of *The Inheritance of Loss* is India, at the foot of mount Kanchenjunga in the north eastern part of post-independent India, yet it deals with the characters and incidents on the territories of the USA and UK. The novelist laments for the multiple losses of the central personages of the novel, and this loss is conveyed through explicit as well as tacit details. Regarding the various facets of the novel and its dense thematic structure, Ragini Ramachandra in the essay “Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*: Some First Impressions” writes:

Made up of various strands the novel presents not mere a kaleidoscopic picture encompassing different countries, continents, climes, cultures, peoples, their struggle and their conflicts, their dreams and their frustrations but also a mature understanding of life itself at various levels. (Ragini Ramachandra 19)

The writer suggests that despite having love and regards for English way of life: their language, and colour, Indians cannot conceal their native appearance and absorb them in English culture. The solid problem with the eastern people is that they cannot shed away

their coloured complexion, and cannot speak the western language in the manner native English people do. Judge Jemubhai Patel, the principal figure in the novel, is Indian Anglophile who detests India and everything belonging to her from the core of his heart. In order to pretend and look like English man, he even cuts off his affiliations with his near and dear ones. At every juncture of his life, Jemubhai embraces and appreciates the western culture, and feels vainglorious for the same. But the fact is that every person inherits certain indigenous and innate attributes which cannot be done away, and one has to live with them, and associate his or her identity with these things. The ability of adaptation and assimilation in a different social milieu is positive trait in a person, but try to forsake one's inherited endowments proves harassing and irksome in the long run. The novelist expresses the interior urges of her characters, and uses the figurative descriptions to convey their irreparable losses on foreign soil. As she has herself undergone the dilemmas of rootlessness, alienation, multiculturalism, and has experienced the incompatibility of her inner world with the outer exotic setting, so her delineation is plausible as well as pleasurable.

Kiran Desai does not narrate the plot in a straightforward and in a traditional linear progression. She employs innovative techniques like flashback and at times introspection to depict the past concerns of her characters. By doing so, she compares and contrasts the present life of Jemubhai Patel and Sai's parents with their past experiences. Such a procedure makes her statements intensely striking, and is also reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's poetic short hand which he uses in his poetry to juxtapose the present with the past in order to make his complex concepts explicit and comprehensive.

The Inheritance of Loss portrays a cluster of figures who nearly all suffer from psychic aloofness and social segregation. One of the scholarly critics Mudhari Deshmukh asserts: "Every character in the novel is a foreigner. In this world, ravaged the colonial past and pulled by the deceptions of a global future, the poignant emptiness of the present is felt in the presence of the lack of genuine feelings of love, of connection, of lasting bonds, of roots and of truth" (*New Quest* 76). Among all the characters Jemubhai Patel and his Cook's son, Biju suffer painfully from the inferiority complex of being Indians in the presence of English and Americans. Jemubhai is described as a sort of "self hating misanthrope" who not only dislikes his Indian kith and kin, but also looks down upon himself when his native heritage thwarts him to mingle with foreigners. He is British trained Civil Service Officer who has served in the colonial administration as well as in the government of freed India. Although he is Gujarati by birth, yet he prefers to settle down in Kalimpong hillside in order to live a peaceful and quiet life like an alien to others. He is accompanied only with his teen aged granddaughter named Sai, his Cook, and his much loved dog Mutt in a ramshackle and rundown manor known as 'Cho Oyo'.

The house during its initial stage was considered as an emblem of English architecture, but is now only a sign of loss and dislodgement.

