

THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS: AN INEXORABLE PAST

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Kiran Desai is one of the eminent novelists of Indian Diaspora. Her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* won Man Booker Prize in 2006. The novel focuses primarily on Indian culture and how it has both integrated with and influenced Western culture. The result of cultural clash is clear in the fiction. We see that the two different cultures coincide peacefully without dominating the other. It is clearly visible that the individuals are the creation of their environment. All the characters in the novel are suffering from the problems of their past. Their past dominates on their present. They are unable to come out from the nostalgia of their past. When each of the characters in the novel encounters a foreign culture, their experiences vary, but are mainly negative, which is sadly quite realistic. Every experience shows again that the past identity carries with them will always influence their view of others. It clearly states that the culture should not mix completely with the language, though culture and language both are interconnected.

“Kiran Desai is a terrific writer,” reiterated Salman Rushdie in her praise. The commendation uttered is true to the letter in the realm of Indian English Literature. She won the Man Booker Prize for the fiction *The Inheritance of Loss* inheriting the lost legacy of her mother Anita Desai. Her mother wrote a number of fictions and secured a reputed place in the galaxy of noted novelists but she could not win Man Booker Prize for any of her novel so far. The deed unexecuted by Anita Desai was executed by her daughter Kiran Desai winning the prestigious prize. Really, she retained the lost dignity and hope. She proved her mettle that she could do what could not be done by her mother. Kiran Desai’s past was pathetic, but after *The Inheritance of Loss*, the present with future turned golden and full of hopes and happiness. Kiran’s *The Inheritance of Loss* is a multifaceted novel which revolves round the essence of race, ethnicity and cultural identity. It chiefly focuses on integration, assimilation, influence and bifurcation between Indian culture and Western one. There is a great confrontation of different societies creating trepidation and resentment in the novel. It is unambiguous that the two cultures always coincide serenely, but without dominating the other.

The novel illustrates the clash of two absolute cultures and its consequences. It is fact that world is replete with the thoughts of prejudices and people are treated and separated differently due the difference in class, culture and race. It is set between two main places: Kalimpong, India and New York City. Though the novel is set principally during 1980s, it recurrently weaves in and out of a variety of time frames as far back as the 1940s. The one character is retired Judge who lives with his granddaughter Sai in a crumbling old Scottish mansion named Cho Oyu during crucial political period in the terrain region of Kalimpong. Mutt, Judge’s beloved dog,

accompanies him and his faithful cook was the source of interaction. Desai has clearly stated that people are the product of environment. The society plays a vital role in the development and mould of the character in any human being and so is happening in the novel.

Biju, the cook's son, is frantically struggling to survive in New York as an illegal immigrant. He does not have green card to stay in the city. He is trying to hide identity by changing his job from one place to another. It suggests that Biju is the victim of helplessness and need. He does the illegal work to stay in the foreign city due to being the slave of situation. The society is accountable to make him reach at such place.

Globalization today brings culture together, encouraging ideas and traditions from one culture to mould and unify with others. Though there are a number of aspects of this mixing that are positive, it can also stir up hatreds, causing new obstacles and resentments. The characters the Judge, Sai, Gyan(Sai's boyfriend), Noni and Lola(Sai's tutors) and Biju all have experiences where their identity comes in contact with a foreign culture. Unfortunately, each of these experiences results in a strong negative reaction, illuminating the division between cultures that still exists today. She has presented the premise of cultural differences metaphorically by geography and atmosphere of the region. She introduces the vital character of Kalimpong at the commencement of the novel. Kalimpong is the border part of northern India below the Himalayas. Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Assam and Bangladesh are just a few of the other countries that meet in this diverse environment. Kalimpong is a rural region of India which is almost surrounded by constant rain and fog. Desai portrays:

All day, the colors had been those of dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains possessed of ocean shadows and depths. Briefly visible above the vapour, Kanchenjunga was a far peak whittled out of rice, gathering the last of the light, a plume of snow blown high by the storms at its summit.(1)

