

EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN THROUGH KIRAN DESAI'S “INHERITANCE OF LOSS”

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Abstract

From times immemorial, women have been suffering. Either in private or public life, women face a number of difficulties and are destined to cross a number of hurdles in the journey of life. The Road to Success is not smooth especially in the case of women. She is doomed to inherit loss, losing everything including her own identity. She becomes a victim in the existing societal conditions and suffers from the sense of Alienation. History repeats and so is the case with women's plight. Times have changed: situations have changed and the world is experiencing globalization. But still, the conditions of women remain to be the same. Who is to be blamed for this? Is it the society or the socio-cultural conditions, the man or the woman herself? The present paper is an attempt to analyze the problems of women in real life through literary examples and to arrive at a means for emancipation of women. Women need to become really independent both in thought and action and should have the courage to face the situation. She should turn out to be an embodiment of confidence filled with the spirit of innovation. Kiran Desai has shown different natures of women in her novel “Inheritance of Loss” and separate Gorkhaland movement.

Key words: Emancipation, Identity crisis, socio-cultural conditions

From the ancient times women have proved their talent in all the fields and they have been trying to get equal opportunity and option with men. But they were allowed to show their scholarly skill only after 14th century. In great intellectuals' opinion 'woman is not undeveloped man, but diverse'. So men-scholars feel that women's writings are complementary or supplementary to the man's. Partly through the exigencies of their historical development, partly because of their psychological characteristics, women have, with certain reservations, proved literary artists of the secondary order only. But from 18th century onwards women have been beginning to realize their aptitude for novel-writing. The draw-back is most of the feminine pioneers in fiction have seriously handicapped themselves by writing their novels in their mother tongues and haven't tried to translate them into other languages. But some women writers have tried very hard to break the above statements by showing their writing skills. Among those women are Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Sashi Deshpande, Mahasweta Devi, Shobhaa De, Kamala Das etc. who attain great reputation through their novels. Many of them consider Man Booker Prize is a coveted award. But a young writer, daughter of Anita Desai has achieved the success with her second novel "Inheritance of Loss".

"A magnificent novel of humane breadth and wisdom, comic tenderness and powerful political acuteness," So said Hermione Lee, the chairwoman of the judges of the Men Booker Prize for 2006, when she announced that Kiran Desai, with her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, won the prize. It reflects the precious heritage of India which was suppressed and oppressed by the Western domination. It also reveals the mindset of people after independence and how some people are influenced by false English language style and Western traits. Many critics feel that after 'A Passage to India' by E.M.Forster, this novel tells about the Indian culture and heritage in a modernistic way. It represents the conflicted minds of the people who settled in abroad, whether to follow Indian culture and foreign tradition. We notice Kiran Desai's keen observation of people, her love for wilderness and her fanatic affection of flowery language in this novel.

She has attempted the influence of colonization on Indian culture in a smooth way with an intervening theme. Indian culture is very difficult to understand for the colonists as it is the ancient one. So they've taken India just as a colony not as a land. The cultural hierarchy and racial stereotype of Indians is not only embraced by the conservative authorities like the Judge and other Civil Service employees but also accepted by the women like Noni, Lola, Mrs.Sen etc. The power of English education is clearly depicted in one of the scenes. A portrait of Queen Victoria is hung above the entrance to the mission school where the Judge Jemubhai Patel studied in. The portrait is a symbol of regal power.

The novel is a third person narration. It starts with the description of an old house called Cho Oyu in Kalimpong at the lapse of the Himalayas. In that crumbling house three people are living. One is the owner, the master of the house a retired Judge Jemubhai Patel, who passed ICS during the British era in India, his granddaughter Sai and the cook. The Judge loves his dog Mutt, more than anyone. Kiran Desai has presented the character Mutt in a different way that reflects the role of woman in the life of man in general and in the life of Judge in particular. It also evinces how some people give more importance to their pets than the human beings and how they maltreat their dependents and show mercy on pets.

The pathetic character in this novel is Nimi, wife of the Judge who is ill-treated by her husband, who has spent her life in silence as she is unable to understand the ferocious nature and moods of her husband. Her original name is Bela Patel but she has lost her identity along with her name though she has hailed from a rich family. Bela in Sanskrit means 'a creeper' which depends on support. Here Bela Patel also never takes her own decision and feels intimidating

about her husband. In her maternal house, she has spent her childhood under the rules and restrictions of her father and at the age of 14 years when she married the Judge (at that time he was a student) she became a slave to her husband. She is naïve, innocent and traditional in her manners, never protests her husband, bears the abuses and cynical behavior, never protests her husband without a word. “She grew accustomed to his detached expression as he pushed into her, that gaze off into middle distance, entirely involved with itself, the same blank look of a dog or monkey humping in the bazaar.”

