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**KIRAN DESAI'S NOVEL, THE *INHERITANCE OF LOSS*, A RICH
PROJECTION TO THE POSTCOLONIAL PANORAMA IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

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Abstract:

The present paper aims to bring forth the perception of the world in the postcolonial period in Kiran Desai's Award winning novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. The euphoria of liberalization and celebration of globalization have been skillfully denuded by Kiran Desai in her work. She demonstrated that though the advancement of technology professed to create wealth and well-being in integrating the cultural diversities, the fact is that there is a darker side where innumerable people are deprived of their basic human rights. Desai's motive in writing *The Inheritance of loss* was to look beyond the general concept of globalization. With her optimism Desai finds the other disordered side of global economy, which are less discussed. In the background of colonial neurosis and multiculturalism, Kiran Desai explores the impact of globalization expressed in terms of financial security in alien lands, racial discrimination, bitterness of immigration, complexity of the high society and disenchantment borrowed out of the opulence of the West in the post-colonial era.

Keywords: alienation, displacement, cultural clashes, globalization, hybridity, insurgency, identity crisis, multiculturalism, racial discrimination, and search for home

In *The Inheritance of Loss*.Kiran Desai presents the craze for western values, manners, language, and glamorous life-style. The impact of modernisation, consumerism, and globalisation is manifested in all walks of Indian life. Despite political freedom, cultural slavery is directly manifested through some of her characters. Consequently, they can neither assimilate the new culture nor can they give up their original culture in totality. It is not merely a matter of adapting to a new environment, or adjusting to new customs, or learning a

new language. It is much more profound, and a displacement far reaching. It is an agonizing process of alienation and displacement which may create an imbalance that can affect a person's feelings, thoughts and ideas.

Desai's fiction is fascinating as she portrays and presents various themes in the broad perspective of globalization as it exists in the contemporary society. Sensitive issues like hybridity, insurgency, immigration, intercultural communication, identity crisis, loneliness, multiculturalism, racial discrimination, social realism, and search for home also find expression within the ambit of her novels. Her work also focuses on the suppression of women in India. Kiran Desai's works present not only a kaleidoscopic picture of people from different countries, their struggles, conflicts, dreams and frustrations, but also a mature understanding of life at various levels.

Most of the characters of Desai's have been stuck by alienation or dislocation. The main characters the judge, Sai, and Biju live in two worlds: the Indian class system and the Western world. Set against the backdrop of rising insurgency in Nepal, the present novel also traces lives of people who are forced to confront their colliding interests with the encounter of the anarchy and chaos in the surroundings. The novel highlights the differences and similarities between the Nepali immigrants in India and Indian immigrants in the USA.

The story of *The Inheritance of Loss* is about a teenage Indian girl, Sai, living with her Cambridge-educated Anglophile grandfather, a retired judge, in the town of Kalimpong a small town in northern India beside the Himalayas. Sai is the exact replica and the living personification of rootlessness in the contemporary society. When Sai's parents' love affair came to the notice of the Judge, Sai's grandfather he simply disconnected his relationship with his daughter. Her father an aspiring astronaut, who was about to be the first Indian to fly into space was killed in a road accident in Russia, making her an orphan. Before living with her grandfather, Sai lived in a convent school. Her convent made her a westerner and a foreigner in her own land. At the convent school, she learned English as well as Western values and appreciation of all things English. She is strong and ambitious.

Sai learns about her privileged life and she feels guilty. She falls in love with Gyan, her mathematics tutor, though he is from a lower class. But Gyan, the descendant of a Nepali Gurkha mercenary, hates the bourgeois life style of the judge and Sai. He considers Cho Oyu, the house of the judge as symbol of colonial hangover. He was astonished and surprised the way Sai was keen to celebrate Christmas. He burst out one day, "Why do you celebrate Christmas? You are Hindus and you don't celebrate Id or Guru Nanak's birthday or even

Durga Puja or Dussehra or Tibetan New year.”(Desai: 163) To him Sai happens to be “a reflection of all the contradictions around her.”(Desai:262) He thought that some people like Sai and the judge even after independence still under the influence of colonial rule. He is caught between Sai’s Love and GNLF, but finally felt his association with a group of ethnic Nepalese insurgents is more important than his passion for Sai. The angry departure of Gyan indicates the permanent loss of Sai’s love and also lover.

Desai in a parallel narrative brings out the predicaments of Biju, the son of Sai's grandfather's cook, an illegal immigrant in New York. Most of the time, besides survival, Biju's main challenge is dodging the authorities, moving from one ill-paid job to another. His utmost desire in life is to obtain the green card in America. Desai deftly shifts between the first world and the third exposing the pain of exile, the uncertainties of post-colonialism and the aspiration for a better life.

