

ISSN : 2454-3365

THE LITERARY HERALD

AN INTERNATIONAL REFEREED ENGLISH E-JOURNAL

A Quarterly Indexed Open-access Online JOURNAL

Vol.1, No.1 (June 2015)

Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Siddhartha Sharma

Managing Editor: Dr. Sadhana Sharma

www.TLHjournal.com

sharmasiddhartha67@gmail.com

“That is no Country for...”
Fragmented Nation, Nationhood and Quest for a ‘National Identity’ in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*: An Analysis

Anindya Sundar Polley

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English and Foreign Languages

Guru Ghasidas Viswavidyalaya, Bilaspur

Abstract

Postcolonial universe, with the confused amalgamation of ‘colonial neurosis’ and with the quest for a distinct identity of its own, creates a problematic yet inescapable scenario in the third world countries. Neither the geographical boundaries of the ‘map’, nor the spheres of homogenous cultural domain, offer a watertight identity of a nation-in-building. On the other hand the deconstruction of the concept of ‘global village’ and the failure of ‘multiculturalism’ in the level of ‘transcultural space’, worsen the problem. The fragmented identity of the nation has been merely reduced to the individual level and perhaps confined to the world of ‘passports, visas or immigration’. The situation is indeed thought provoking and demands a serious investigation.

Here in this paper, Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) has been taken for this particular case study. The novel with its diverse plot, situational settings, vivid characterization and sensational ‘current affairs’, offers the perfect food of thought for this particular issue, both from the universal as well as individual stand points. The paper, through the study of the novel, is an attempt to uncover the realities of a postcolonial nation and the ill-fated nationalities with the fragmented identities, and seeks a probable mode of redemption from this unseen suffocative situation.

Keywords: Nation, Multiculturalism, Transcultural Space, Fragmented Identity, *The Inheritance of Loss*

“That is no Country for...”
Fragmented Nation, Nationhood and Quest for a ‘National Identity’ in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006): An Analysis

Anindya Sundar Polley

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English and Foreign Languages
Guru Ghasidas Viswavidyalaya, Bilaspur

Postcolonial universe, with the confused amalgamation of ‘colonial neurosis’ and with the quest for a distinct identity of its own, creates a problematic yet inescapable scenario in the third world countries. Neither the geographical boundaries of the ‘map’, nor the spheres of homogenous cultural domain, offer a watertight identity of a nation-in-building. On the other hand the deconstruction of the concept of ‘global village’ and the idea of multicultural world in the so called transcultural space hardly has any existence. Here, everybody wants to create their own world. And in the flow of continuous displacement, everybody, in order to secure their existence, talks about ‘bookish terms’ like ‘global village’ or ‘multiculturalism’. The situation is indeed thought provoking and demands a serious investigation and here Kiran Desai’s award winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* has been taken for analyzing this particular issue.

Before delving into these issues, as Smriti Singh points out in her essay, one needs to analyze the reasons for studying the ‘nation’ through the novel (1). She talks of the relationship between the nation and the novel just like Timothy Brennan, who in his essay “The National Longing for Form” writes,

It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the ‘one, yet many’ of national life and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles. Secondly, the novel joined the newspaper as the major vehicle of the national print media, helping to standardize language, encourage literacy and remove mutual incomprehensibility. But it did much more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to image the special community that was the nation. (49-50)

The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* depicts the crisis life of four primary characters: the judge, Sai (judge’s 16 years old granddaughter), Biju (judge’s cook’s son, an illegal immigrant to USA) and Gyan (Sai’s Nepali teacher) and several other secondary characters like Lola, Noni, father Booty, Uncle Potty etc. All of them either voluntarily or against their will, are displaced from their origin and it creates a chaotic effect on their existence. The individual scenarios which they undergo are distinct from each other, yet they possess a striking resemblance, when considered together in the macrocosmic level of ‘nation’.

Ideas of nationhood are statically and statistically presented throughout the novel. For most of the characters, the very idea of nation is a confused thing and has become a mere concept where they can ascribe certain demography and ideology. Sai, the young girl, is perhaps the most prominent example who embodies this confusion. She possesses an artificial personality, just like her grandfather, and cannot withstand cultural and social inferiority.

