

Assessing the themes of Loss and Search for Home in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

Kiran Desai has focused on all the modern issues in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. There are several themes expounded in it. Desai manages to deal with issues like- globalization, multiculturalism, modernization, terrorism and insurgency. With the help of tapestry of colourful characters, Desai has managed to portray her themes in a very elegant manner. Theme of terrorism, loss, immigration, economic inequality, human relationship and marginalisation are the themes that Desai tries to explore. The theme of loss is a major theme that Desai explores in *The Inheritance of Loss*. The theme of loss is indicated in the title itself and through the Epigraph from George Luis Borges. True to the title, each and every character sketched by the writer suffers loss in some or the other way, which is its own 'dubious inheritance'. The loss each character bears varies in magnitude and its intensity is also very different, but the loss is inevitable.

Key Words: Culture, Diaspora, Gorkhaland, Inheritance, loss, loneliness

According to Pramod K. Nayar, "Diaspora is simply the displacement of a community or culture into another geographical and cultural region. Such movements were common during colonialism. Such diasporic movements developed their own distinctive cultures which preserved, extended, and developed their 'original' cultures. Diaspora culture is the effect of migration, immigration, and exile. Diaspora is a particularly fascinating phenomenon because it has existed since the arrival of humans on earth. As communities settle down, they acquire and build certain traditions and customs. Later, when members of this community move away, they take with them the baggage of these customs and belief-systems" (Nayar 187). Homi Bhabha considers borders as space of in-betweenness, zones of transition and hybrid spaces. He writes, "The need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal-that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (1-2).

The title of the novel possesses the twin motifs of 'Inheritance' and 'Loss' which in a vivid manner depict the shape of the life of each of the major character in the novel. Sai, the protagonist inherits loss right from her childhood. Her father, an Airforce officer about to become the first Indian to fly into space, is killed in a road mishap along with his wife (Sai's mother) in Soviet Russia. Sai who is just six becomes an orphan. Loss of parents is what Sai bears at a very tender age. She has been put into a Convent School. She hates the Convent keeps on telling herself that, "I am an orphan, my parents are dead" (Desai 27). Moreover, Sai's father, a Parsi boy is also an orphan, brought up in Zoroastrian charity for orphans. Sai's mother, daughter of a well-known judge Jemubhai Patel is disowned by him as she married outside her caste. Sai's mother elopes away with Mr. Mistry (Sai's father) despite the denial of her parents. With the loss of parents, Sai bears rootlessness and thus has to live alone. As there is no one to pay for her, she is sent to live with her maternal grandfather, Retired Judge Jemubhai Patel. Sai has never been to her grandfather's house. Even the judge finds his life disturbed by the arrival of Sai. He finds himself very upset. He is unable to sleep inspite of taking a sleeping pill. But he lays awake, thinking of his own journeys, he also had left the house for the first time with a black tin trunk, just like the one Sai had arrived with to Cho Oyu Sai is quite well aware of herself and manages her new life in the crumbling Cho Oyu of her maternal grandfather, who least bothers about her. As a part of his duty, judge makes provision for her studies and Sai is entrusted to Lola for her further education. Here Sai finds relief and enjoys the company of the neighbours: uncle Potty, Father Booty, Lola and Nonita. Her life in Cho Oyu is one of prolonged listlessness. The Judge is interested in reading but seldom purchases or updates his library and stock of books. Sai has to satisfy herself with the old numbers of National Geographic Books. Then she discovers that she is in love with Gyan. The two lovers play the game of courtship, reaching retreating, teasing, fleeing and calling each other nicknames. The love story of Gyan and Sai is the major core of the novel. But it is too good to last long. The Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) becomes active in the hills and Gyan gets caught up in the movement. He participates casually but finds himself destined for the same. Though romantically involved with Sai, he feels irritated with her English accent and behaviour. Half-educated, uprooted, Gyan is very keen to get a proper job and wants to leave that fussy pair, Sai and her grandfather, due to their English culture and their attitude to be English. Gyan, the Nepali lover of Sai is frustrated because of Sai's hybrid culture and he tries to bring sense in her saying. "Don't you have any pride? Trying to be westernized they don't want you! Go there and see if they welcome you with open arms. You will be trying to clean their toilets, even then they won't want you" (ibid 191).

