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Navigating Identity and Trauma in Globalized Contexts: A Comparative Study of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Women and Other*

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Abstract:

In today's rapidly changing world, the interplay of globalization and colonial legacies significantly influence individual and collective identities, often leading to complex experiences of trauma and cultural displacement. These experiences provide a psychological, cultural, and social narrative of loss. This paper shall study Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* to illustrate how different cultural and historical contexts reflect these themes through their characters' struggles with identity, belonging, and the psychological impacts of their environments. Both novels feature characters with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Their journey illustrates the duality of globalization, which, on the one hand, poses opportunities for connection and, on the other, poses challenges that question one's cohesive sense of self. Desai and Evaristo use race, class, gender, and the characters' cultural backgrounds to show the convergence that shapes their identities while delving into the intricacies of intersectionality. The paper shall also highlight how both texts use postmodern features such as non-linear narrative structure, interconnected storylines, and polyphonic voices to reflect the contemporary discord in identity, emphasizing the characters' struggles to reconcile their pasts with their present realities and fragmentation of traumatic experiences. The interplay of personal and collective traumas highlights the

broader societal implications of globalization as characters navigate their identities within a rapidly changing cultural landscape. The paper shall also delve into the Postmemory theory and Cultural trauma theory to understand the ontological process of how individuals react and cope with the growing contemporary sense of alienation arising from significant social changes.

Keywords: displacement, trauma, identity assimilation, globalization, social change.

Introduction:

As the milieu around us is constantly in flux, the emerging trend of naming the world a 'global village' comes to the forefront. When everything is interconnected, making our lives wired with each other, it becomes crucial to revisit and reexamine its nuances. Literature is one such tool that provides a lens to question and comment on the complexities of accepted narratives. Within this framework, colonialism and globalization serve as a broad spectrum to study the lives of individuals who witnessed and are witnessing the myths, challenges, and transformations brought about by these phenomena. Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* and Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman and Other* serves as a rich source for pondering these issues while highlighting the experiences of often silenced and marginalized voices in history.

Desai's works deal with socio-cultural realism, offering vivid portrayals of the effects of cultural conflict and displacement. The recipient of The Man Booker Prize (2006), *Inheritance of Loss*, deals with the themes of alienation and trauma brought about by globalization, underlining the harsh truths of this massive social change. The characters' perspectives, especially the Anglophile Indian Judge (Jemubhai) and Biju, underscore the internalized turmoil in the global context which comes as a part of the colonial legacy.

Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman and Other* made her the first Black woman to receive the Booker Prize jointly with Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*. Just as her reception of the prize

marked a turning point in history, her text also makes a groundbreaking entry in the study of identity politics, intersectionality, inclusivity, and contemporary Britain. Through the voices of twelve black British women, she portrays a panoramic picture of Afro-diasporic identities and histories.

Both writers use various tropes to present the trauma, cultural conflict, complicated memories, and ways in which their characters try to assimilate and accommodate within the changing social landscapes. Desai uses two settings, Kalimpong(India) and the U.S.A., to highlight the experiences of racism, colonialism, and immigration. Evaristo's approach is much more diverse as she paints a vivid portrait of the state of contemporary Britain and looks back to the legacy of Britain's colonial history in Africa and the Caribbean. She masterfully puts forth hybridized and hyphenated identities of her characters, tracing back to their complicated and silenced history through generations. She describes her writing as "fusion fiction" and says, "As a storyteller, I like to mix things up temporally, spatially and stylistically—to cross the borders of genre, race, culture, gender, history, and sexuality" (*The Guardian*, 2019).

Desai and Evaristo employ various tools like the use of polyphonic voices and multiple perspectives, stylistic devices like the combination of prose and poetry, and tracing memory and its intergenerational passage which is reflective of the fragmented identities and lived experiences of the characters. Though both the texts have their own cultural and historical differences, they, almost subversively, try to question the supremacist British colonial regime and the challenges of social mobility wherein some communities have always been othered leading to a fractured sense of self and distorted social reality.

Identity: The Individual and The Collective

Social sciences have long argued that identity is a multifaceted concept with various dimensions. Emerging research shows that identity cannot be a monolithic category. The constructivist approach argues how identity is constructed through social interactions while emphasizing its fluidity. Through diverse characters and their experiences, Desai and Evaristo examine and present this complicated development of the sense of self and the community, which is primarily influenced by the interplay of globalization and colonialism.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai explores identity conflict and crisis primarily within a post-colonial context, mainly through the experiences of characters like Biju and Sai. Biju's status as an undocumented immigrant in the U.S. positions him and others like him as part of a "shadow class"(Desai.2006) highlighting the exploitation of immigrant laborers in neo-colonial capitalist environments such as New York. This dynamic underscores how globalization can be viewed as an extension of colonialism, where the allure and promise of urban life are overshadowed by the harsh realities of racism and stereotyping.

