

Be(longing) and E/Ethno(scape): Losing of Self and Identity in

The Inheritance of Loss

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Abstract

This paper begins with the notion that postcolonial literature is the most important and emphatic tool of representing various issues, the offshoots of a colonial hangover like displacement, orientation, self-contradiction, alienation, and identity crisis. Taking into consideration the various illustrations of Kiran Desai's Booker prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), this paper purports how the Self and identity of the characters are recognized or determined on the basis of his community and society which creates a sense of belonging in them and again how their longing for Western values, manners, language and economic stability lead them to escape or migrate to the colonial places, the globalized ethnoscape. The paper also emphasized though the ethnoscape provides them the basis to fulfill their aim and aspirations, they confront the Western Self which essentialise them and creates a crisis in their Self and identity.

Keywords: Displacement, Orientation, Self-contradiction, Identity Crisis and Ethnoscape.

Introduction

Post colonialism as a literary discipline deals with various factors like colonial aftermath, migration, globalization, diasporic experiences to show the complex issues – displacement, orientation, self-contradiction, and identity crisis bred by the discrimination between the colonized and colonizer, the inferior and the superior. The colonized countries

even after their independence still bear the colonial hangover because “the colonial master’s constant representation of the native as the non-human, animalized thing annihilates the identity of the native” (Nayar 157). Kiran Desai as a diasporic writer projects these observed and experiencing complexities in her Booker prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Sinha and Reynolds state,

The Inheritance of Loss is not only a story, it is, a perspective, an inside look into postindependence India, with its roots dug in colonialism, its branches embracing Americanism, but its leaves brown and dusty with the age-old prejudices that govern people’s minds; an India where a class of people still speak only English and squirm at the mention of their mother tongues (xi).

Here she shows how the sense of belonging of the characters like Jemubhai Patel and Biju gets nullified by their longing for the Western culture and economy. Because of their longing for the Western values, manners, language, and glamorous life style, they escape to a new space, loses his self and identity, and feels alienated and exiled.

Set partly in India and partly in the U.S, it deals with the characters’ search for identity and struggle of their Self as well as the pertinent issues of globalization. In “Identity Crisis- Indian English Fiction of post 1980’s” Tiwari writes, “identity is a multi- dimensional word. In psychology and sociology, identity is a person’s conception and expression of their individuality and or group affiliations – such as national identity and cultural identity” (6). The identity of an individual connects him/her to his/her national identity as well as to the society or community he/she belongs to and thus constructs in him/her a sense of belongingness. It is also considered that “identity may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual or shared by all members of a particular social category or group” (6). Thus, identity leads to the fact that an individual’s characteristics are recognized and defined on the basis of the social group where he/she belongs to. Such kind of recognition and definition of

an individual's identity creates complications and conflicts in the Self of the individual. In order to eradicate these complications, they always try to elevate themselves to the ladder of social status both individually and economically.

Be(longing) and Ethno(scape) Through Self and Identity

Globalization as a postcolonial phenomenon provides the basis where such individuals can fulfill their aspiration but it has also its drawbacks which again lead them to their identity crisis and Self-contradiction. Arjun Appadurai in his book *Modernity at Large* divides globalization into five scapes – Ethnoscapes, Mediascapes, Finacioscapes, Technoscapes, and Ideoscapes. The issue of ethnoscapes is so much relevant in the novel. Ethnoscape is the flow of people across the world. The characters of the novel escape to a multicultural space where their sense of belonging and identity are affected or determined by the dominant Western culture. Pankaj Mishra writes, “Desai takes a skeptical view of the West's consumer-driven multiculturalism” where “people fated to experience modern life as a continuous affront to their notions of order, dignity, and justice”. The prominent figure Jemubhai Patel migrates to the U.K for higher education to become a judge and always his Self struggles to become a Western. But the other character Biju migrates to America to make him and his father financially stable. He always tries to restore his Self by not being influenced by the dominant culture. This paper investigates how the sense of belonging is affected by their longing to escape to a globalized place which ultimately snatches their identity by putting their Self in contradict and problematic culture.

The character mostly affected by colonial confrontation is Jemubhai Patel who sets for the U.K to pursue his dream of passing the I.C.S exam. Jemubhai is born and brought up in a peasant caste family, who invests all their resources into ensuring his good education. But separation from his native land hardens his life and crates extreme self-hatred in him. In London, he experiences the very process of essentialisation that how Indians are always viewed

with a mean and nonchalant attitude. He goes through “the platform between benches labeled ‘Indians Only’ and ‘Europeans Only’” (41). The process of essentialising and recognition through differences creates in the judge inferior complexity about his Indian identity. He becomes a mimic man but cannot become fully identified with the foreign culture. Under the colonial dictation, he feels uncomfortable regarding his own skin color, the basis of essentialisation. In order to fill this racial gap, he insists on wearing the white mask and behaves according to Western dictation. Desai describes his attraction towards the Western culture in the following manner, “The clothes were frayed but clean, ironed by the cook, who still ironed everything- pyjamas, towels, socks, underwear, and handkerchiefs. His face seemed distanced by what looked like white powder over dark skin” (Desai 37). He also finds his English very poor before the Westerners. Because of his unaccented poor English, he eventually stopped speaking “I”, beginning sentences instead with “one”. He had learnt “to take refuge in the third person and to keep everyone at bay, to keep even himself away from himself” (111). Thus he loses his own Self.