She again describes the beauty of the mountain:

How the mist slowly invades Kalimpong and replaced everything with itself, solid objects with shadow, and nothing remained that did not seem molded from or inspired by it.(2)

The forest was aged and broad at the edge of the lawn; the bamboo thickets rose thirty feet into the darkness; the trees were moss-slung giants, bunioned and misshapen, tentacle with the roots of orchids. The mist fills the air and intertwines everything it touches, but at the same time it obscures objects and people, separating everything as well. People, in the same way, are always connected by being human, by simply having the same desires and needs all people share. However, people are constantly separated by the differences among them such as culture, race, ethnic identity, and class. In modern age, due to the advancement in technology of audio-visual, different cultures are continually confronted with one another.

When separate cultures congregate sometimes they basically bounce off each other, but often they begin to amalgamate even though this may be unconsciously done. There are no longer many examples of accurately chaste cultures that have not adopted at least some foreign ideas and traditions. Sai and the Judge, for example, without more ado, think of American films and actors instead of popular Bollywood movies. The cook has a fetish for modern western appliances. Sai speaks English as her first language instead of a more indigenous Indian language. The mist, therefore, also represents this idea of globalization and integration among different people all over the world that has blurred the division between cultures.

Though the novel has a number of characters, yet it is concentrated on a central theme, instead of a central character. One of the characters is Jemubhai Patel, the Judge, who is easing his loss from the past incidents in the present time and is trying to make his future peaceful and sublime. He was born in a peasant family and was living at the village-like outskirts of pilphit. While his father kept procuring counterfeit witnesses in the court, thus helping the distortion of the very basic and significant institution of his own nation, he was himself being imperceptibly indoctrinated by the supposedly philanthropic mission school which perhaps readied him for the use of the imperial machinery of the Raj. Such English education combined with the compelling presence of haughty and smug Raj administration somehow proved a unblemished combination which moulded him into a dislocated alien unable to connect with anything native and Indian and more than willing to cross over the English rank and file. His stay in England during 1940s was one of the extreme loneliness and humiliation where 'he retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man and it crushed him into a shadow' (45). In England nobody was to accompany him- no real friends, no one to help, no one to support, he was helplessly alone. He was hated by Englishmen, so he became so introvert that he despised himself, his skin and anything that made him Indian. He tried to whistle obsessively and sprinkled powder to glaze his face complexion. The Judge also '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' (131)

The Western education transformed him completely which caused him so much pain and suffering. In the obsession of English education, he tried to become as English as possible, and hated anything Indian. When Jemubhai went to clear the ICS exam, he never opened himself up to the human world; instead like a dead bud, withered and died unknown, unacknowledged and unheeded. The moment he mounted the ship, he had conquered and won over and like a trophy went to the English. The chasm between him and his family suddenly became monstrously large:

Jemubhai looked at his father, a barely educated man venturing where he should not be, and the love in Jemubhai's heart mingled with pity, and pity with shame. His father felt his own hand rise and cover his mouth: he had failed his son. (37)

Here it is crystal clear that Jemu's lopsided education turned his mind unsympathetic and disdainful. His father's illiteracy appears to him piteous and shameful as if it were the only thing required to judge a man. Even after returning India, the Judge despised his wife. He was extremely offensive towards his wife. He violently rapes her after she steals his precious powder puff 'to teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned' (186). Ultimately he sent his wife Nimi back to her family where she gives birth to a daughter before she commits suicide. He is neither European nor Indian and becomes an immigrant within himself. So the Judge experience with the English is too much harsh which shows how extremely destructive the clash between cultures can be.