Biju's pursuit of a "green card" symbolizes his quest for belonging amid the alienation he experiences in a foreign land. Caught between his Indian roots and his immigrant identity, Biju embodies the struggle many face in reconciling their cultural heritage with the demands of a new environment. Similarly, Sai grapples with her identity as she navigates her Western upbringing alongside her current socio-cultural and political realities in India. Jemubhai's characterization of her as a "Westernized Indian" reflects the tension between her privileged background and the expectations of her cultural context.

The need for cohesion in identity leads to a constant negotiation between personal self-conception and socio-cultural expectations. This theme is further complicated by the insurgency led by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), which highlights the Gorkha people's determination for recognition and the reinforcement of their collective identity. The

political turmoil surrounding the GNLF brings multiple intersecting cultural identities to the forefront, illustrating how individuals navigate their personal experiences within broader socio-political frameworks.

Through these narratives, Desai effectively illustrates the complexities of identity in a globalized world, where the legacies of colonialism and the realities of immigration shape personal and collective experiences. The interplay between individual aspirations and collective movements underscores the ongoing negotiation of identity in the face of cultural and political challenges.

In *Girl, Woman and Other*, Bernardine Evaristo employs her “fusion fiction” style, in which sentences flow into each other in a polyphonic narrative. This is representative of the fluidity of identity that Evaristo tries to establish. Her characters’ lives are entwined with each other in various cultural, historical, and social contexts. Here again, the intersectionality complicates historical and social realities. Drawing from Kimberlè Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, Latha Nair R. and Juney Thomas in “Evaristo's Womxn - The Trajectory of Intersectionality and Hyphen-ated Identities in 'Girl, Woman, Other'” write, “The theory of intersectionality posits that the lived reality of women’s lives is constructed by multiple, interwoven systems of oppression and not as a singular, binary process”. Building on this framework, Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman and Other* shows how the individual and collective identities of the twelve black British women are formed based on interconnected systems of oppression in the form of colonialism, racism, and sexism.

Bummi and Carole’s stories in the text show the clash in identity formation and the generational differences that come the way. Bummi is a proud Nigerian mother who had her share of hardships as an immigrant. She desires Carole to make her place in the Western world, but not at the cost of her Nigerian roots. When she realizes that Carole has “rejected her true culture”,

she reminds her, “You are a Nigerian, first, foremost, and last most”(Evaristo.2019). Megan’s journey of becoming Morgan comes from her sense of otherness in her own body. She struggles to find a “gender-free” identity. Amma and Dominique have unique way of navigating through marginalization and finding a sense of belonging in their friendship. Hattie sees her identity as deeply associated with her farm land, which she can never let go. These characters navigate multiple forms of oppression while seeking a sense of belonging and assimilation. Evaristo masterfully weaves together the interconnected lives of these women, subverting the hegemonic narratives often dominant in Western discourse.

Echoes of Displacement: Psychological, Cultural and Social

Displacement is a multifaceted phenomenon that manifests in the lives of individuals and communities in numerous ways. The experience of uprootedness, coupled with the ongoing quest for a sense of belonging, has profound psychological, cultural, and social implications that extend beyond the immediate survivors to their descendants. Marianne Hirsh’s concept of “postmemory”(1997) provides a framework to analyze the intricate dynamic of trauma and its transgenerational effects. The transmission of trauma-induced memories affects the psychological and cultural identities of the next. This emotional resonance can be seen in Desai and Evaristo’s texts, where the characters struggle with their fragmented selves.

Sai’s character in *Inheritance of Loss* is a classic example of this emotional resonance. Her inability to cry at her parent’s demise is representative of her cultural homelessness. Sai grapples with her hybridized upbringing within her social, cultural, and political environment. The rebellion led by the Gorkha youth represents their quest for recognition, echoing the historical struggles of their ancestors. Biju’s experiences in the West exemplify the collective challenges faced by the immigrants, often referred to as the 'shadow class.' His nostalgic

memories of his homeland stand in stark contrast to the hardships of being an undocumented immigrant, highlighting the emotional toll of displacement.

