



Impact of western culture in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*; a character study of the protagonist Biju

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Abstract

The dominance of western civilization over Indian culture is a lingering phenomenon for Indians. Kiran Desai, in her novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* portrays the characters that are the target of cultural dilemmas, which lead them towards isolation and identity crisis at the end. Biju stands for the young crazy men of the Third World who dream of going to West for money making; unflinchingly, they sacrifice their own culture and social conventions. Through Biju, Desai explores the pain of the immigrants. This study attempts to show how diasporic dislocation can contribute to the reinforcement of the national and cultural identity in the age of globalization.

Keywords: Kiran Desai's, protagonist, diasporic, dislocation, cultural

Introduction

The literature produced by diaspora writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, has proved immensely popular in recent English Literature. Writers who have diasporic experiences try to share their miscellaneous emotions in exiles with the readers through literature. Besides, they are equipped with bundles of memories and articulate an amalgam of global and national strands that embody real and imagined experience. Desai portrays in her works such characters as are dislocated in one way or another. Some characters are experiencing the pain of exile in America when few persons are enjoying the pleasure of being immigrants in the subcontinent. In both cases, they face identity crisis after a certain period in their life in exile. Desai competently explores these crises and the disorientation in the formation of cultural, national and linguistic identity. Both Western and Eastern immigrants go through the constant psychological endeavour to construct a new identity in a dislocated place whether in America or in India.

Kiran Desai, who was born in 1971, lived in Delhi until she was 14, and then spent a year in England, before her family moved to the USA. She completed her education in USA. Desai reflects on her experiences in her journey from India to USA in her famous novel, *About The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), she says, "The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys (of her grandparents) as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is this I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance." Her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), won her the Betty Trask Award as one of the best novels by a citizen of the Commonwealth of Nations under the age of 35. *The Inheritance of Loss*, her second novel, won the Man Booker Prize in 2006, and the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award. It deals with a number of present-day issues such as economic inequality and poverty, fundamentalism and

terrorist violence, but the major emphasis is on mobility and migration, on dislocation and the subsequent loss of background, of history and of family - changes that are brought out by craze for western values, manners, language and lifestyle: impact of modernization, consumerism, and deep rooted reaction to indigenous values which failed to sustain life.

Desai explores the contemporary international issues like immigration, westernization, cultural conflict, class-discrimination, race, colonialism, post colonialism, exile, alienation, fundamentalism, globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, and terrorist-violence etc. She wonderfully attempts to handle the cause of suffering of the modern society. Most of the time, she merges cultural environments to create a complex and confusing setting for her characters. They hold on to a questionable or mistaken identity and are unable to define them in another, more positive way. They are always in a quest to overcome the feeling of vacuum which is resulting from diasporic dislocation. Throughout the novel, it is conveyed that experiences in exile always welcome multi levelled losses in life. Though the title of the novel connotes a vacuum feeling with the word "loss", but the novel ends with the glimpse of hope. This study attempts to show how diasporic dislocation can contribute to the reinforcement of the national and cultural identity in the age of globalization in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* with special emphasis on the character study of the protagonist Biju.

In the beginning, the house of a retired judge is robbed by members of a separatist Nepali insurgent group — the GNLF (Gorkha National Liberation Front). Throughout the novel, the book cuts back and forth between the story of Sai, an orphan who lives with the judge — her grandfather — and his cook; the story of the cook's son Biju, who just moved to America; and the story of the judge himself and his initial trip to England to go to law school in 1969. In two parallel strands,

the narrative follows Sai's life in Kalimpong and that of the cook's son, Biju, who has been sent to America by his father. Biju is an illegal immigrant in New York. These sections of the novel that deal with Biju's life in New York are the most powerful - and the most acutely observed.

Biju is a less educated teenage boy from a poor family. His father is a cook who wants to see his son in the most prosperous part in the world, the United States of America. In order to gain cultural and material prosperity, and fight the inferiority complex, he fixed up his son, Biju's mind to migrate America. Biju's journey to America is story of unexpected humiliation. At the Embassy, Biju joins a crowd of Indians scrambling to reach the visa counter at the United States. After arriving at New York Biju's life faces a series of challenges. He just enters the alienated world as a migrant, as an exile. His dream of a secure future is defeated by the harsh reality.

Biju's daily life in America reflects his insight of being an exile. He begins to think himself as an unexpected individual. The protagonist Biju confronts a struggle to achieve a stable identity but at the same time faces so many cultural conflicts. His situation is more pathetic as he is an illegal immigrant unlike the Judge. He leads a wretched life and he is even exploited by his Indian employer Harish-Harry, owner of the Gandhi Café. He is deprived of his basic rights as a worker.

The author outlines the themes of dislocation, nostalgia, yearning for home, and longing for identity through the character of Biju who dreams of the greener life and of course, the Green Card in the US. While performing a series of low-paying menial restaurant jobs, Biju finds it impossible to gain entrance to American social networks or to adjust to American culture. He sends letters home to his father, which the cook interprets as evidence of his son's great success, and shows to all of his neighbours, relatives, and friends. Biju is miserable in the US, as he struggles to navigate American racism. He suffers the misunderstandings and abuse of his American employers, one of whom even buys him soap and deodorant to cover up his unpleasant "smell."