Most of Desai's characters have been stuck by alienation or dislocation as mentioned earlier. The main characters the judge, Sai, and Biju live in two worlds: the Indian class system and the Western world. Every day these two worlds are associated in their social interactions, their expectations and anticipations. “He retreated into a solitude. The solitude became a habit and it crushed him into a shadow” (Desai:39). The judge becomes a victim of double consciousness which means division of identity into several facets. "He envied the English— He loathed Indians" (Desai:119). The Judge looks at the English as someone superior and this attitude puts him in a postcolonial dilemma that aggravates his ambivalent nature.

Jemubhai takes revenge on his early confusions and embarrassments in the name of keeping up standards. He wants to keep his accent behind the mask of silence. He works at being English with fear and hatred, but he wants to maintain a false pride throughout his life by concealing his real identity. The acceptance of cultural hierarchy leads to some enduring personal dilemmas resulting in identity crisis. He follows the British culture blindly. He gets recruited as an Indian Civil Service member and tries to become an official keeping up the British standards. It clearly shows his mindset that Britain represents a society superior to that of India. Homi Bhabha maintains that the powerful influence of a different culture will cause a tension between the desire of identity stasis and the demand for a change in identity; and mimicry represents as a compromise to this tension (Bhabha: 86). ‘Mimicry of the center’, as Ashcroft claims, is “the periphery to immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become ‘more English than the English’” (Ashcroft: 4). The

same is the case with the judge. He studies hard only to get more acquainted with Western culture and tries to adopt the British standards in his daily life. He takes tea every afternoon, tries to speak English like a native speaker, covers his brown skin colour with the powder puff. He is always in a dilemma, a struggle of identity. All of his efforts to find a place among those who are in the center are futile. Though he holds a highly prestigious position like ICS, he has to work only to reinforce the domination of Britain.

Sai is also a victim of circumstances. She lost her parents in an accident in Russia when she was in a convent in Darjeeling. So, she has already tasted bitter feelings of separation and displacement. She arrives at the house of her grandfather, a retired Judge whom she has never met before. Sai's desire to achieve a kind of emotional bond with her grandfather, also fails, for he himself is displaced emotionally and physically. The tension between wanting to belong to his own native land and a foreign culture at the same time, is the usual post-colonial dilemma. The first evening when Sai was at Cho Oyu at her grandfather's home "she had a fearful feeling of having entered a space so big it reached both backward and forward" (Desai: 34). Desai often uses the binary opposites like arrivals and departures moving in and moving out, hope and hopelessness all part of the postcolonial dilemma. Sai's displacement from the comforts of a convent school in Darjeeling to the lush, misty Himalayan region of Kalimpong in North Eastern India, where a growing Nepalese insurgency is about to unravel her life further, brings a lot of havoc in her life.

In the case of Gyan, Sai's mathematics tutor, it is dislocation from Nepal that makes him ambivalent. He also faces the problem of identity as he loves Gurkhaland but does not fight for it. His love for Sai is also ambivalent and uncertain. The love between Sai and Gyan though flowers in the beginning, it dies when Gyan joins the insurgents and stops coming to see her. Eventually he felt that Sai is more English than native. He found out that she could speak only English and pidgin Hindi. She is confined to only high-class social circle. Her inability to eat food with hands, her fancy for English vegetables peas and beans and her fear of Indian vegetables makes him hate her. Her visits to temple are only to appreciate their architectural elegance and Gyan thinks that she should be ashamed of for her lack of nativity. Later they get alienated from each other because Gyan didn't like her colonial mannerisms.

Desai throws light on larger questions of rights and identities including those of women. She remarks on the subjection of women in India with special reference to the shattered relationship between the judge and his wife, Nimi. She has spent nineteen years within the confines of her father's compound. The judge always prefers to be treated like a Westerner.

He left India to study in England when he was a young man. When he returned to India, he became a foreigner. But the future judge as student was isolated in racist England. But on his return to India, he finds himself despising his apparently backward Indian wife.

He wants to teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame that he had learned for himself. The anglophile judge could not digest the truth that his wife couldn't speak English. He forced her to learn it and when she learned no English he thought it is out of her stubbornness. He used to ask her different names of English food and when she couldn't pronounce the name of the food she was denied to eat it. Desai wants to demonstrate through the character of the judge, that the ridiculous Indians who couldn't be freed of what their broken souls learned became self-haters. Most of the people in the postcolonial world lived with a clumsy promise of modernity.

The shared historical legacy and a common experience link these apparently contrasting characters. Desai refers to centuries of subjection by the economic and cultural power of the West. She felt certain moves made long ago had produced all of them.