Not only Nimi (Bela Patel), other female characters like Mrs. Mistry, Lola, Noni, Mrs. Sen represent the many faces of Indian women. They don't have individual identity always depend on male's identity, whether they hail from a rich family or poor family, educated or uneducated, must be submissive to their men. The humiliation and domination of her husband throws Nimi in a depressive mood and her activeness changes into inertia and silence. “She had fallen out of life altogether. Weeks went by and she spoke to nobody, the servants thumped their own leftovers on the table for her to eat, stole the supplies without fear” (172). If masters give respect, the servants follow. As Jemubhai wants to show his superiority in order to hide his inferiority, he reproaches and blames his wife always which makes her dull and miserable. He criticizes her red hair-oil, her bangles, her long hair and her dress. “Nimi, made invalid by her misery, grew dull, began to fall asleep in heliographic sunshine and wake in the middle of the night. She couldn't bear to spend a moment in dressing and combing, activities that were only for the happy and the loved.” (173)

These words prove that how the women suffered in those days. Her uninterested deportment makes her shabby-looking and Jemubhai feels that she has got some skin disease. “When Jemubhai saw her, cheeks erupting pustules, he took her fallen beauty as a further affront and felt concerned the skin disease would infect him as well. He instructed the servants to wipe everything with Dettol to kill germs.” (175)

He has ordered his wife not to come out from the house and the distance between them has been widened and his bitterness has made her away from him completely. But one day when Jemubhai has gone to hunting, some women came to his house. Among them, a very enthusiastic congresswoman has invited Nimi to follow them to receive a great person whom Nimi doesn't know. Half happy and half scared Nimi after a long time comes out from the house, follows them without a word. At the meeting Nimi is given a platter with scrambled eggs and toast which she hasn't eaten a single piece because of uproar and rush of the people. There she has practiced to smile at a cute baby and after some time she is dropped at her house. Kiran Desai reveals the state of mind of women who come out from their houses without taking permission from their husbands and how they feel tensed and their embarrassment in a clear way.

This small incident has changed her entire life and given a great turmoil to her. The District Commissioner who hates Jemubhai and Gujaratis, particularly Patels has informed him about Nimi's presence at the meeting where all the people have gone to receive Jawaharlal Nehru whom the Britishers disliked. He has described how Nimi has taken the plate of eggs and how she has participated in that meeting. Jemubhai is at severe rage and asks her whether she is a stupid or a liar. After a long silence she has given a reply which makes him furor. He is unable to digest her reply starts beating her with his fists and legs. “For the first time he hit her, although he had wanted to before and fought the urge for some time. He emptied his glass on her head, sent a jug of water swinging into the face he no longer found beautiful, and filled her ears with leaping soda water. Then, when this wasn't enough to assuage his rage, he hammered down with his fists, raising his arms to bring them down on her again and again, rhythmically, until his own

hands were exhausted and his shoulders next day were strained sore as if from chopping wood. He even limped a bit, his leg hurting from kicking her.”(304) Not only Nimi many of the Indian women have been still facing these torturous and treacherous deeds from their family members.

If she is silent he can't bear, and if she gripes it is worse. As she feels that she is the scapegoat for his rage whatever may be the reason. “She soon realized that whatever she did or didn't do the outcome was much the same.” (305)

Desai has portrayed that character in a sympathetic way which reflects the real conditions of Indian women at that time. As Jemubhai couldn't bear the presence of his wife, he has sent her to her father's house. First Nimi has resented going to her mother's house not because she likes her husband's home and her status in that house but because she thinks about her father's name and fame, how that name will be spoiled because of her arrival. This is drastic condition of women in Indian society. Some parents still insist their daughters to stay at their in-law's house though their condition is across-the-board and they will be killed by their in-laws. Nimi's life is the best example for the dire conditions of the women in the society.

Jemubhai threatens his wife to leave his house otherwise he will kill her. So she has left his house. After six months he has received a telegram from his father-in-law's house which tells that he is blessed with a baby girl. He doesn't feel joy for his fatherhood instead he gets irritated about the news. He never visits his daughter or his wife. As Nimi's father has died, her uncle insists her to go back to her husband and he tells that it is not his responsibility to look after her and her baby. He suggests her that if she has made her husband angry it is her duty to request and beg him for pardon.