Sai is the haunting character in the novel. She is the granddaughter of the Judge. She has been schooled in Western style, so she has the standard of living in English culture. But she was sent to live with the Judge after her parents died in an accident when she was only seven years old. She had been living with the Judge in bicultural household. Sai's experiences with her tutor, Gyan, represent the sweet and sour aspect of mixing people. Sai and Gyan both are Indian, but they belong to different cultural background. She was from upper-middle class family while he

was from a minority group in India. Both speak different languages having myriad differences in the standard of living, eating, behaving and education. She was taking keen interest in her study slowly. She reads enthusiastically and this stimulates her thinking and imagination:

She found they affected her so much she could often hardly read the accompanying words- the feeling they created was so exquisite, the desire so painful. She remembered her parents, her father's hope of space travel. She studied the photographs taken via satellite of a storm blowing a red cloud off the sun's surface, felt a terrible desire for the father she did not know, and imagined that she, too, must surely have within her the same urge for something beyond the ordinary. Cho Oyu and the Judge's habits seemed curtailments to her then (69).

She was also advised time to time by her teacher Noni to get grand success. She sometimes narrated her own experience of her school days, so that she might learn any lesson. She advises:

If you get a chance in life, take it. Look at me, I should have thought about the future when I was young. Instead, only when it was too late did I realize what I should have done long ago. I used to dream about becoming an archaeologist. I'd go to the British Council and look at the books on King Tutankhamen.... But my parents were not the kind to understand, you know, my father was the old-fashioned type, a man brought up and educated only to give orders.... You must do it on your own, Sai. (69)

Sai falls in love with Gyan, her tutor and she behaves in an uninhibited manner in this relationship. There was partly difference in their opinion and connection. Sai and Gyan could not understand each other due to different educational and social background. So Sai thinks rationally and comprehensibly over the entire problem:

What on earth was wrong with an excuse for a party? After all, one could then logically continue the argument and make a case against speaking English, as well, or eating a party at the Hasty Tasty- all matters against which Gyan could hardly defend himself. She spent some time developing her thoughts against his to show up all the cracks. (175)

The thoughts produced in her mind were matured and balanced in comparison to Gyan's thoughts despite age difference. Angered by the untruthful and derogatory portrayal of India and a discriminatory attitude towards Indians in the writings of authors of English origin, she thinks and produces and produces reasons coherently:

A rush of anger surprised her. It was unwise to read old books; the fury they ignited wasn't old; it was new. If she couldn't get the pompous fart himself, she wanted to search out the descendants of H. Hardless and stab the life out of them. But the child shouldn't be blamed for a father's crime; she tried to reason with herself, then. But should the child therefore also enjoy the father's illicit gain? (199)

Gyan deserted Sai because soon Gyan literally gets caught up in the movement, swept along by the crowd in the Kalimpong market. She wished to go and look for him to tell him the feelings of her heart. She thinks:

And how grown-up are you? Too scared even to come for tuition because you know you've behaved nastily and you're probably just sitting waiting

for your mummy to arrange your marriage. Low-class family, uncultured, arranged-marriage types... they'll find you a silly fool to marry and you'll be delighted all your life to have a dummy.(261)

This separation helps Sai to grow and understand life better. She becomes conscious of the existence of more than one point of view. She also realizes that it is neither possible nor desirable to be so self-centred that one fails to understand and accommodate others:

Her crying, enough for all the sadness in the world, was only for herself. Life wasn't single in its purpose... or even in its direction.... The simplicity of what she'd been taught wouldn't hold. Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it. (322-23)

Just as Nimi was the representation of an idea larger than herself for the Judge, Sai also becomes the embodiment of colonialism and racism for Gyan. However the Judge saw Nimi as part of the 'thieving ignorant' (184) Indian class, while Gyan sees Sai as part of the upper Westernized Indian class. Gyan and Sai's relationship and eventually falling out show what often happens between cultures. Instead of looking at the individual, people are lumped together in groups and individuals are blamed for things that they themselves are not directly involved with. Neither Sai nor Gyan needed much provocation to unleash these cruel insults. Firstly, they both should have glanced at their different cultures, but even they cannot escape their history and identity.

