

Geo-Cultural Identity and Multiculturalism in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

Harmonizing the concerns of geo-cultural claims posited against the 'melting-pot' ideology of multicultural societies is a challenge for negotiating a cultural identity. Dominant strains of geo-cultural identities often involve problematising structures such as language, ethnic identity, territorial autonomy, environmental concerns and immigrant rights. This paper seeks to explore Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* for representing the polarities through the sketches of diverse cultural entities whom she conjoins in the mesmeric 'culture-space' of the novel. The characters, Jemubhai, Sai, Gyan and Biju, traverse the liminal thresholds of cultural identity within and between the geo-cultural and multicultural space.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Inheritance of Loss, Kiran Desai, Geo-Cultural Identity

The interruption of geo-cultural identity is the suppressed reality of multicultural societies. The intermingling of diverse cultures and their identification with new standards of parallel existence presents challenges singular to its kind with respect to both individual selves and societies. The estrangement with local, regional and national cultural bonds often leads to the loss of self-identity amongst the geo-cultural entities. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* portrays the brittle notion of self-identity and examines its transformation through cultural

encounters. The novel amalgamates cultural polarities in its narrative and presents the issues of cultural adaptation, cultural transformation, cultural tolerance and cultural resistance etc. The work ensembles characters from varied cultural groups in a common space and dissects their relations to highlight the nuances of geo-cultural identity in the face of the transforming sphere of multiculturalism. The novel grapples to amalgamate the fleeting essence of cultural identity by tracing its influence right from the colonial times of primeval cultural encounters to the contemporary era of multicultural city-space.

Before discussing further, let me begin with encapsulating a working definition of multiculturalism – a dynamic and evolving construct which becomes a topic of debate and disagreement among scholars, educators, critics, writers and publishers among many. Different people, view it differently. Numerous definitions, opinions, and explanations of the concept have been proposed ranging from the most simplistic and specific to the most complex and generic. However, none of the viewpoint appears to have gained a universal acceptance so far.

Multiculturalism simplistically involves the existence and convergence of several diverse cultures in geographical territory. The outlook has permeated numerous aspects of the global society and is therefore seen as an off shoot of diverse phenomenon such as globalization. Stemming from the civil rights and feminist movements, it has grown to transmit an increasingly pluralistic and multi-ethnic world view. Multicultural ideals have influenced various spheres of society such as arts, popular culture, media, education, and legal social policy and most significantly literature.

Such has been the extent of the influence of the phenomenon that the social model for American society has shifted away from the image of the “melting pot”- according to which minorities gave up their individual identity to integrate fully with general society; and moved

towards a model where unique ethnic identities remain intact and contribute to the greater good.

Multiculturalism, the ideology of multi-ethnic cohesion in global societies finds itself posited against geo-cultural identity of individuals belonging to different ethnic groups. Geo-cultural focus identifies people on the basis of their geographical and cultural roots. It necessarily involves issues such as language, ethnic identity, assertion of territorial autonomy, sovereignty, immigration and environment rights. People living in multicultural societies are inherently in a state of transacting a pacts between their geo-cultural roots and their evolving status in the 'melting-potish' scenario. The value-system and cultural diversity among the geo-cultural groups living in a multicultural set-up therefore witness a struggle between their shifting standards of existence and evolving status.

This paper attempts to evaluate the cultural polarizations through Kiran Desai's novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* by examining its characters who undergo a shift in identity due to the process of cultural transformation characterized by the interplay of multiculturalism and geo-cultural dynamics. Desai creates characters from diverse ethnic, national and international communities and brings them together in the city of Kalimpong. The judge, Jemubhai, is an Anglicized judge who hails from Pippit, Gujrat; Sai, his grand-daughter, has come from St. Augustine Convent in Dehra Dun; Gyan, Sai's Maths tutor is a Nepali, whose ancestors came and settled in Kalimpong from Nepal; Biju is local who travels to New York as an illegal migrant; Lola and Noni are Bengalis; Father Booty, is a Christian missionary is from Switzerland. Desai thus juxtaposes the stories of varying shades to emphasize multicultural and geo-cultural conflicts.

To trace the foremost nuances of cultural encounters Desai describes the 'culture-scape' during the colonial era. She narrates how the Anglican judge Jemubhai Patel becomes

a victim of cultural neurosis after he leaves his country to go to Britain for higher education. He is clearly shocked by the encounter with a new culture and begins to feel uneasy and self-conscious. He is a mis-fit who cannot interact with anyone and keeps to himself during his stay abroad. His lack of esteem becomes evident in the following lines: "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). He powders his face to make it white like the British, goes hunting using British guns and gorges on British food such as "scones, macaroons or cheese straws". (Desai, 3). He gradually becomes "...a foreigner in his own country." (Desai, 29)

Jemubhai Patel's cultural encounter leaves him with a fractured sense of identity for he cannot identify himself with the British and is no longer filled with contentment of being an Indian. The lack of completeness in his life eventually leaves him frustrated and transformed into a despicable character, full of hatred for those around him. His young wife Nimi becomes a vent where he releases the emotions of his troubled mind. She becomes the symbol of a culture, which he wrongly grows to understand as 'inferior'. In order to wipe clean from his 'inferior' status he resorts to bringing misery upon her. It is apparent that his cruel efforts to eliminate her crude ways makes him feel strangely superior.