The judge's past is reflected through the stream of consciousness and flash back techniques. The judge always prefers to be treated like a Westerner. He left India to study in England when he was a young man. When he returned to India, he became a foreigner. Though he appears to be an Indian, behaves like a Westerner. The future judge as a student was isolated in racist England.

But on his return to India, he finds himself despising his apparently backward Indian wife. "He would teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself."(Desai: 170).

Kiran Desai finds how the poor and the jobless migrate to the western world for a better life but suffer a lot due to racial prejudice, exploitation, social oppression, alienation, displacement and disillusionment. Biju goes to America to escape the class system because he was born into the lower, or servant class in India. He has expectations that in the Western world he will be treated differently. However, he soon learns that America has its own type of confinement called economic enslavement. During his stay in the United States, Biju does not abandon his Indian identity. Biju has seen the underground society in the basements of America and has a more objective knowledge to assess the two cultures. His life in America illustrates the dismaying life of the illegal immigrants and their distressing experiences in a peculiar environment. Desai analyses in her novel how even in the post-colonial times people

from colonized countries face destitutions in a country like United States which is renowned for democracy.

Biju landed in America to fulfill his father's dream with fake documents. The novel depicts Biju's fondness of modernity but the West reveals to him the disorderly and the uncivilized side. Biju is amazed to see Indians ordering beef in New York restaurants. This makes him disgusting towards this disorderly situation: "One should not give up one's religion, the principles of one's parents and their parents before them.... You had to live according to something"(Desai:143). This repulsion is a little more obvious when later Biju becomes aware of his exploitation. He shows his anger to the boss but, he was fondness of modernity in the western society.

In a foreign land he faces ill treatment and insult as an illegal immigrant. He was also paid a very meager salary in spite of working for long hours. As an illegal intruder he moved from restaurant to restaurant for better pay and respect. Still he aspired for a green card though his dream did not become a reality.

Kiran Desai describes vividly the cognizant of socially and historically significant events taking place in the postcolonial era in her novel. She brings out the way insurgency at Kalimpong has led to displacement of several people, and also throws light on how in the postcolonial situation the marginalized or the oppressed become the aggressor. In *The Inheritance of Loss* Kiran Desai describes the socio-political situation in Kalimpong due to the effect of colonization. This kind of situation influenced half-educated, young men like Gyan to take part in local political agitations in their search for better living conditions. He joins an ethnic nationalist movement mainly to vent his rage and frustration. "Old hatreds are endlessly retrievable," Desai reminds us, and they are "purer . . . because the grief of the past was gone. Just the fury remained, distilled, liberating."(Desai: 81.)

Desai's novel showcases the view that multiculturalism is restricted to the cosmopolitan cities of the West but it could not provide any solution to the existing causes of extremism and violence in the developing countries like India. It doesn't even suggest, whether economic globalization can pave the path to prosperity for the downtrodden. Desai's main idea is that profit could be distributed among nations, working together.

The major theme running throughout the novel is the one closely related to the effects of colonialism and the scenario in post-colonialism period, the loss of identity and the way it travels through generations as a bitter sense of loss. Desai highlights most of the outstanding issues of contemporary society in her novel. Thus, Kiran Desai's self-confidence, committed

views on terrorism and weaknesses of a poverty-stricken society are candid and bold. In addition, she focuses her attention on alienation, cultural clash, displacement, exile, exploitation, economic inequality, fundamentalism, globalisation, hybridity, insurgency, and immigration, loss of identity, loneliness, multiculturalism, poverty and racial-discrimination.

Kiran Desai brings the new idea for her novel by exposing the socio-political conflict in Kalimpong. She narrates the insurgency activities in Kalimpong where the Indian Nepalese demanded a separate state for themselves during the 1980s. The Goorkha National Liberation Front has been formed mainly by the Indian Nepalese youth who are fed up with their minority status in a place where they are in the majority. They want their own country to manage their own affairs. The Gorkhas consider that it is their birthright to fight for a separate homeland as they and their forefathers have sacrificed a lot for India. Desai has highlighted this complex picture of terrorism and political self-deprivation as the worst political turmoil in the post-modern era.

One of the major concerns in postcolonial literature is the problem of displacement and its consequence resulting in the loss of home. Uprooting from one's own culture and land, and the agonies of re-routing in an alien land are depicted in many postcolonial works. The characters in *The Inheritance of Loss* often face the problem of identity and alienation, and become frustrated at the end. Even when they come back to their own country, like the Judge in the novel, they develop a sense of distrust and anger. They remain in a state of confusion from which they find it difficult to come out.

The Inheritance of Loss is a chronicle of loss that one has to face due to circumstances of one's life. Most of the characters, especially the chief characters have to face losses in life due to their diasporic existence. First of all, Sai, who has suffered the loss of her parents' death at an early age, is also bereft of love and affection from her grandfather, the Judge. The love story of Sai and her Nepali mathematics tutor, Gyan, suffers a blow with the Nepal uprising.