Biju is the protagonist in the novel. He belongs to a poor family. His father is a cook at Jemubhai's home. Despite earning from dawn to dusk, they could not save money for their rainy day. They have hard days in India. So Biju's father sent him to America on a tourist visa, but the intention was different. Biju was sent to earn money to improve his father's economic condition. He stayed there illegally. In New York, he finds himself in a strange world, a world where there was no sympathy, no fellows, no one to encourage. He passes his days changing jobs, bearing pathetic condition, and attempting to dodge the immigration authorities of the United States. Since he has stayed there illegally, he is forced to work on a very low wages. He experiences extreme servitude to his employers. He has fed up his illegal life there. He is now unable to bear the mean behaviour of his employers. At one point he becomes so much frustrated from his life that he makes a pathetic request to his present employer, Harish-Harry to sponsor him for a green card:

Without us living like pigs, said Biju, what business do you have? This is how you make your money, paying us nothing because you know we can't do anything, making us work day and night because we are illegal. Why don't you sponsor us for our green cards? (188)

Biju is desperate to procure green card to return home. He is crying for India and its soothing familiarity. America has generated a profound chasm in him. When Biju telephones his father in India, his memory turns live about the atmosphere in Kalimpong where his father resides:

He can feel the pulse of the forest, smell the humid air, the green-black lushness; he could imagine all its different textures, the plumage of banana, the stark spear of the cactus, and the delicate gestures of ferns.... (230)

Romanticizing one's native land has a place so long as it does not paralyze one's capacity to develop new bonds within one's adopted homeland. Biju recreates his home through bitter sweet reminiscences of his village:

The village was buried in silver grasses that were taller than a man and made a sound, *shu shuuuu, shu shuuu*, as the wind turned them this way and that. Down a dry gully through the grasses, you reached a tributary of the Jamuna where you could watch men travelling downstream on inflated buffalo skins... at this shallow place, Biju and his grandmother would cross on market trips into town and back, his grandmother with her sari tucked up, sometimes a sack of rice on her head. Fishing eagles hovered above the water.... A hermit also lived on this bank, positioned like a stork.... On Diwali the holy man lit lamps and put them in the branches of the *peepul* tree and sent them down the river on rafts with marigolds- how beautiful the sight of those lights bobbing in the young dark.(102-3)

On the contrary, the cook mistakenly imagines that Biju is earning a lot of money which will give me every comfy and facility. But the reality is that Biju is struggling to remain even alive being an illegal immigrant. His existence in America is rather a constant struggle to stay ahead of the immigration authorities, to escape being arrested. Biju was not only in the queue of illegal immigrant working in the hotel, his so many friends were also the same? So for the time being, he consoles himself on his illegality. Biju learns soon enough that 'you lived intensely with others, only to have them disappear overnight, since the shadow class was condemned to movement. The men left for other jobs, towns, got deported, returned home, changed names' (102).

He has a weird experience of waiting on tables and sleeping in dirty, mice-infested New York basements. He dreams to go home to see his father because he experiences that many 'lived and died illegal in America and never saw their families, not for ten years, twenty, thirty, never again.'(99) On the one hand, Biju is exploited by his employers on his undocumented status. On the other hand, his neighbours force him to reconsider his beloved country's relationship with the wider world. When he was working in hotel, Biju has interaction with the people of diverse cultural backdrop. The following quotation will point out the common anger against the Indians in different parts of the world:

In Tanzania, if they could, they would throw them out like they did in Uganda.

In Madagascar, if they could, they would throw them out.

In Nigeria, if they could, they would throw them out.

In Fiji, if they could, they would throw them out.

In China, they hate them.

In Hong Kong

In Germany

In Italy

In Japan

In Guam

In Singapore

Burma

South Africa

They don't like them.

In Guadeloupe- they love us there?

No. (77)

So from every corner, Biju does not have affable environment to diminish the soreness of severance from everything he held dear. During the revival period, the pressure to get green card causes Biju so much stress that he ‘vomits and cannot sleep’ (190). His father continues to send him letters telling him to help others who are on their way from Kalimpong. Biju cries when the letters arrive. The mounting pressure causes him to grind his teeth in his sleep, and in the long run, he cracks his tooth.