Collapsing under colonial depictions he resists his Indian self and starts to elevate himself in accordance with the Other Western self. Though Jemubhai’s “Self-first encounters the Other as a threat” (Lott 154) ultimately the Other becomes his ideal. Jean Paul Sartre argues, “the Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other” (302). Now he tries to become more English and ultimately secures the position of a chief justice with the I.C.S. With the help of his English friend, Bose he makes him more like an English man. After coming to his native land he still resists the Indian self and always conducts with his Western self. He always follows the English mannerism while taking tea: “never ever was the tea served the way it should be, but he demanded at least a cake or scones, macaroons or cheese straws. Something sweet and something salty” (Desai 3).

Returning from England he always showcases his British social and professional status to hide his middle class status. The narrator writes that “found he began to be mistaken for something he wasn’t—a man of dignity,” that “this accidental poise became more important than any other thing. He envied the English. He loathed Indians” (119). He becomes envious to his Indianness. He demeans everything which is Indian. He asked Gyan to recite a poem and mocks at him “in a cheerless and horrible manner” (109) as the poem was known to every school children. This reminds the judge of the shame which he himself felt at Cambridge when asked to deliver a poem during his exam. Thus he insists on belittling Gyan to generate a distance between himself and his past. Even his wife becomes a victim of his hatred. Nimi, his wife reminds him of his former self. He detests her “typically Indian bum – lazy, wide as buffalo” (172). His attempt to distance himself from his wife involves his contempt, neglect and physical abuse:

One day he found footprints on the toilet seat—she was squatting on it, she was squatting on it! – he could barely contain his outrage, took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl, and after a point, Nimi, made invalid by her misery, grew very dull... She peered out at the world but could not focus on it, never went to the mirror, because she couldn’t see herself in it. (173)

Nimi becomes the suppressed self of the judge. In order to forget his previous Self, he sends her away because he is afraid that he may kill her. Thus, he always tries to maintain his distance with his former Self.

The judge leaves like a foreigner, settles in a mansion in Kanchenjunga. He alienates himself from the Indian community and chooses the Western type of privacy. She does not care for her wife and daughter but has a dog, Mutt who is his only companion. This kind of attitude makes him inhuman and selfish. In the end, he himself finds the drawbacks in his character and wonders “if he had killed his wife for the sake of false ideals. Stolen her dignity, shamed his

family, shamed hers, turned her into the embodiment of their humiliation” (308). So throughout the novel, it is explicit that he loses his Self as well as his identity because of his double consciousness and in-betweenness condition.

The other important character is Cook’s son Biju who like the judge goes abroad just to fulfill his father's dream. His father wanted his nineteen years old son to become rich. It is the globalization which provides Biju the space to get financial stability, it puts before him some kind of problems that clash with his Self and creates identity problem. Because of his postcolonial status, his identity is essentialised and his individuality encounters rejection and denial from the Western community as “essentialism presupposes that a group or a category of objects/people share some defining features exclusive to the members of this particular group or category” (66). Basically, as a migrant his identity is recognized and determined on the basis of his religion and color like other South Asian migrants: “At least they might have something in common with them like religion and skin color, grandfathers who ate cured sausages and looked like them too” (54). Because of his color and native temperament, he is stereotyped and marginalized.

Ethnoscape for the migrants creates an identity crisis. D. Gnanasekaran remarks, “migration then has its own problems. When the marginalized happen to migrate, the usual problems not only cling to them wherever they go but also multiply” (12). The narrator describes the Western gaze and view about Biju. For example, the wife of his owner says, “he smells...I think I am allergic to his hair oil” (54). Biju always experiences rejection and resistance as the Western employers dictate him to cope up with civilization. One of his employers says, “use the time off to take a birth” (26). The employer does not take Biju as himself and this always reminds him of the gap between the colonized and coloniser’s status. The other migrants like Saaed and other Muslims also face the same kind of problem. But Saaed does not bother about his Self because his only aim is to earn money.

But Biju is so concerned about his Self and identity. He always grapples to maintain his Hindu belief of “holy cow and unholy cow” (138). He has the sense of his own religious values. He leaves his job at a restraint that serves steak because he has the realization that he should lead his life according to his native religion. In spite of his strong sense of native Self and identity, he also affected by the Western self to some extent. He also faces the Other as a threat when at the time of his applying for the visa he states that “I’m civilized, sir, ready for the U.S., I’m civilized, ’mam” (201). Such claim of being civilized puts him under colonial dictation and creates in his identity dilemma. There are other characters who are totally overpowered by colonial self and bear ambivalence in identity. The hotel employer Harrish- Harry as a mimic man bears such ambivalence in his identity as his name is composed of two different selves, the East and the West. So “almost all of Desai’s characters have been stunned by their encounters with the West” (Gnanaskaran 23).

Conclusion

Throughout the novel, the characters look at themselves from the perspectives of the West and suffer from an identity crisis which is “a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself” (Erikson). Their native land creates their Self through their sense of belonging but longing to escape to a new dominant culture alienates them from their true Self. So Kiran Desai shows But, Biju though he confronts with the issues related to self-contradiction and identity crisis, he does not let the colonial attitude to grasp his Self and identity. He leaves America and comes ultimately to India, his native land as he has the self to realize the contradiction created by the colonial space. Kiran Desai as a diasporic writer projects her observation and experiences how globalized world through its colonial consciousness still dominates the third world country people psychologically and exile them to a schizophrenic condition.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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