

Identity crisis in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Shalini Thakur

Ph.D. Scholar

Gurukul Kangri Vishwavidyalaya

Haridwar, Uttarakhand

Supervisor: **Dr. Mudita Agnihotri**

Background –The Inheritance of loss

This novel is set against the background of the Gorkhaland in the north eastern hills of Darjeeling, which is very close to the Nepal. There are stories within the stories depicted through numerous backgrounds. This novel is set in 1980s, novel depicts the Indian society in characters like Jemubhai, the former judge, his teenaged granddaughter, Sai and their cook, Biju, the cook's son, Gyan, Saeed, Haresh-Harry and two sisters Nonita and Lolita. All these characters are inheritors of loss. They are losers in terms of dispossession, dislocation, wealth and progress. All the characters are transformed from the native identity to the westernized native. They are negotiating with their identity. They are caught between two worlds and caught between two cultures. One of the major features of Postcolonial texts is the concern with place and displacement that results in the crisis of identity into a person. The main character of the story will find himself in a struggle to establish an identity. They feel themselves conflicted between two cultures. This Novel addresses these issues in a direct way. It is not only a matter of adjusting in a new environment or learning a new language but it is much more serious.

It is a painful process of alienation and displacement which may create an imbalance in a person's thoughts and ideas.

Nostalgia

In the post-colonial literature, nostalgia plays an important role. All the characters feel nostalgic of their lives. Biju becomes very nostalgic about his past life when he thinks of his childhood in his village in India. In his stay in America he remembers his grandmother. He remembers how his grandmother crossed on market trips into town and back, sometimes she put a sack of rice on her head. He remembers of the hermit living on the river bank. Biju thinks of the Yamuna River. He also remembers of the typical Indian food. He thinks of roti made on *choolah*, *atta* ground by hand. He thinks of fresh roti, fresh butter.

“ On Diwali the holy man lit lamps and put them in the branches of the *peepul* tree and sent them down the river on rafts with marigolds –how beautiful the sight of those lights bobbing in that young dark. When he had visited his father in Kalimpong had reminisced: “How peaceful our village is. How good the roti tastes there! It is because the *atta* is ground by hand, not by machine ... and because it is made on a *choolah*, fresh butter, fresh milk still warm from the buffalo...”(103).

Jemu popatlal patel's life story is mostly told through the flash back. In his flashback, he attempts to put forward his Indian life and his stay in England. But his attitude is different from the usual thought of liking his native land. This novel presents a contrast between his life in England and Biju's stay in America. He presents a contrast of his Indian life with his stay in the England. He went to London to qualify the ICS. He starts his journey from the Piphit. He purchased the house, Cho oyo, from the Scotsman who told him, "It is very isolated but the land has potential." This land is fertile for quinine, sericulture, cardamom, orchids." The judge was not interested in agricultural possibilities still he went to see the land.

Judge personal life was a complete failure. His marriage to Nimmi was not successful. He had no feelings for his wife though her parents had sponsored his visit to England. He felt guilty after her death. His false ideals had killed his wife. Memory of Past incidents brings a lot of guilt feelings in him.

When he reached England, he realized that the England of his dreams was different from England of reality. He began study this is the only skill he could do in the England. "He worked twelve hours at a stretch, late into the night, and in thus withdrawing, he failed to make a courageous gesture outward at a crucial moment and found, instead, that his pusillanimity and his loneliness had found fertile soil. He retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow" (39).

Sense of Loss and Ambivalence

All the characters in the novel suffer from a sense of ambivalence that eventually leads them to develop a sense of loss. The narrative begins in the Darjeeling hills of West Bengal. In a decayed and crumbling estate in Kalimpong, situated at the foothills of the north-eastern Himalayas," where India blurred into Bhutan and Sikkim" (9), Jemubhai Popatlal Patel – retired and reclusive judge lives with his teenage granddaughter named Sai, his aged and chatty cook, Pannalal and his well bred dog named Mutt. Jemubhai Popatlal Patel is an eccentric person and he often lives in the past. In his flashback, we learn that when he was a young man, he was sent to Cambridge by his family to study law. But in England, he was ridiculed for his accent. Young girls in England held their nose as he passed showing that he smelled of curry. This rejection fuelled in him a shame and hatred for his heritage, his native culture and color of his skin.

"He retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow" (39).

The judge looks at the English as someone very superior and this attitude exhibits his ambivalent nature.