He gets a fairly well-paying job at an upper-class steak house in New York, and considers the irony of the wealthy Indian customers eating beef, saying, "I'll have the steak," they say with a practiced nonchalance, with an ease like a signature that's a thoughtless scribble that you know has been practiced page after page". Biju tries to justify his own involvement in the restaurant by thinking, "Those who could see the difference between a holy cow and an unholy cow would win. Those who couldn't see it would lose" — symbolizing his need to accept and work within the American cultural system in order to reap its financial rewards." Still, he is guilt-stricken, thinking, "One should not give up one's religion, the principles of one's parents and their parents before them. No, no matter what. You had to live according to something. You had to find your dignity". During this internal debate, "Biju thought of Saeed who still refused to eat a pig, 'they dirty, man, they messy. First I am Muslim, then I am Zanzibar, then I will BE American". Saeed can survive and thrive in America, even finding an American woman who marries him so that he can get a green card, while maintaining his own cultural integrity. Biju finally decides that he cannot work in a restaurant that cooks beef, and finds a job in a Hindu-run

Indian restaurant; this job is relatively pleasant, aside from the fact that he earns low wages and has to sleep in the kitchen. Here, though, he falls in the kitchen and hurts his leg, and his employer will not pay his medical bills.

Biju falls for the charms of Saeed, whom he finds, not "drowning, butbobbing with the tides", who is far more successful in adapting to America than Biju is, and Biju wants to learn from him and, perhaps, attract some of his good luck. Saeed is from Zanzibar and both black and a Muslim — both are characteristics that had, in the past, made Biju distrust someone. He used to refer to Muslims as "pigs, pigs, sons of pigs". When he was a child, the people in Biju's village said of black men that "in their own country they live like monkeys in the trees. They come to India and become men". This early information continues to influence Biju's perception of black people, until he meets Saeed, who challenges his preconceptions. Biju is confused by the contradictions between his own racist expectations of Africans and Muslims and the reality of Saeed's character, as Saeed is well-respected, kind, strong, and resourceful.

What transforms Biju into a more mature, secure person is his friendship with Saeed, at first motivated by latter's charismatic personality, and as much propelled by former's loneliness. While he is black and Muslim, Saeed's grandmother is Indian, and early on in their meeting Saeed and Biju ate Indian foods like "samosas and chapattis, jalebis, pila rice," while Saeed and his friends sang Bollywood songs and entertained Biju with Indian dance. While Biju feels proud of his country, it is Saeed's friendship that shows him that he should expect to be respected and accepted, not harassed or reviled because of his ethnicity.

When Biju faces his first real test in America, it is the confidence instilled by Saeed that comes to his help. Kiran Desai tries to unravel the myths about the American dream, much touted by the Indian mind. When Biju expresses his determination to leave the US after he was thoroughly disillusioned, Mr. Kakkar tries to intervene saying that Biju is making a big mistake by going to India, where he is going to be treated as a servant. According to him, America is always like a king and those who live in America are kingly whereas all others who are living on the other side of the planet are like servants to that king. In a very strong expression, Mr. Kakkar tells Biju, "America is in the process of buying up the world. Go back, you'll find they own the business".

Biju hears about the violence but cannot reach his father — he finally decides, against all of his friends' advice, to return to India and his father with his savings. Due to insurgency, he pays for a ride with the GNLFF, but they rob him of all of his family's gifts, his entire savings, and even his clothes. He arrives at his father's house with nothing but a stolen women's bathrobe, but his father is still elated to see him. It is the breaking up of the American dream and also the breaking up of the hallucinations about India.

Conclusion

The novel admirably throws light on the split personalities of the diasporians, who are pulled forward and backward by the adopted culture, and then, by the native culture. What they become in the process is a disillusioned lot. Biju, the protagonist of this novel, is a symbol of the breaking apart of

the dream that America is for a majority of Indians. His return to India to is marked with his robbing of everything that he had earned. He is brought home, in bare clothes, in which he had left this country. The fate comes full circle. He has seen the world, but it has only impoverished his basic stock. At the end of the novel, Biju knows he belongs to the country whose hold he has doubted. In giving up what might be gained, both Sai and the cook's son, Biju, inherit loss, but that loss will prove a lasting gain of illuminating experience. All the characters in *Inheritance of Loss* long for identity, for love and acceptance in an alien land. But they hardly are able to locate where they belong to since postcolonial hybridity is, in the words of Radhakrishnan, “a frustrating search for constituency and a legitimate political identity. They have developed a sense of loss, though in different degrees. The characters are all victims of the so called postcolonial dilemmas. However, eventually it is in Biju that the reader finds some hope of ‘true’ happiness in his supposedly reunion with his father.

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