

Multicultural Essence in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract. This paper will deal with Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* from multicultural perspectives as reflected in the novel. Multiculturalism is the by-product of globalization and colonialism. multiculturalism is a society at ease with the rich tapestry of human life and the desire amongst people to express their own identity in the manner they see as fit. Such ideologies or policies vary widely, including country to country. Desai, creates a diverse array of characters in the book who grapple with their historical duties and cultural heritages. The novel will analyzed for collisions of cultural influences. Through *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai creates a mirror that reflects the intricate ways in which historical, political, and cultural forces continue to shape and mould the human experience.

Keywords : Multiculturalism; hybridity; globalisation; immigrants; Loneliness.

Indian English Literature pertains to the body of work by writers from India, who pen strictly in the English language and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous regional and indigenous language of India. English literature in India is also intimately linked with the works of associates of the Indian Diaspora. Among other writers, Kiran Desai is one of the most renowned writers in the Indian English Literature. With Kiran Desai, a literary tradition is reborn. One of the major themes in the novel is multiculturalism. Multiculturalism relates to communities containing multiple cultures. The term is used in two broad ways, either descriptively or normatively. As a descriptive term it usually refers to the simple fact of cultural diversity. It is generally applied to the demographic make-up of a specific place, sometimes at the organizational level, eg: school, businesses, cities, or nations. *The Inheritance of Loss* heralds Kiran Desai as one of the most insightful novelists. With this gem of a novel (a prodigious feat of almost eight years) Kiran Desai has joined the ranks of literary stars like Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy, to name a few. The early and enormous success bestowed upon her caught the glaze of readers, scholars and critics, she

was both exalted and denigrated in their reviews and critical assessment. The varied response to her works and her instant success inevitably arouses interest and curiosity. *The Inheritance of Loss* weaves several interconnected stories into a composite whole. The stories are about the losses incurred by a group of uprooted and isolated characters. These characters trek across vast expanses of geography, and when they do nestle in niches in the lush mountains of northeastern India at the foot of the majestic Kanchenjunga, they remain as alien, and 'other' as temporary migrants, not only to their external surroundings but most troublingly to themselves.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai is speaking of our inheritance as products of colonization and immigration. The story revolves around five main characters, each grappling with their cultural heritage and the profound impact of historical, political, and cultural legacies on their lives. The central character is Biju, the son of the cook at the house of The Judge, Jemubhai Patel. Biju leaves his home in the Indian Himalayas in search of possibilities in the United States because he longs for a better life. He encounters loneliness, exploitation, and the battle to maintain his cultural identity in the fast-paced metropolitan atmosphere, making life as an immigrant in New York City difficult. In this regard, Y. K. Kumari underlines that "As an illegal immigrant, Biju is always haunted by the fear that he might be detected by the American cops at any moment... A sense of guilt pursues them, and it leaves them no room for peace of mind" (Kumari, 47).

Most of Desai's characters, too, display a constant obsession with western thought. Jemubhai Patel, a living artifact of colonialism, his granddaughter Sai, middle class and westernized, a foreigner in ways to her own culture and country of origin. She is the English speaking, boarding school abandoned offspring of a scientist couple, both educated with an eye to the West, who subsequently die in Moscow, leaving her in the care of a hateful grandfather. Two middle class Anglophilic women, Lola and Noni, who condemn Naipaul for suffering from colonial neurosis, whereas Lola's own clothesline sags under a load of Marks and Spencer panties. Uncle Potty and Father Booty, the naive and ridiculed cook, his immigrant son Biiu, and the confused and craven Gorkha- Gyan, together complete the group of uprooted and isolated characters in this novel. *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with what it means to live in a post-colonial context— to live between eastern and western impact, which are

significantly opposing worlds in many aspects. Autocratic treatment of human beings on nature imposed by post-colonial trends has resulted in loss of humane feelings in human relations. The understanding of significant natural aspects reveals the affinities lost as symbolised by the title to the readers to establish, if it was a loss or a gain inherited.