Gyan expresses his anxiety of being a Nepali in India. His lack of identity makes him realise the sense of loss. From the point of view of ethnicity, the Nepali inherits loss of identity that results in loss of opportunity. Despite his education, he is jobless. This makes him aware of the GNLF movement of Gorkhaland for Gorkhas and swings himself in the movement. To achieve identity, he is ready to sacrifice his love. Here his love for Sai is shattered. He starts hating her for her

westernized manners, luxury and independent thinking. Instead, he thinks these wealthy people have deprived them of their rights. Sai realises that for Gyan, she is not the centre of their romance; she is “only the centre to herself and a small player playing her part in someone else's story” (ibid 192). Thus, Sai loses her lover. But tragedy strikes when Sai realises Gyan has leaked the information of the Judge's hunting guns. As a result of this, the GNLF youths intrude in the house of the Judge and take away not only the guns also his prized possession the black tin trunk, which he carried to England. Gyan's information leads the Judge to the loss of his hunting guns, trunk full of grocery items and many more such things. Sai becomes furious and accuses Gyan of the robbery. Gyan is shocked at Sai's behaviour, so in rage he administers a sound beating to her. That horrifying beating signals for Sai, the loss of both her lover and her love. Thus, Sai suffers a major loss in her life.

The next characters to inherit loss are the Anglophile retired judge Jemubhai Patel and his wife Nimi. He becomes British trained man and member of the coveted I.C.S. Before going to England, he is married to a less educated village girl Nimi. In fact, Nimi's dowry helps Jemubhai to complete his education in England. But this pair is incompatible and their relation worsens with course of time. Then bridal night itself is a failure. Nimi is barely 14 years old and she scarcely understands the meaning of the proceedings. Frightened to the core, she cries out in terror, 'save me' and begins to weep. Frightened by her fright, Jemubhai is terrified. Unfortunately, the hapless couple continues to share this ordeal of inaction night after night. Jemubhai goes to England and returns with blind imitation of the West. This results in erosion of his autonomous individuality. On his return to India, he finds himself despising his apparently backward Indian wife. He tries to teach Nimi western etiquettes and manners but it is in vain. This leads to a monstrous behaviour of the judge towards his wife. The relation reaches a worse height when he finds her footprints on the toilet seat in her squatting on the toilet seat in Indian fashion. This enrages him to such an extent that he lifts her up and immerses her face into the toilet bowl. Her cheeks erupt in pustules, The judge who was responsible for Nimi's infected face became more conscious of himself. He instructed his servants to wipe everything with dettol to kill the germs. Moreover, he asked her to remain confined in the house. He said, “Don't show your face outside.... People might run from you screaming” (ibid 190). Further, the marital relation between the judge and Nimi is broken. Nimi is unaware of the effect of her act of joining the localities to welcome Nehru. She least bothers that her action would lead to block her husband, a British employee's promotion. Jemubhai is warned by his senior that no such thing will be tolerated. He will have to compromise with his career in such a situation. That night he hits her hard and that leads to end their relation. Jemubhai sends her back to her parental home. He never goes to see her Then Nimi gives birth to a baby girl but Jemubhai has become too hard to melt for his own daughter. He just sends money and that is all.

As years pass Jemubhai feels the loss. He doesn't confess but feels the guilt for his inhuman behaviour and realises that he is responsible for the loss. Desai here delineates the loss occurred