As a devotee and lover of the western way of life, Judge Jemubhai suffers from megalomania, and considers himself an English man more than a Hindustani. He abhors his own inheritance and legacy lunatically and frantically. This indifference to his own ancestral tradition and cultural heritage is the outcome of his being a first person of the Patal dynasty to leave for abroad in order to get education and learning in Cambridge University, and then become an administrative officer. His stay in England is characterized by the difficulties like embarrassment, chagrin, disgrace, marginalization, and depression. It is because of his extreme mania for Anglo-ethnicity that he incessantly tries his utmost to present himself as a born Britisher. But whenever he does so, he cuts a sorry figure in the exotic surrounding. His innate personal traits like colour complexion, Indian tone of English tongue and his own inborn features prove him weird and outlandish. Slowly and gradually, he begins to think himself as worthless and degraded fellow. He develops into a fearful person, and ultimately turns into taciturnity and recluse. His self-aversion aggravatingly increases when his English companions humiliate him and jeers at his Indian upbringing and way of life. Such an ironical situation for the Jemubhai is explicitly expressed by the narrator in like manner: "His pusillanimity and his loneliness has found fertile soil. He retreated into solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became a man, and it crashed him into a shadow" (*The Inheritance of Loss* 39). Jemubhai's lamentable condition is not only this much. In the college, he is mostly evaded by his class fellows and is not easily talked to by them. They treat him like a puppet and a pauper. All this makes his existence "death in life", and it also results into the loss of his equanimity and tranquility. The anxiety and depression take firm roots in his interior self. His excruciating and agonizing experience can be comprehended candidly from the following extract:

For entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things, and elderly ladies, even the hapless blue haired, spotted faces like collapsing pumpkins. . . . The young and beauty were no kinder, girls held their noses and giggled, "Phew, he stinks of curry".(139)

Though Jemubhai qualifies the examination for ICS, still he cannot make his impression on the English examiners due to his language which is replete with Indian timbre and tempo. His self-hatred accelerates rapidly as he is unable to make himself an English man in appearance and etiquette, and shed away his Indian colour and shape. During his whole stay in UK, he endures the bitter experience of his life. His consciousness of being eastern in look and utterance consumes him internally. The delineation of his character makes it crystal clear that Jemubhai Patel: "would never be seen without socks and shoes,

and would prefer shadow to light, faded days to sunny, for he was suspicious that sunlight might reveal him, in his hideousness all too clearly”(40). Even after his return from England, his attitude towards his native culture and community, instead of making amends, worsens aggravatingly. His conduct towards his tender wife, Nimi, is mocking and disgusting. He makes his utmost to inculcate in her disposition and deportment the English ethnicity, but all in vain. As he cannot overpower his disdain for his indigenous legacy and heritage, his dealings with his wife becomes callous and unbearable. He utilizes sex as a shield to harass her, and he beastly rapes her with rage and repugnance, but his inner fire does not put out. This madness of his character is laid bare in the plot of the novel: “He did not like wife’s face, searched for his hatred, found beauty, dismissed it. . . . An Indian girl could never be as beautiful as an English one”(168). It is because of this harshness and tyrannical attitude that his wife suicides and leaves him behind like a wandered dog. His misanthropy increases, and he does not like the presence of anything except his dog Mutt. It is an apple of his eye that has been with him for last a number of years. When the dog is stolen by the beggars, Jemubhai Patel becomes awfully distressed. His investigation for it is amusingly hilarious and humorous as he says: “Please come home, my dear, my lovely girl, Naughty girl, Princess Duchess Queen, sweetheart!”(293).

As herself an expatriate, Kiran Desai reliably depicts how the unemployed and poor people who go to the USA and UK with a lot of expectations to make their fortune there, face the racial discrimination, exploitation, disenchantment, cultural rootlessness. Such a predicament is portrayed through the figure of Biju, son of Jemubhai’s Cook. Cook is cherishing a sweet notion in his mind that his son in America is earning the riches as well as enjoying his life, but is not aware of the hardships and miseries which the people of formerly colonized nations undergo there. He perpetually dreams of going to America, and of residing there with his son. The misconception and over-enthusiasm of Cook can be better realized in the light of these words: “My son works in New York. He is the manager of the restaurant business.... New York, very big city. The cars and buildings are nothing like here. . . .One day soon my son will take me” (84). Moreover, the novelist also presents the painful experiences of illicit immigrants in America through the portrayal of Biju. His visa is based on forged documents and fake evidences. This fakeness of passport becomes the means of his self-exploitation. He serves in diverse hotels and restaurants like Le Colonial, Freddy’s Wok. The Stars and Strips Diner, Gandhi Café and so on. Although he works more than scheduled hours, yet he is awarded with very little wages. Besides, like Jemubhai, Biju is reprimanded and maltreated by his owners. If the former is inflicted upon a lot of humiliation by the white English, the latter is also disgraced and discriminated on the basis of his cultural variation, race, Indian accented English ,and above all for his coloured skin. The limits of this abhorring treatment crosses the margins when the proprietress of Pinocchio’s Italian Restaurant

grudges to her husband against Biju's stinking smell. She speaks without hiding anything that European servants are better than Asians or Indians: "She had hoped for men from poorer parts of Europe—Bulgarians perhaps, or Czechoslovakians. At least they might have something in common with them like religion or skin colour . . ." (48).