As a post-colonial novelist, Desai has depicted losses not only at the personal level but also in the larger ambit of the society. The novel even pictures the poverty-stricken tribal people of Zanzibar. In fact, poverty itself is a great loss of life. The natives of poor nations are also at a loss as they face poverty and ill-treatment in another country. The cook is badly treated by the Judge only because he is poor. All that he gets in lieu of his twenty four hours of services is the little money that he spends on himself. The cook sometimes even had to tolerate the Judge's ill treatment. Once he grumbled that it is terrible to be a poverty stricken man..

Loss can also be seen in Lola's life. She lives a quiet life with her sister Noni, but the tumult that arises in Kalimpong leaves a lasting impression on her. She mourns the loss of her husband. The Goorkha insurgents attack, Mon Ami and her property. They also humiliate her. Father Booty, another victim, is a Swiss, yet he regards himself as an Indian foreigner. His property has been confiscated by a Nepali doctor as Father Booty's visa is expired.

In this novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, young people lose their sense of inheritance, belonging, their culture and their original home. In fact, the loss is not only faced by one generation but by three generations. Longing is the emotion that the characters cherish in this novel. They long for home, they long for love, and they long for acceptance but they could not fulfill any of them.

Multiculturalism is a characteristic feature of Indian society. Most of Desai's characters belong to different cultural backgrounds. She maintains cordial attitude to all cultures but mildly exposes the vanity and hypocrisy embedded in their attitude to life. Immigration is one of the most striking problems. Most of the Indians and the Third World Citizens face such problems in Europe and America. Biju, Saeed, Harish Harry, Saran, Jeev, Rishi, Mr.Lalkaka, and thousands of Africans, Latin Americans and Asians working in America and Europe experience a bitter struggle as immigrants. In fact, Kiran Desai has a passion for reforming the system to dispel the hardships of the migrant people. It is significant that the description of nature and landscape occupies a large chunk of the novel.

What Desai ultimately highlights is not just individual experiences, but rather the relations of recognition among immigrants, exiles, and foreigners. *The Inheritance of Loss* tells the story of two different kinds of Diasporas, namely the exploited immigrants in New York City and an aging, elitist cluster of Indians settled after retirement in a hill town. Characters belonging to both these types face the challenges of a globalised society that is fraught with increasingly separatist and nationalistic agendas. Desai's novel describes human migration and shows that it has always been part of the human experience. Her realistic portrayal of life in the two continents, diasporic on multiple levels, demonstrates a deeper understanding of the human condition.

The Inheritance of Loss ridicules globalisation and its consequences. Images and descriptions which make a mockery of modernity abound throughout the novel. Biju, when he reached India is immediately engulfed by the local eruptions of rage and frustration from which he had been physically remote in New York. For him and the others, Desai suggests, withdrawal or escape but they are no longer possible. She makes her novel *The Inheritance of*

Loss, a platform to pose questions on post-colonialism and globalisation. The novel has globalisation as its epicenter. Sometimes it's the West which is trying to globalise its ideals as in the case of the judge and Sai and his Westernized neighbourhood. The loss of Father Booty, another important character in the novel, epitomizes the paradox of globalism. He has lived in India for forty-five years, and is a stranger to Europe. But he is not an Indian citizen-- he is a visitor who has never applied for Indian citizenship and even has forgotten to renew his working permit. But he is a displaced person ordered into exile to his native country.

The Inheritance of Loss abounds in themes that make it an interesting social reading. As Desai is an eminent immigrant writer, her themes are of human deprivation, trauma, identity and indifference. In this novel she tried to dive deep into the sea of human psychology.

Carmen Wickramagamage ⁵ points out that most people envision relocation as a painful choice between assimilation and nativism. Desai explores both sides of the issue and ultimately challenges the desirability of assimilation and the wisdom of maintaining difference, inhabiting the margins, and avoiding, unapologetic participation in the New World. The novel unravels an unseen sensitive truth and fate of the people born to experience modern life as a continuous struggle while balancing equally the dignity and justice of their roots and their present existence.

Kiran Desai with her expatriate experience can comprehend the agony and suffering one needs to undergo when one attempts to settle down in an alien land. She believed that racial discrimination is an outcome of some selfish people's political ideology. With her vision and social consciousness Desai suggests that universal tolerance and mutual respect for one another can certainly bring universal peace and harmony.

The Inheritance of Loss highlights the basic human values like compassion and tolerance, while reverence surpasses the cultural, political and religious limitations. *It* is a thought-provoking novel. It clearly shows that Desai's critical intelligence is a part of her erudition and experience. It is evident that her novel encourages plurality of approaches to problems of globalisation, modernity and value systems.

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