Although she ideologically talks about cultural and economic equality and opines about a large country with all its variety, deep down in her mind, she is equally frantic. Her 'nation' is equally fragmented and small and perhaps her intra-diasporic upbringings in the missionary hostel away from her family and dear ones; were responsible for this kind of negative growth. The dystopian images of Gyan's households, the poor state of the life of Nepali immigrants, which she secretly discovers after a verbal fight with the former, creates the moment of epiphany for Sai and it is at this point, she breaks down and thus her individuality which forms her small claustrophobic world, gets exposed.

Similarly, for the people, who belong to the 'contact zone', where cultures mingle to create a hybrid culture, which creates a claustrophobic identity for them by leading them to a point of no return to their own culture, the condition is most pathetic. The novel offers ample evidences of such hybrid individuals who are very much disturbed and mal-adjusted. They are mostly very self-ambivalent and suffer deeply from identity crisis. For example, Judge Jemubhai Patel never places himself properly neither to Indian culture nor to the foreign culture and at the end leads an isolated unpleasant life. He desperately ignores the 'Indianess' around him when he was selected for ICS. He doesn't come across a single soul, save Mr. Bose, with whom he can share his emotion. Neither his late wife, nor his uneducated clan could understand him and his desperate effort at the end to search for the dog, ignoring the political unrest, speaks all about the unspoken solitude. He never discovers his true 'country', and his quest goes on till the end of the novel.

For Gyan, the concept of nation is so ambivalent that it confuses him and people like him. On one hand he lives in India, considers India as his motherland. On the other hand he later joins the GNLf movement and openly participates in the campaigns for a separate Gorkhaland. He is culturally very much confused. He enjoys the aristocratic atmosphere of Cho Oyu yet later tells the GNLf volunteers about the guns of the judge. He considers himself racially minor and hence his existence in India seems like an exile to him. Throughout the novel, he suffers from an identity crisis and cannot reciprocate his love for Sai. His socio economic minority largely determines the idea of a fragmented nation for him from an individual level and it is so prominent that it cannot be ignored. The GNLf movement and its development as shown in the novel is nothing but a collective outburst of Gyan's (and people like him) individual experience of 'exile' in India and hence the movement loses its true ideology to a large extent.

The novel also raises questions over the issues of cultural identity and questions the very concept of nation and nationhood. This idea of nation and nationhood is almost brought to a farcical level by Sayed Sayed, an illegal immigrant with whom Biju was befriended in USA. For Sayed, nationhood is the least important criteria in his life, and he is truly a man of no nation. He is from Zanzibar, works in the restaurants of USA, marries an American woman to get the green card, the permanent visa and to him, his individual identity is his nation. In one of his confession he says, "I am first a Muslim, then a Zanzibari and finally an USA citizen" (105). His choice of nation is very much conscious and self-decided and he is very much happy in his decision.

Sayed's choice of nation and national identity is beautifully contrasted with that of Biju's. Biju's choice of going to USA to earn a lot of money by working in the restaurants is guided by the circumstances. He encounters dystopian experiences in USA where the expectations and reality becomes topsy turvy. The behavior he witnesses from an Indian owner of a restaurant, who refuses to pay the doctor's bill for an ill Biju, shatters his idea of 'brotherhood'. On the other hand when he receives various help from Sayed, an unknown Zanzibari, in an unknown land, Biju's idea of nation has been deconstructed. He readily writes to his father about his

prejudice about Muslims and how wrong he was. He appreciates the positive aspect of this 'multicultural' world and thus he creates his 'nation' through his experiences.

The other minor characters especially the two elderly Bengali sisters: Lola and Noni, also offer significant involvement in depicting the postcolonial reality and in the construction of a fragmented nation. The shallow view of their notions about nation is self-contradictory. On one hand they talk about 'colonial neurosis' and criticizes Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* and the author's stance; on the other hand they are nostalgic about their glorious past but doesn't do anything significant to contribute in 'nation in making'. They are proud enough to showcase their linguistic hegemony and obnoxiously utter Bengali's higher intellectuality over others specially the Gorkha people, yet they talk about a complete nation when they are in distress. Superficially, Desai here attacks this hypocrisy and she is 'spot on' to detect the problem of the nation in building after its postcolonial era.

