

**ALIENATION WITHIN THE HOME: THE PREDICAMENT OF
MINORITY ASSIMILATION IN KIRAN DESAI'S THE INHERITANCE
OF LOSS**

Arun Singh
Research Scholar
Deptt. of English
University of Rajasthan
Jaipur

The forms of social and cultural discourse known as 'minority discourse' have emerged as a backlash against postcolonial subalternisation and neocolonial hegemony. A minority group—women, 'lower' castes and classes and ethnic minorities—lives as an 'other' within a postcolonial cultural gamut. In the wake of 'decolonisation', the dominant groups of society and culture came into power and they replaced the former colonial power with some sophisticated ideologies and exploitative mechanisms – to be known as 'neocolonialism' in critical spheres. Thus, it can be argued that there is not any end to the provenance of minorities and they exist perennially in one or other form.

Minority literature is a foray into a controversial field of study. It is an attempt to introduce the complicated issues involving identity crisis on an ethnic level. It poses a question as why minorities subsist mere as minorities (in a pejorative sense) and why they do not become majorities. Such a counter- discourse exposes the veneer of postcolonial idealistic discourse, expostulating the cultural homogenization and marginalization in post-Independence phase of postcolonial nation-states. Postcolonial subalternisation is a process of disempowering and suppressing the subordinate classes and minority sections.

In her Booker awardee novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Kiran Desai addresses the crux of minority assimilation regarding the Gorkha people of north-east india. The novel peers into the dislocation of some characters and elaborates their alienation within their home (nation). There are some westernized characters who are native diasporans and live in Kalimpong (the setting of the novel) estranged from their roots. Kalimpong is a hilly area situated in the north-eastern part of India. From the historical perspective, the novel renders a fictional account of the Gorkha insurgency of the mid-1980s in the north-east.

There is a clash between two classes of society in the novel. A minority lives with its rigid ethnic norms and fundamentalist proclivities. One group of this society is represented by some jumped-up westernized Indians including the judge and his granddaughter, Sai; the Bengali sisters, Lola and Noni; Uncle Potty and Father Booty, Mrs Sen and the Afgan princesses etc. And the other one is collectively represented by the Gorkha people of Kalimpong. Gyan, Sai's mathematics tutor belongs to this group. The Gorkha people are not content with the neocolonial exploitative system of Indian government as a 'nation'. They demand a separate nation-state to be known as Gorkhaland, as they proclaim that they are economically backward and very poor in comparison with the people of other parts of the nation. They argue that they are 'stateless' and 'constitutionally tortured', raising and insurgency for procuring their share. They raise a voice

against the postcolonial marginalization which they have been suffering since 1947 or even before it:

In our own country, the country we fight for, we are treated like slaves.... We are labourers working weather, thin as sticks as they sit fat in managers' houses with their fat wives, with their fat bank accounts and their children going abroad. Even their chairs are fat.... We must unite under the banner of GNLFF, the Gorkha National Liberation Front. We will build hospitals and schools. We will provide jobs for our sons. We will give dignity to our daughters carrying heavy loads, breaking stone on the roads. We will defend our homeland. This is where we are born, where our parents were born, where our grand- parents were born.... (Desai 159)

The economic lacuna induces this minority to protest, to wage a violence against the system. They are able to suffer deaths but not deprivation, destitution, alienation and dislocation anymore which they have been suffering for long. Originally, these people belong to Nepal but they have been living in the north-eastern states of India for centuries. They follow a Marxist agenda for the attainment of liberation, equality, progress and happiness. They deploy violence and bloodshed in their mode of resistance, for they do not have rational tactics to subvert their alienation and eradicate the subalternity. The feeling of 'ethnic chauvinism' dominates their propensity which has been instigated by uneven social structure. The idea of a sole Indian 'nation' is abhorrent to them. They do not believe in the 'imagined community' of the Indian nation-state. They militate against the cultural homogeneity with rigid ethnic traditions. In current context too, the Naxalite and Maoist movements in India are examples of such confrontational disparities.

The Nepali Gorkha community living in India has been treated as a minority (in pejorative sense) and some cultural theorists consider that a nation's identity is constructed on the premise of majority. India is known as 'Hindustan' due to the vast population of Hindus in India. Siddhartha Deb argues in his essay, *Fragments from a Folder* that the people of the north-east India have never been granted justice as the citizens of a secular nation. They "represent the most remarkable failure of that imagination in regard to India". (Jaleel 88)

Anderson defines nation as an 'imagined community' "regardless of the actual inequity and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately this is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (Imagined Communities, 7). But the case may not be applicable to the Gorkha insurgents, who do not imagine India as their own 'nation'. Their rigid ethnicity, bestirred by postcolonial hegemony and homogenization, weighs heavy upon the Anderson's thesis of 'nation'.