In “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”, Jeffery C. Alexander writes, “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.” Evaristo’s *Girl, woman and Other* examines this collective experience of trauma induced by displacement, colonialism, racism, and sexism. Amma’s magnum opus, *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, being opened at the National Theatre, highlights her journey as a Black lesbian playwright where she navigates cultural displacement as she struggles to find acceptance and recognition in the predominantly white, heterosexual world. The intergenerational impact of displacement is explored through characters like Yazz and Carole. They grapple with their familial legacies while navigating through their identity in the post-colonial context. Carole is called a “ghetto” at Oxford, while Yazz too faces racist slurs at college. LaTisha’s story reveals the myth of meritocracy in England and the elusive upward social mobility. The challenges she faces to raise her children leave her with no option but to become “Major General Mum”. The numerous microaggressions these women face shape their psyche and ways to find a sense of belonging in an otherwise oppressive world.

Resistance, Resilience, and Renewal

In her seminal work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth writes, “The crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives...often emerges, indeed, as an urgent question: Is the trauma an encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?” Building on this argument, if the question is about survival, one has to address how the trauma manifests itself in survival, how the trauma-shaped identity circles itself for

the minoritarian subjectivities, the ones culturally dislocated and displaced, and finally, how they process and heal themselves.

Caruth's exploration of trauma challenges the traditional understanding and narratives around it. She asserts that trauma is intricately linked with cultural memory and collective identity, which has a transgenerational impact. She underscores the role of literature and narrative, which helps individuals process and articulate their experiences, but this, too, is fraught with challenges like remembrance complexity. She explores these ideas where healing of the collective experience of cultural trauma happens through recognition of the trauma and its representation through various mediums, which leads to a reconfiguration of the collective identity.

In *Inheritance of Loss*, Desai uses fragmented narrative and multiple perspectives to represent trauma-linked memory and how it shapes the present. The coping mechanisms employed by the characters differ. Aprajita Nanda's exploration of Jemubhai and Biju's characters helps study their coping tactics. She investigates Jemubhai's character through Ruth Leys's ideas in *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Nanda writes, "...Leys argues that when trauma fails to register in one's consciousness, it does not disappear but remains in an unintegrated state in one's mind. This leads to the victims of trauma dissociating themselves from the source of trauma by way of an amnesic denial." The racial discrimination faced by Jemubhai makes his affected psyche internalize that cultural elitism. His compulsively abusive behavior toward his wife Nimi, is a result of his internalized colonial prejudices. The fact that he never meets his daughter and the location of his home Cho Oyu, is representative of his constant sense of dislocation and his fragmented identity as an Anglo-Indian. Where Jemubhai's character shows personal and societal disintegration, Biju's character is representative of a much more affirmative vision, even in light of his displacement. Through the ending scene of the novel, where Biju hugs his father, Desai tries to paint a hopeful picture where there is a possibility for the reclamation of

the experiences of the marginalized. In the words of Aprajita Nanda, “Biju, by embracing his culture, moves on to create and celebrate a homecoming that speaks of a different world-building and points towards a new and more affirmative subjectivity.”

In *Girl, Woman and Other* Evaristo employs polyphonic narrative to represent the interconnectedness of individual and shared histories and reclaiming agency over it. If literature is seen as a medium for the representation and reclamation of experiences of trauma survivors and historically marginalized subjects, then Evaristo’s use of Adinkra symbols for each chapter can be seen as a masterful way to represent the historical connection to the African origin of its characters. The after-party held for Amma’s opening play at the National Theatre can be seen as a culmination of the story of intersecting identities of these women who showed resistance and resilience in the face of traumatic events that shaped their lives. The coming together of all the characters stands symbolic of their acceptance of their collective struggles and interconnectedness of their experiences and hints towards the renewal of new relationships and a more inclusive representation.

For Evaristo, this representation becomes even more nuanced as her characters have to deal with “double consciousness”(Bois. 1903). The characters struggle with their self-perception and the stereotypes and prejudices held by the dominant society, this psychological conflict results in an aggravated oppressive experience. The characters develop their survival tactics and find ways to assimilate into their present realities. Hattie’s decision to give the inheritance right of Greenfields farm to Morgan and to make it a sanctuary for the transgender community can be seen as an example of Evaristo’s hopeful vision to forge a society based on inclusivity and equality. The text celebrates the togetherness, imperfections, and complexities of its characters which is often viewed as an aberration by the dominant regime.

Conclusion

Inheritance of Loss and *Girl, Woman and Other*, serve as a rich source to study the challenges brought by the rosy promises of globalization which becomes an extension of colonialism in multiple ways. Desai and Evaristo masterfully trace the diasporic displacement of their characters and their fragmented selves, navigating through their trauma-induced identity to find a sense of belonging. Their use of a disruptive narration style provides a unique entry point to examine the characters' psychological conflict. Both texts end with a hopeful promise to find a sense of cohesiveness and agency for the marginalized groups whose identities are under constant construction.

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