Jemubhai had been born in 1919 in family of peasants in piphit. Jemu was a brilliant student. Jemu was the first person of the Patel lineage who was very intelligent. Kiran writes about his intelligence "modern in its alacrity" (58).His parents gave him everything from love to food and

they deprived their daughters to ensure that Jemu should receive all the comforts of life. When he topped in his class his father became very ambitious for his son, Jemu. Jemu's principal suggested his father that Jemu should sit for the local pleaders' examination that would enable him to find a job in the courts of subordinate magistrates. His father ignored his suggestion because Jemu's father had other plans for him. "The father walked out thinking, well, if he could do that, he could do more. He could be the judge himself" (59).

Displacement

The diasporic fiction tries to capture the sense of displacement of the diasporic. The displacement of Biju, the son of the cook is more poignant than any other characters in the novel. Biju, joining a crowd of Indians scrambling to reach the visa counter at the U.S Embassy is one of the most harrowing scenes in the novel. In page after page Kiran Desai narrates the process of migration from the impoverished third world countries to the immigrant packed basements in New York City.

The following scene in which Biju joins a long queue of Indians scrambling to reach the visa counter at the American embassy in Kathmandu:

"Biju, like half the room, didn't understand, but he saw from the ones who did, who were running, pleased to be given a head start, what they should do. Stink and spit and scream and charge; they jumped toward the window, tried to splat themselves against it hard enough that they would just stick and not scrape off; young men mowing through, tossing aside toothless grannies, trampling babies underfoot. This was no place for manners and this is now the line was formed: wolf- faced single men first, men with families second, women on their own and Biju, and last, the decrepit. Biggest pusher, first place; how self-contented and smiling he was; he dusted himself off, presenting himself with the exquisite manners of a cat. I'm civilized, sir, ready for the U.S. I'm civilized, mam. Biju noticed that his eyes, so alive to these foreigners, looked back at his own countrymen and women, immediately glazed over, and went dead" (183).

These Indian applicants' uncivilized behavior and their willingness to demean themselves for an American visa lead Biju to contemplate: "In this room it was a fact accepted by all that Indians were willing to undergo any kind of humiliation to get into the States. You could heap rubbish on their heads and yet they would be begging to come crawling in" (184).

However, in the end, Biju becomes an illegal immigrant in New York, does odd jobs to survive:" Biju changed jobs like a fugitive on the run" (3). He changed his jobs so frequently that he could not settle anywhere. He worked in numerous hotels and restaurants like French, Mexican, Italian and Indian. His experience was hardly better than that of the colonized. He suffered the pangs of loneliness since he came to America. The irony is that his father, the cook in the judge's house thinks that he is doing well and is proud of the fact that his son is in America. Kiran Desai writes about the efforts of the cook, " the cook had first made the effort to send his son abroad four years ago when a recruiting agent for a cruise ship line appeared in Kalimpong to solicit application for waiters, vegetable choppers, toilet Cleaners" (179). The cook's joy knew no

bounds. His son was employed in the USA. He boasted to everyone he met. He told his acquaintances, "Excellent job", "better than the last" (17). He is the manager of a restaurant business in New York which is a very big city. "He imagined sofa TV bank account. Eventually Biju would make enough and the cook would retire. He would receive a daughter-in-law to serve him food, crick-crack his toes, Grandchildren swat like flies" (17).

Concern for safety and security

All people living in another country away from their homeland is always concerned with their safety and security. When they reach in the foreign land their livelihood depends upon their relatives, who are settled there.

In the case of Biju he has no relative to support him. He has to fight on his own for his living. Biju made his way to different places. His concern with Harish-Harry shows an immigration concern for safety and security. Harish-Harry had thrashed him out without money and security. Harish beat him badly and wanted him to go back to India.

"Biju walked back to the Gandhi Café, thinking he was emptying out. Year by year, his life wasn't amounting to anything at all; in a space that should have included family, friends, he was the only one displacing the air. And yet, another part of him had expanded; his self-consciousness, his self-pity-oh the tediousness of it" (268).

He is a broken man emotionally and materially. His return to India is very disturbing. When he reaches in India GNLf struggle continues. His father doesn't know about his coming home. On returning home he had been robbed by the group of thugs. They have taken away all the money and the things he had purchased in the America.