Jemubhai thus becomes a representation of Indians during the colonial era who sought to eliminate their own cultural identity by adopting the ways and manners of the colonizers. The imitation of the rulers in terms of language, dress, education, manners and so on become a natural response of the colonized who in an effort to step in the shoes of the 'master' sought to do away with their own culture legacy. The cultural encounter with the colonizers typically left them with a deep sense of loss like Jemubhai, who was far from being British

and who could neither accept himself in his own homeland. The identity of several colonized thus remains marred for generations.

Jemubhai's encounter with the British culture was not merely limited to him but was rather passed on to his grand-daughter, Sai though in a more peculiar way as, "She was a westernized Indian brought up by English nuns, an estranged Indian living in India." (Desai, 210). Like Jemubhai, Sai was English in her tastes – 'she celebrated Christmas', 'could not eat her meals in the Indian manner using her hands', 'her study comprised the Western literature such as the National Geographic and Wuthering Heights'. Her English tastes are revealed in the following lines: "... cake was better than *laddoos*, fork spoon knife better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ better than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds. English better than Hindi." (Desai, 30)

Jemu, spiteful of his wife, daughter and Indians, in general could accept Sai with open arms: "There was something familiar about her; she had the same accent and manners. She was a westernized Indian brought up by English nuns, an estranged Indian living in India. The journey he had started so long ago had continued in his descendants." (Desai,210)

Both Sai and Jemubhai present the consequences of cultural intermingling through their persona. When Jemubhai encounters a foreign culture abruptly, he receives a cultural shock which fractures his identity. Sai is more balanced as she is introduced to the foreign culture gradually and at an early stage of her life. Sai, being the daughter of educated parents and the grand-daughter of a Judge has certain social exposure right from her childhood, later her upbringing in the Convent acquaints and shapes her personality with the English culture dominating the Indian.

Through Jemubhai and Sai, Desai presents the nuances of cultural intermingling between a dominant and a rather oppressed cultural encounter which impacts different individuals in different ways such as Sai and Jemubhai. She takes the discourse forward by including the geo-cultural concerns of minority rights by bringing the character of Gyan in the novel.

Gyan, Sai's young Maths tutor, who eventually charms her romantically becomes a member of the GNLF, a local party which works to assert the ethnic rights of the so-called Nepali insurgents. Sai loves him dearly and tries to adapt to make her relationship work with Gyan, at least initially. But her love eventually wears off understandably, on account of clash of cultural identities.

Sai is in a state of mixed emotions, she is in love with Gyan but all the same detests his habits, family back ground and most importantly cultural milieu. Gyan, too is an instance of contradictions: while he loves Gurkhaland, he hesitates in fighting for the cause. While he loves Sai, he is also offended by her English ways.

Sai, walks up to Gyan's house and is disgusted to see the locale, where he lives and describes his house in the following words:

It was a small, slime slicked cube; the walls must have been made with cement corrupted by sand, because it came spilling forth from pocket marks as if from a punctured bag.

Crow's nest of electric wiring hung from the corners of the structure, split into sections that disappeared into windows barred with thin jail grill. She could smell an open drain that told immediately of a sluggish plumbing system failing anew each day despite being so rudimentary. (Desai, 255)

Sai's disgust of Gyan's 'house', also a symbol of his class and cultural identity is strikingly evident in the lines above. She is aghast at the first sight of it though later a mix of more humane feelings descends upon her and she observes, "Still, she could tell it was someone's precious home... just the kind of thing Lola and Noni would have made merciless fun of." (Desai, 255)

Thus, it is noticeable that while Sai is repulsed by the sight of the house yet, she can appreciate the fact that it is a loving home of its residents. When Gyan emerges out of his home, Sai feels "distaste" for herself, as she had loved him. Later, they argued and Sai, "...wished to claw him... wanted to pluck out his eyes and beat him black and blue." (Desai,258). But soon after unleashing her fury she "began to laugh a bit", she also switched her voice to a "pleading tone." Desai, deliberately presents these contradictions, so as to reflect a real culture-scape where people are composed of conflicting propositions, she vividly captures this ideology through her characters; and explains it most accurately and beautifully by medium of Sai and Gyan:

Just ordinary humans... composite of contradictions...Cheese and chocolate they wanted, but also to kick all these bloody foreign things out. A wild daring love to bicycle them into the sky, but also a rice and dal love blessed by the unexciting feeling of everyday...Every single contradiction history or opportunity might make available to them, every contradiction they were heir to, they desired. But only as much, of course, as they desired purity and the lack of contradiction. (Desai, 259)

The relationship of Sai and Gyan thus extends the issue of minority-rights in a regional sense. Sai thus suffers in her relationship with Gyan, much like her grandfather, generations ago. While Jemubhai was married to Nimi, he could hardly accept her on account of apparent lack of 'English-ness'. Sai ends her relationship with Gyan, way before it could

even take off, on account of their cultural differences, which are regional. Typifying, the experience of generations both Jemu and Sai fail in the face of cultural clash.