Having had enough, Biju decides to return home. He is matchless among the immigrant characters because unlike Saeed, a Pakistani and the Judge, both of whom see going abroad as a way to better themselves, Biju resists the new culture in which he finds himself and romanticizes India, based mostly on his positive experiences growing up there.

Biju is specifically the kind of person Noni and Lola would look down upon, not only because of his servant class status, but also for his aspirations to rise out of poverty. He was sent to New York by his father to make a better life and become a ‘fine-suited and booted-success’ (90). He suffers through years working as an illegal cook at one scruffy restaurant after another. Biju, like the Judge, is met with unfriendliness and discrimination from other higher-class cultures.

While he was in US, Biju is not always met with discrimination and he actually begins the question the racist ideas he had grown up with India. In New York he becomes part of the shadow class of illegal immigrants from all over the world. He is living with the people of different class, race and ethnicities, so his beliefs about different races begin to change. He turns a good friend with Saeed Saeed who is an African man; even though in India, Africans are often deemed as uncivilized monkeys who ‘come to India to become men’ (85). The friendship between two different races suffering from the same problem can sometimes overcome racial differences. In other instances of prejudices, the ancient grudge between Pakistanis and Indians has been shown when Biju works in the kitchen with a Pakistani. Living in culturally diverse city of New York, Biju still has belief that Pakistanis are ‘Pigs pigs, sons of pigs’ (25) because of hatred among the people of both the countries. Biju is constantly found fighting with the Pakistani’s worker and throwing cabbage at each other.

Biju is the only one character in the novel who poses a question of ideas he was inculcated and at least begins to let go of some of his prejudices. His encounter with alien cultures is more positive than most of other characters’ encounter in the novel. Fortunately, after years of struggle in New York desperately missing India and his father, Biju ultimately comes back to India all his belongings and earnings robbed along the way. The novel is replete with the instances of how myriad kinds of people interact, mix and blend. Unfortunately, the line between cultures is not always easily blurred. Some traditions and customs transcend separate cultures especially in today’s globalized world, but hatred and prejudices based on race and class are often hard nut to crack. The entire novel is dark in its description of colliding cultures, but at last the different theme appears when Biju returns home shattered and penniless. Biju and his father embracing each other, leaping at each other are seen. They are overwhelmed by their meeting in Kalimpong where the mountain of Kanchenjunga appears above the parting clouds.

So the characters Biju, Jemubhai, Sai and the Cook are easing their loss occurred in the past. All have sad and painful past which is affecting their present. Biju anyhow manages to overturn his lot by fleeing from New York and meeting his father at the end, but the end is also

the blend of nostalgia. Despite being happy outwardly, the duo father and son are unhappy inwardly. The reality is that the world is replete with the feelings of racism, segregation and cultural divisions, but it does not mean that hope too does not exist. Transformation can happen if people initiate it. People are always stuck in the same place, in the same mind set, until they decide to change, to move, to escape. Happiness is feasible because the world is not always submerged in rain and fog. In the mist of chaos and cultural division, home, family, identity and history are what hold people together and allow them to survive the day. We see characters who desire contradictory things typically without using suppression. Desai contributes to debate about immigrant agency and identity in the novel by advocating neither the preservation of cultural distinctiveness nor assimilation, but rather ambivalence and flexibility- what we may call a radical postcolonial sensibility. She presents that the real issue facing postcolonial and immigrant people are not whether they should assimilate but how clinging to cultural certitude leads to disaster. In the course of the novel, she consistently shows relative success and failure in terms of how the characters adapt in response to experiences that confound their expectations and prejudices when cultures are brought into conflict. She observes both determination and assimilation to preserve cultural authenticity. At the end, Desai presents a very heart touching and congenial description of the mountain depicting all the feelings of nostalgia. She says ‘the five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent.

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