The west-lured characters in this novel maintain a standard life-style of upper-class people and this ostensible life-style proves to be repugnant to the men Gorkha National Liberation Front. Belonging to different parts of India they live in Kalimpong as outsiders. They do not celebrate Indian festivals; their day begins with Western breakfasts. Even they do not like to be called 'Indians'. The Euro-centric ideology dominates their mental set-up and showy life-style.

The colossal lacuna that persists between the life-style and cultural practices of these westernized Indians and the Gorkha people proves to be the bone of contention. The jumped-up characters suffer pilferage, affrontation, arrogation, ferocity and ostracism on their own property.

They are coerced into doing some contribution to the GNLf movement and if they do not make any, they are warned that they will be persecuted in terrible ways. During the violence they are prevented from walking outside their houses and can not avail commodities from the local shops owned by the Gorkha people.

The family history of Gyan renders the past of his community exposed. Owing to his ethnic prejudices he is never united with Sai. This ethnic identity suppresses his feelings for her. He realized that there is a prodigious gap between him and Sai. They belong to substantially different classes. Gyan nurtures dual emotions – one for Sai and the other for his community, his identity. A great inner conflict of realism and romance governs his tendencies. In his essay “*Imagi-nation*”: A Reading of Kiran Desai’s *Inheritance of Loss*, Jati Sanker Mondal observes in this regard:

The unfruitful, almost a one year stint of love between Sai and her science tutor Gyan is probably an escape and effort from confinement to dissolve the boundaries of caste and class But when they become conscious of the question of social scale, they locate the wide differences and ultimately their love collapses. Gorkhaland appears to Gyan as a pursuit of his identity formation and he joins in the movement. He constantly questions his identity and the identity of Sai. (Biswas 232)

He reviles Sai’s west-oriented propensity, habits and convent-oriented education. His vitriol is formed by the cultural fundamentalism reared by his community. He refers to the class distinction existing between them. His acrimonious feeling for the upper-class society comes out in this way as addressed to Sai. He accuses her of being a western ‘copycat’:

You are like slave, that’s what you are running after the West, embarrassing yourself. It’s because of people like you we never get anywhere. (Desai 163)

The judge is an epitome of alienated personality. His life is dominated by two factors: memory and silence. Most of the time, he racks over old ashes. Loneliness and morbidity force him to plunge in to the sea of nostalgia. His misanthropic proclivity turns him into a dour and lugubrious person. He is always in search of satisfaction, but he is unable to recognize the satisfying and consequently nothing seems to him to be satisfying. His affection is limited to his dog, Mutt. This is one of the absurdities of his life that he hates human being and adores a dog. He lives with his granddaughter Sai and the cook Pannalal. He has no love for them, not the least. The cook is only a machine to serve him tea and food, water to bathe and is an attendant to entertain his dog. “It was his (judge’s) habit to be a master and the cook’s to be a servant” (Desai 209). The seeds of his psychological alienation begin to sprout from the time of his stay in England for higher studies. An inner rancor for his own people makes a home in his heart and mind. “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”. (Desai 119)

Originally, the judge belongs to a Patidar family of a small village of Gujrat. He evolves nostalgia for his homeland and this memory of the past leads him to loneliness and ennui. The novelist employs ‘flashback’ technique in representing the judge’s real character. Subsequent to his return from England as an I.C.S., he comes to realize that “...he was a foreigner a foreigner – every bit of him screamed” (Desai 166-7). He develops an unnecessary malevolence for his uneducated and naïve wife. He traumatizes her ruthlessly and sends her to her father’s home

never to get her back. Even her face appears to be abominable to him. His repugnance for his wife knows no limits:

His hatred was its own creature; it rose and burned out, reappeared of its own accord and in her he sought only its justification, its perfection. In its purest moments he could imagine himself killing her. (Desai 305)

The judge does not feel any contrition for his deeds. He accuses the cook of the missing of the dog. He beats him mercilessly and has no sympathy for his plight and squalor. There is not any mutual rapport between both of them. The cook tolerates all the callous idiosyncrasies of his misanthropic master:

The judge and the cook had lived for years than they had with anyone else, practically in the same room, closer to each other than to any other human being and nothing, zero, no understanding. (Desai 313)

Frustration and vagaries overpower judge's sensibility. He lives in his inner world of thought often rapt in memories. He may be seen as dropping over his chess-board or pampering his dog. The loss inherited by him from his colonial education, he imposes upon his granddaughter. Shyamala A. Narayan puts forward that "the judge has deliberately cut himself off from society but people like Lola and Noni have just drifted in to this alienation" (Reddy 309).