Some people criticize Desai for taking the story of 80s and presenting those situations at present. But there is not a revolutionary change in the lives of women from that time to present time. We find a slight change in the lives of women from 40s to 80s and 80s to 21st century. Take the example of Nimi's daughter. Though she hasn't got any individual significance she owns freedom and unlike her mother she chooses her spouse Mr. Mistry, an orphan who also has suffered with lack of parental affection just like her. Their marriage is a happy marriage but unfortunately they die in an accident leaving their only daughter Sai who is studying in a convent in Russia. With Sai, the third generation starts. Unlike her mother and grandmother, Sai has distinctiveness, strong mind and adaptable nature. She is fortunate that her grandfather, the Judge Jemubhai has received her though not wholeheartedly, in an inevitable situation he has accepted her. To her mother he has provided only financial support. Sai is neither like her grandmother who spent her whole life like a slave, without freedom and individuality, nor like her mother who has been neglected. She is a replica of many women in modern society who are innocent, adaptable, sensitive, lovable and sociable. Because of her brought up in a convent, because of her voracious reading, she can adjust herself in Kalimpong, in her grandfather's house whom she hasn't known before.

Through Sai's character Desai has given self-confidence, courage and malleability to the women folk. Though Sai is receptive to the behavior of Gyan, she never accepts the bad comments about her from him. She always maintains self-respect which her grandmother hasn't upheld. Desai has molded that character as a self-conscious, gregarious and benevolent human being. Every lady character has its weaknesses in the story but Sai has very limited.

Another two characters Noni and Lola also represent a special class of women sect who live individually without taking help from men. When the reader is ready to appreciate their individual life, they have proved that women belong to weaker section because of some incidents. Nonita is a spinster who lives with her widow sister Lalita in a beautiful chalet called

Mon Ami at Kalimpong. They live on Lalita's husband's pension and Noni gives tuition to Sai to earn some money. Lola's only daughter Prixie works for B.B.C. channel in England and she feels proud about her daughter working for English people and visits her once in a while. When she comes back she praises her daughter's life style and western culture and tries to imitate their habits. Both the sisters are Anglophiles, read English novels, eat English food. In their garden they have raised broccoli, an English vegetable which they like very much and they celebrate English festivals like Easter, Christmas etc.

But their aristocratic peaceful life is disturbed when Gorkha movement has been started at Kalimpong and nearby places. Their wealth which they feel saves them becomes a predicament to them. The place behind their house, where they are growing a beautiful garden with vegetables and flowers is occupied by Gorkha naxalites. Lola wants to give a complaint against these occupants to the head of the Kalimpong wing of the GNLFF called Pradhan, as the police are afraid to take action on this people. Here Desai has presented another picture which shows the behavior and attitude of men over women. When Lola tell the name of her house as Mon Ami, Pradhan sarcastically asks her why they have taken a French name, while they are living in India and why don't they speak in French. The conversation between Lola and Pradhan reveals how the men trouble women and the condition of women who don't have the support of men.

Lola and Noni live a tranquil life at Mon Ami. Suddenly some poor Nepalis have occupied the back yard of Mon Ami and built huts overnight and settled with women, children, pigs, goats, dogs, chickens, cats and cows. Lola and Noni are shocked when they see these huts and Lola dares to complain against them to Pradhan. But he laughs at her and treats her as a bourgeoisie and blames her. "Here he began to smile 'In fact', he said, 'as you can see,' he gestured out, 'I am the raja of Kalimpong. A raja must have many queens.' He jerked his head back to the sounds of the kitchen that came through the curtained door. 'I have four, but would you,' he looked Lola up and down, tipped his chair back, head at a comical angle, a coy naughty expression catching his face, "dear Auntie, would you like to be the fifth?" (244). All people even women also laugh at his joke.

India is great for its rich culture and heritage. Our epics and all holy books say, "where women are respected, there suras tread." (Yatra naaryastu poojyante thathra ramanthi devathaa) But even this is restricted only in sayings not in actions. Woman is a puppet and a luxury thing in the hands of men. She is treated as a sleeping partner not as a sparkling partner. It is meaningless to say 'Kaaryeshu daasi, karaneshu manthri, bhojyeshu maatha, karaneshu rambha.' After the ill-treatment of Pradhan, for the first time Lola remembered her husband Joydeep intensely and agonized by their behavior. "Look at what you've left me to! Do you know how I have suffered, do you have any idea??? Where are you?! You and your piddling little life, and look what I have to deal with, just look. I don't even have my decency." She held on to her ridiculed old woman's breasts and shook them (245). This scene indicates age is not a barrier to men to satisfy their carnal desires.

Kiran Desai has depicted the lives of immigrants and the mentalities of Indians in a superb way. She has indirectly shown the corruptive nature, escapism, laziness, inferiority and self-pity of Indians as immigrants at one side and strong human relations of Indians at other side through some characters. She leaves the decision to the Indian women whether they live with self-esteem or survive as dependants. Malani, the wife of Harish-Harry is a tough woman who works equally with her husband. At the same time Mrs. Singh who is wrapped up by the domination of her husband. So every female character which is portrayed by Desai has equal

importance and we surely say that she has told the women empowerment or emancipation of women through ‘Inheritance of Loss’.

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