Desai further explores the issues faced by geo-cultural ethnic groups in the contemporary multicultural space through the character, Biju, the son of Jemubhai's cook who attempts to migrate to America in search of work. He leaves his homeland in the hope of a bright future which could alleviate his father and their family both financially and socially.

After he goes to America, Biju witnesses a cultural encounter like Jemubhai but is characterized by peculiarities, in its own way. He comes into contact with people from numerous Third world countries; while he lives in New York, as an illegal migrant worker belonging to the "shadow class" (Desai,102). His encounter with multiple cultures is evident from, "there was a whole world in the basement kitchens of New York" (Desai, 22). Similar views are presented in the following lines:

After long hours at work, he "returns home to the basement of a building at the bottom of Harlem he joins a shifting population of men living wherever they find a space for themselves: camping out near the fuse box, behind the boiler, in the cubby holes, and in odd-shaped corners that once were pantries, maids' rooms, laundry rooms, and storage rooms at the bottom of what had been a single-family home, the entrance still adorned with a scrap of colored mosaic in the shape of a star. (Desai, 51)

Biju who is coloured with bias for members from different ethnic groups, initially fails to negotiate with the foreign cultures as evident in his brawl with a fellow Pakistani worker, "old war, best war" (Desai, 23) . Despite the brawl's antiquated setting their "words flow with an ease that comes from centuries of practice" (Desai, 23), and in the heat of the

battle it is as though the “spirits of their fathers, their grandfathers, rise from the dead” (Desai,23).

However, he undergoes a noticeable change and befriends an African, Saeed Saeed though he earlier was prejudiced against them as evident from, “he remembered what they said about black people at home... ‘Be careful of the *hubshi*. Ha ha, in their own country they live like monkeys in trees”. (Desai,76). After meeting Saeed Saeed who is a Zanzibari Muslim, he begins to rethink the social, racial and religious prejudices he had lugged with him all the way from India. The charismatic Zanzibari soon “becomes the man Biju admires most in the United States of America” (Desai,53), and he finds himself “overcome by the desire to be his friend, because Saeed Saeed wasn’t drowning, he was bobbing in the tides” (Desai,76).

Biju finally comes to the awareness that a, “habit of hate had accompanied him, and he found that he possessed an awe of white people, who arguably had done India great harm, and a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India” (Desai, 77). Thus, Biju clearly evolves as a culturally hybrid person. Biju remembers about “Colonial India, free India,” he finds “the tea was the same, but the romance was gone” (133); Biju and his friends drink tea and diligently they read the *New York Times* together. They take *tikka masala*, tandoori grill, *navrattan* vegetable curry, *dal makhani*. He dissolves the age-old biases harbored against people of foreign nations to emerge as a more balanced individuals who return to his Indian roots retaining his values, but draining clear from cultural prejudices and fallacies, moving towards an equilibrium.

However, as the novel proceeds he fails to obtain official recognition as a legal migrant and returns to his home in India. His journey to America turns out to be a journey of disillusionment. After living in squalid conditions, he returns to his homeland without the anticipated monetary or social upliftment. His dreams from the cultural encounter remains

unfulfilled and unaccomplished, like the other characters in the novel, though he does transform positively, in a limited sense.

Desai's characters like Judge, Sai, Father Booty, Uncle Potty, Mrs. Sen, Lola and Noni, at Cho Oyu and Mon Ami, are distinctive products of cultural hybridity. However, they do not live in an accommodating atmosphere, and are constantly under cultural conflicts, clashing ideologies, confusion and turmoil.

Desai's juxtaposes the issue of negotiating identity in the flux of dissolving borders. She interweaves the stories of characters from diverse cultural groups and brings them together on a common 'cultural-space'. She explores the issues facing a cultural continuum beginning with colonialism to contemporary forms associated with multiculturalism. Her characters typify the cultural crisis faced by the colonized as in case of Jemubhai and traces its impact on the future generations through the portrait of Sai. She examines the issue of regional and ethnic minority rights and fundamentalism through the character of Gyan. She juxtaposes the concerns of erosion of identity in contemporary geo-cultural clash through the sub-plot of Biju who grapples with trans-migrancy problems, racism, alienation and loss of human values etc. The novel converges the issues related to cultural identity crisis and presents befitting narratives of little entities which interweave like multicolored threads of the overarching narrative of the multicultural drapery.

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