The Bengali sisters Lola and Noni live their life with Western standard. They purchase clothes and other fashionable commodities from London. Lola is an Anglophile widow who likes England but hates America. This is a symbol of great prerogative for her that her daughter works for the BBC. The utopic vision she had nurtured with her husband is shattered by the arrogation of GNLFI insurgents. They intrude in to her property and begin to camp out there. The limits are crossed when she is affronted by the insurgents at her own property.

Father Booty's experience of sudden dislocation is the worst of all the characters. He is a Swiss immigrant living in Kalimpong, unfortunately "found to be residing in India illegally" (Desai 220). For 45 years he has been living in India and now he is questioned about his migration proof. He is a Christian and Christians are considered to be a minority in India. Subsequent to the photography incident he is ordered to leave India immediately within two weeks. The politics of national identity creates a chaos in his life. He regards himself more profoundly assimilated in India than an Indian national as "... He knew he was a foreigner but had lost the nation that he was anything but an Indian foreigner..." and "...had done much more for the development in the hills than any of the locals and without screaming or waving kukris, Father Booty was to be sacrificed" (Desai 223).

On being found that he is an illegal immigrant in India, he is declared to be "...a threat to [our] national security" (221). This is the absurdity of the politics of nationalism that the Gorkha people, who spread chaos and produce ferocity all over the area, are not a threat to the national security and a man who has been residing peacefully in that territory for about half a century turns to be a threat to the nation.

Sai, the judge's granddaughter, is forced to perpetuate the loss of location and dilemma of assimilation which the judge has been cherishing from his stay in England. She has to spend her life "...in the lack not the contentment" (Desai 2). She evolves some romantic ambitions for Gyan, but they remain unfulfilled. There are also some contemporary uncertain historical conditions which preclude in to their relationship.

Bose, the only friend of the judge, is still haunted and stupefied by the defunct colonial prejudices. He wished that things would change after the Independence in India; though "... it was a different age with different rules, but it had turned out to be only different version of the same old" (Desai 204).

Bose's predicament is the unequal pension— that he does not get a pension equal to the English I.C.S. for he belongs to a nation whose system is 'still colonial'. He has a deep-rooted rancour for the British colonial system and moreover for its ingrained impact on post-colonial India.

The character who belongs to none of these groups is the poor cook. He belongs to the lower-class stratum of society. He is destined to put up with the travesties of the judge and his dog. He lives with the judge because he is a poor man and the morbid master exploits him callously. His son Biju, an illegal immigrant in the USA is the only hope of his life. Originally, he belongs to Uttar Pradesh and he is always nostalgic about his homeland. He is a doubly-maltreated subaltern. He suffers the affrontation and persecution imposed by the judge and also the occasional ordeals aroused by the Gorkha insurgents.

Apropos of the motif of this paper, Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) presents some parallel aspects to be compared with that of Kiran Desai's chef-doeuvre. The people of Morichjhapi live there as its 'resettled' inhabitants. Originally they belong to Bangladesh and come to Morichjhapi as refugee. These people are a minority in the Sunderbans area which is also known as 'tide country'. These Dalit people have been exploited by Muslim and Hindu majorities in Bangaledesh, therefore they plan to resettle in Morichjhapi. But "... the government announced that all movement in and out of Morichjhapi was banned under the provisions of the Forest Preservation Act. What was more, Section 144, the law used to quell civil disturbances was imposed on the whole area: this meant it was a criminal offence for five people or more to gather in one place" (Ghosh 252).

Kusum poses a humanitarian crux before Nirmal with the following argument:

As I thought of these things it seemed to me that this whole world has become a place of animals and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No human being could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil (Ghosh 261-62).

The people of Morichjhapi island are victims of postcolonial subalternisation in the 'Indian' nation as they are a Dalit minority. Amitav Ghosh has attempted to divulge the collapse of postcolonial nationalistic ideal. The seminal difference between the resistance method of the Ghorkha people and the people of Morichjhapi is that the Gorkha insurgents deploy violence as their main tool, but the people of Morichjhapi do not use violence in order to resist the suppression, they are silent sufferers.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 1991. Print.
- Deb, Siddhartha. "Fragments from a Folder." In *People Unlike Us: The India That is Invisible*. Eds. Muzamil Jaleel et al. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2001. 75-100. Print.
- Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. London: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. London: Harper Collins, 2004. Print.
- Mondal, Jati Sankar. "“Imagi-nation”": A Reading of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*". In *Indian English Fiction: A Reader*. Edr. Sarbojit Biswas. Kolkata: Booksway, 2009. 229-234. Print.
- Narayan, Shyamala A. "India and the U.S.A. in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*". In *Aspects of Contemporary World Literature*. Edr. P. Bayapa Reddy. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2008. 303-319. Print.