The concept of nation only exists in the world of 'immigration, passports and visas' etc. and it is nothing but an unreal conception. The novelist criticizes these unreal distinction and boundaries of nation through the presentation of the illegal immigrants, for whom the nation is not restrictive to those official formalities of passport and visas. They do not care about the official stamp of a 'nation' yet they are perhaps the most ambivalent characters in this particular aspect. On one hand, they hate the nation where they immigrate; they hate the people, their culture etc. On the other hand they are more than willing to stay there in order to earn more than their motherland. They are exposed to a cultural dilemma; that is why people like Harris Hari exists, who neither can adopt the target culture properly, nor can he shed his root properly. As the very name suggests, he in fact hangs in between, and thrives for an identity which he never achieves.

The situation of the hills: the Gorkhaland Movement also enables the author to criticize the nation making/breaking exercise on part of the GNLf leaders who misguide their fellow followers through their hegemonic power. They stimulate the public emotion and needs to use them in their favour. Hence the participation of the common mass in such movement is not spontaneous; rather it is something which is forced upon them. Thus, to GNLf leaders, nation hood and separate national identity is nothing but an opportunity to succumb power which is also exposed by Desai by showing the naked greed and corrupt ideology of GNLf leaders like Pradhan. In his essay, Sarkar points out:

The true picture of nation doesn't exist in the piece of paper; it exists in the hearts of those people who live in the soil of the nation. But it has been a sad lot of the people where people have been living in the hungry, thirsty, and half naked and like living corpse from generation to generation, there the talking of nationalism becomes a sheer dishonesty. In that condition, the relationship between collectivity and community start to fall apart and there takes place the disintegrating forces to regenerate a great deal of disorder and disobedience. The word nation breaks down under the weight of destructive forces of corrupt political system which is against the suffering of humanity and the handling of citizens, friends or foes of the country. (2)

The novel shows how the concept of nation is on the verge of disintegration and every individual is responsible for it. They do not contribute in the construction process rather they try to escape. *The New York Times* reviews beautifully this particular aspect of escaping trend among the characters of the novel in the following manner:

In scene after scene depicting this process — a boarding house in England, derelict bungalows in Kalimpong, immigrant-packed basements in New York — Desai's novel seems lit by a moral intelligence at once fierce and tender. But no scene is more harrowing than the one in which Biju joins a crowd of Indians scrambling to reach the visa counter at the United States Embassy: “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 the foreigners, looked back at his own countrymen and women, immediately glazed over, and went dead.” (5)

The novel thus illustratively exposes a bitter truth: the very concept of nation lacks its most important characteristic feature- its homogeneous identity as a nation. All the characters with their individual involvement elucidate the idea that the idea of nation is what they perceive from their individual benefit and the ideology of nationalism has nothing to do with it. The novel thus serves as an eye opener and raises an important question: whether the individual existence of a person in the transcultural space at all relishes the microcosmic life of a nation or is it altogether an unwanted existence? Desai has presented a cryptic enigmatic solution of the question in her novel which makes it more thought provoking.

Works Cited

Primary Source:

Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. New Delhi: Penguin. 2006. Print.

Secondary Sources:

Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary terms*. 7th edition. Bangalore: Heinle. 2007. Print.

Brennan, Timothy. “The National Longing for Form”. *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi Bhabha. New York: Routledge. 2008. Print.

Sarkar, Sushil. “Mapping of Insurgency and Nation in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*” *The Challenge* 22.1 (June 2013): 1-5. Web. 23 Aug. 2014.

Singh, Smriti. “Textualizing Postcolonial India: Gita Hariharan’s *Siege* and Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*” *The Criterion* 3.2 (2012): 1-10. Web. 23 Aug. 2014.

“Wounded by the West”. Rev. of *The Inheritance of Loss*. *New York Times* 13 July 2006, late ed.: pp. 5