Such an ill-treatment and insulting behavior of the hotel owners compels Biju to shift from one place to another, but everywhere he is looked upon with contempt and is condemned. He feels that the workers from the formerly colonized countries are offered only lower positions with a paltry salary. He also experiences that even legal expatriates in America have to face estrangement, psychological trauma and marginalization. Biju has seen that workers in the hotels are provided a space for sleeping as per their cultural background and racial origin. At Baby Bistro Restaurant, Indians and Mexicans are asked to sleep below in the kitchen, while as French above the restaurant. All this makes his stay in USA a disgusting and sordid experience, yet he hopes to get a Green Card which is a sign of authority and security for a person to remain in American ceaselessly and legally. But this dream of owning the Green Card does not turn into reality for Biju. His father Cook without an iota of knowledge of the real conditions of Biju in America entreats him: "Stay there as long as you can. Stay there. Make money. Don't come back" (191). But Biju slowly realizes the absurdity of his being, and feels that living in one's own loving family even though poor is equivalent to heaven, and to be in a strange environment without dignity and identity is hellish. He becomes reminiscent of his past Indian life full of peace and pleasure. The pain of distance reminds him how once his father in Kalimpong felt homesick when he visited him: "How peaceful our village is. How good the roti tastes there! It is because the ata is grounded by hand, not by machine. . . . Fresh roti, fresh butter, fresh milk still warm from buffalo. . . ." (102). Ultimately, the sweet memories of his home and the bitter experiences on the foreign soil show Biju the path of his lovely mother land, and it becomes obvious that "the home is where the heart is". He feels immense joy and elation, and takes a sigh of relief when he arrives at Calcutta. He finds himself free from all the anxieties and apprehensions which have possessed his whole being on the foreign soil. Pertaining to the same, the narrator utters:

Sweet drabness of home--he felt everything shifting and clicking into place around him, felt himself slowly shrink back to size, the enormous anxiety of being a foreigner ebbing – that unbearable arrogance and shame of the immigrant. (300)

Conclusion

All these descriptions and illustrations demonstrate that the east and the west are two opposite poles. The people of these different directions can not merge into one due to their diverse sensibilities and countenances. Though modern people show flexibility

enough to assimilate and adjust themselves with others, yet there are innate and immediate regional traits which distinguish them, and make one race of mass distinct from the other. Every person has some inherited personal characteristics which are associated with his or her birth and place. These individual features leave an indelible mark on the personality, and they cannot be worn out by polishing by the other peoples' culture and etiquette. That is why Thorndike says that "the first impression is last impression". Moreover, the western people think themselves superior race, active and rational beings, while as they consider the rest of the world, particularly the people of Third World Countries opposite of these attributes like inferior, irrational and passive, or what is now generally known as 'other'. All these things become a hindrance in the way of mixing of the people belonging to different socio-cultural heritages and geographical locations. Jemubhai shows his taste and temperament for English culture and living. He also neglects Indian asset of inheritance and legacy in order to look like a perfect English man. But all his efforts end in nothingness, and his indifferent attitude towards Indian values and traditions proves an ultimate failure for him. Although the case with Bigu is different, yet his stay on American soil yields nothing other than pangs and sorrows. The mistreatment of these persons in the hands of the westerners is lesson learning for those who have high opinion of English and American socio-cultural establishments. While evaluating the novel critically, one thing is evident that the easterners and the westerners are incompatible due to their unique respective environment conditions and ethnic milieus. The novel justifies what Rudyard Kipling has earlier said that: "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet".

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