The Inheritance of Loss can be interpreted through the new wave of ecocriticism which recounts all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint. As a very intelligent writer and careful observer of human attitude and behaviour, Kiran Desai writes on many sensational issues in her novel. Desai masterfully explores the problems of migration, the conflict of tradition and modernity between generations of a single family in conjunction with the environment around. Desai in her novel creates characters from different backgrounds that are exiles at home as well as abroad. Globalisation has disintegrated the strictly drawn boundaries between nations and cultures. Desai uses extended flashbacks to life in Kalimpong and also through Biju the life of the underdog in the U.S. The characters in the novel have their own feelings toward the living environment that controls their existence. They also have their own ways to face the difficulties created by racist environment. Chronotype of time is expressed in nature's cycle with the cook's expectation of seeing his son. Jemubhai Patel, the judge is the sad symbol of India's colonial history. He is a displaced person who remains Anglicised carrying the burden of being an Indian by birth. The novel opens with a poetic description of a serene landscape in the NorthEastern Himalayas to the residents of Cho-Oyu. Nature as a motif once again finds its place in *The Inheritance of Loss* where Jemu voices out the plight common to all immigrants. The Judge developed Anglophilia and felt embarrassed in England and eventually he saw nothing of the English countryside when he has finished his studies. He subjected his wife to torture as a counter to his dehumanisation in England. Animal symbolism is used as a metaphor in the novel to indicate that in nature all things are equal and all have an equal impact on one another. Mutt, his dog means a mix-breed dog and while his dog is actually a pure-breed. This suggests the life of the Judge with mixed cultural background. Sai and Gyan exemplify symbolic figures that undergo purgation, forever criticising and resisting. Sai is a new representation of the grandfather's image with a broader outlook. She has the English accent and manners, a westernised Indian brought up by English nuns. She is educated in a Christian convent in Dehradun. She

experiences hybridity by reading Lochinvar and Tagore. The awareness of Sai entering a different space away from the modernised world into a post-colonial, native landscape is revealed finely in these lines where the nun asks Sai about what she thinks about God sulking her into this hell of horror of native struggle.

Sai considers the different contexts and different people she encounters. She is the real 'universal' as her name 'Sai' connotes in the Indian context and she decides to explore the world towards the end with a hope that one day Gyan too will return back to her as she felt that relations really meant something. Universality symbolised by Sai and knowledge symbolised by Gyan should combine to let mankind get out of the conflicts and emptiness, so characteristic of modern life. The character of Gyan is deeply engaged in the struggle for independence. As a nationalist, Gyan embraces the ideals of freedom and sovereignty. Desai portrays his commitment to the movement, stating, "It was a masculine atmosphere and Gyan felt a moment of shame remembering his tea parties with Sai on the veranda... It suddenly seemed against the requirement of his adulthood. He voiced an adamant opinion that the Gorkha movement take the harshest route possible" (*The Inheritance of Loss*, 177). There is a hope with Sai, the universal and with Gyan, knowledge will reach frustrated modern individuals to look at nature and derive strength. Biju, the son of the cook is the first to understand simple village life and nature as motherly and protective as he longs for it. Although illiterate he understands quite quickly, the importance of holding on to one's culture, values and nature than other characters. What enables multicultural and transnational narrative to function with solution is an understanding of the ecosystems and human social structures, which are subject to the same ethical imperatives world over. E. Jackson asserts that, "The Inheritance of Loss can be read as a critique of interrelated historical processes that, as its title suggests, generate a heritage of loss for each successive generation" (Jackson, 42).

Desai presents a broader interpretation of globalisation in the present age as a direct consequence of modernity, which was an impact made by colonialism. She mocks at the remains of colonialism and imperialistic fervour, which was imposed upon Indian society a Western capitalistic rule. Her struggle becomes evident in the depiction of history and environment around her. She is left alone and the ruins she observes represent her condition. They symbolise the ruins of the exquisite Indian

past before the colonial hangover. She could see an old hunting lodge from their bungalow that dated to the Mughal emperor Jehangir and she could identify with the craftsman who felt nostalgia and saw beauty in carving the iris, which even the Mughals, could appreciate with a soft heart. All the people affected by colonialism, globalization, exacerbated traditional values, nationalism and multiculturalism suffers a loss that does not seem to go away and is handed down from generation to generation.

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