due to mistakes and misunderstandings. The inevitable incompatibility between two persons who are the two opposite poles in education, upbringing and values leads to the inheritance of heavy loss. Jemubhai breaks up his marital ties. Jemubhai and Nimi both have to bear the loss. In fact, the mockery of all English education and high placed situation in life leads the judge to loss. Judge has to bear another loss and it is the loss of his pet Mutt, a dog who was closer to him than any human being. He is closer than his wife or daughter to him. Mutt is a human being to the judge. As the movement of the Gorkhaland takes momentum, incidents happen in such a way that the loss of power and authority of those who occupy a position of centrality in the existing system becomes evident. Mutt is stolen by the wife and the father of the drunkard. When the judge complains of the gun robbery, the police are quite serious and consider the theft too important to be ignored and look into the matter immediately. They are successful in tracing the culprit. But now the conditions have changed. When a report is filed of Mutt's missing, the police answer that, people are being killed in large numbers and the way things are they cannot look for a dog. Instead, they make fun of the judge and the SDO fixes the judge with a certain gluey look that convinces him he meant to be rude. The judge almost weeps and understands the world has failed Mutt. He realises that he has lost the previous power. He remembers all of a sudden and regrets, "why had he gone to England and joined the ICS?" (ibid, 361). Lola and Noni, the wealthy Bengali sisters also have to bear loss. Lola is a widow and they both live on her pension. Mon Ami is their beautiful residence, living a peaceful life, they are satisfied but unexpectedly their life is subverted by the Nepali insurgency. The land around their Mon-Ami is illegally acquired by the GNLFF youths. When Lola complains to GNLFF chief, she is humiliated in a bad way.

The next to bear the loss is Father Booty, Sai's neighbour. He is the worst loser, who has been in India for decades. Father Booty is a Swiss man. He owns a dairy, has some cows, produces milk and milk products. In this agitation he is found to be residing illegally in India. He considers himself more an Indian than a Swiss citizen. So he hasn't renewed his stay permit. He knows he is a foreigner but considers himself an Indian foreigner. He is asked to leave Kalimpong. It sounds like an earthquake to him. No one acquainted with him is ready to help him. The people who have regular trips to his dairy also are helpless – "But now, all those who in peaceful times had enjoyed his company and chatted about such things as curd, mushrooms and bamboo were too busy or too scared to help" (ibid 242). Uncle Potty consoled Father Booty that he would look after his property and cows and when the atmosphere cools down he can come back. But Uncle Potty is a drunkard and it would be a great risk. Thus, there is no alternative. Father Booty is forced to leave for the Siliguri airport. Having lost everything it is only his memories he can take with him. He remembers the time, he had given a lecture on how dairies might create a mini Swiss style economy in Kalimpong and his proposal was greeted with a standing ovation. He feels the loss of his property, friends and everything. He left his friend Uncle Potty in mourning and drinking with all the mess no one to care for. Loss becomes the lot of Biju, who overcoming

the hurdles reaches New York to test his luck. The career of Biju the cook's only son, is again one of loss gaining something by fraud and losing it to threatened violence. By improper means he manages to reach America but is at loss without a green card. He has to undergo humiliation and insults. Biju being an illegal immigrant the owners are indifferent towards him. He is harassed and he wants to return to India. Mutt is more human than a dog. Her closeness to the judge is seen in the following incident, "He overturned the beetle on the table with his knife, it stopped buzzing and Mutt, who had been staring at it with shock gazed at him like an adoring spouse." (ibid 38) She enjoyed status like a human being, in fact as if she was the spouse of the judge. But fate hits her hard. The judge becomes very sentimental after her missing. Mutt adds to the sad fraternity of loser in the narrative. Compared to other characters in the narrative she suffers more for she has to pay the ultimate penalty of death.

After studying the loss of individual characters, the insurgent Indo-Nepalis are also at loss. Under GNLF they are fighting for independent state. Their argument is that inspite of their majority they are treated as minority. They have never been offered good jobs. Inspite of being educated, Gyan is deprived of the opportunity of job. Even fighting for the British Army and then for the Indian Army they are given low paid jobs, that the meagre pension hardly meets both the ends They try to subverts the government but fail to do so.

Thus, the theme of Loss is all pervading. In the context of theme, 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, people, their struggle and their conflicts, their dreams and their frustrations but also a mature understanding of life itself at various levels." (Ramachandra 19) It is present in the life of all the characters. It appears to govern the life of all characters. The novel describes a world where people are forgetting their cultural of heritage and are biased about caste, creed and religion. This leads to a world of agonies, pairs despair and desperation. In the age of globalization the world has become a global village, but humans are separated. The unity is lost, integration is lost – this loss is the fatal loss that people are inheriting.

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