"Biju sat there in terror of what he'd done, of being alone in the forest, and of the men coming after him again. He couldn't stop thinking of all that he'd bought and lost. Of the money he'd hidden under fake soles in his shoes. Of his wallet. Suddenly, he felt an old throbbing of the knee that he had hurt slipping on Harish-Harry's floor"(318)

There is another traumatic scene. His father goes to Kalimpong to get to know about Biju. Due to the GNLf activities all the communication has been stopped. He tries to talk to him.

"ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?" Biju shrieked on the Newyork street."

"Give accommodation. Free food. EVERYTHING FINE. BUT ARE YOU ALL RIGHY?"(231) having robbed he reaches Kalimpong, Biju does not find his father.

In *The Location of culture* Homi Bhabha explains the negative effects of migration and diaspora. According to him, the experience of migration involves "gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines, gathering the memories of under development , of

other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present”(1994)

The characters in this novel are always negotiating with their past, present and future.

Ambivalence

All the characters in the novel suffers from a sense of ambivalence that ultimately leads to sense of loss. Jemubhai patel, a former judge, is an offensive man. In his flashback, we learn that when he went to England he was ridiculed for his accent. He found his own accent peculiar.

“The young and beautiful were no kinder; girls held their noses and giggled, “Phew, he stinks of curry!”(39)

He becomes a victim of “double consciousness”- A term coined by W. E. B. Dubois it is used in postcolonial literatures. He becomes the victim of double consciousness. “He envied the English, He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become; he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both”(119). Judge looks at the English something superior this attitude makes him ambivalent. In the England, he feels shame on his culture and heritage. He feels shame of his darker skin .

Sai, judge’s granddaughter is also a victim of circumstances. She lost her parents in an accident in Russia. Her father was a space scientist, living in Russia; she herself was living in Darjeeling in a convent. From the beginning she had lived an isolated life.

She arrives at the house of her grandfather, whom she has never met before. She has been displaced from convent school in Darjeeling to the lush, Himalayan region of Kalimpong . Where a growing agitation of GNLFF intensifies her trauma. She develops an intimacy with her maths tutor, Gyan. Their relationship flourishes in the beginning very soon Gyan joins the insurgents and stops to coming to see her. Sai finally meets him, but meeting ends in disappointment. She desires to achieve an emotional bond with her grandfather but it also fails, because he himself is disturb both emotionally and physically. He always wants to belong to his native land and the foreign land which is the major characteristic of postcolonial literature.

Minor characters like Noni, Lola, Uncle Potty, Princess Mrs. Sen and Munmun are all inheritors of loss. They are all leading a dual life which affects their thoughts and feelings. All characters are come into contact with the cultures in conflict. That affect their identity consequently they are put in the ambivalent environment.

‘Hybridity’ is another major concept of postcolonial theory. It refers to interrelatedness of two cultures. It is the state of conversation inside. Acceptance and rejection occurs at the same time. For Desai, the process of transformation is not easy or always positive, in some cases it has far reaching psychological consequences.

Language

Language is one of the central concerns of postcolonial literatures. Desai uses Hindi convey the thoughts of her characters. She tries to capture the essentials of her characters in their new thoughts and feelings. She often uses the clichés and words of common language. She uses both gentle (Namaste, Dhanyawad, Shukriya ,Pitaji etc.) and vulgar (bhenchoots) , vernacular expressions in Hindi. Writers often take liberty to use language according to the situations where their characters are put in. Use of vernacular language sometimes acts as a therapeutic act of resistance.

Conclusion

All the characters in *Inheritance of Loss* search for identity and they long for love and acceptance in an alien land. All of them are displaced. They have developed a sense of loss, though in different degrees. The characters are all victims of the postcolonial dilemma. It is true that novel ends with the positive note when Sai saw the meeting of the cook and his son Biju taking place.

“The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it” (324). In spite of sufferings, backwardness and poverty in one’s own land: One can try to drive a sense of belonging and identity on one’s own land. One is often attracted by the material prosperity that west seems to offer. Uprooting from one’s own land and re-rooting in an alien land is a painful process and coming back to own land has been delineated successfully by the author .She has described the dilemmas faced by her characters in their longing to find a material prosperity in a alien land.

References

1. Ashcroft and et al, Eds.*The Post-Colonial Reader*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2008.
2. Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination*, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1987.
3. Bhabha, Homi *The Location of Culture* London and New York: Routledge, 1994
4. Desai, Kiran *The inheritance of loss* (London, Penguin, 2006).