

## **The Theme of Alienation in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss***

**Dr. G. Chenna Reddy**

**Department of English**

**Acharya Nagarjuna Univesity**

**Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur**

**India**

**&**

**V. Pawel**

**Ph.D. Scholar Department of English**

**Acharya Nagarjuna Univesity**

**Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur**

**India**

### **Abstract**

The theme of alienation has been recurrent in the Indian English fiction. It has become a major concern for post-modern writers and Kiran Desai, daughter of Anita Desai is no exception. She has explored this contemporary issue in her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* for which she took eight long years to complete. The various themes which are intertwined in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* are globalization, multiculturalism, insurgency, poverty, isolation and issues related to loss of identity. The author Kiran Desai exposes powerfully the ill-effects of globalization and liberalization which profess to create wealth and improve the quality of life; but in reality widen the gulf between the rich and the poor. She powerfully delineates how the sense of 'loss' has started with Jemubhai Patel, the Judge who vainly attempts to become an Anglicized person and gets alienated in the process in the colonial period. This loss has been inherited to the next generations and epitomized in Sai, the Judge's granddaughter. Her efforts to recuperate from the sense of rootlessness by having a relation with Gyan, the Nepali are severely impeded by the political turmoil caused by Gorkhaland movement. On the other hand, Desai tries to capture what it means to live

between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant through the character of Biju, the Cook's son.

**Key Words: Alienation, Disillusionment, Acculturation, Illegal Immigrants, Hybrid identity**

## **Introduction**

Alienation is a condition in the rich social relationships reflected by a low degree of integration or common values and a high degree of distance or isolation between individuals, or between an individual and a group of people in a community or work environment. The term alienation itself comes from the Latin *alienus* which meant 'of another place or person', which in turn came from *alius*, meaning 'other' or 'another'. The term alienation has been used in varied meanings over ages. In the ancient times it was used in the metaphysical sense of achieving a higher sense of contemplation.

Alienation is estrangement from other people, society, or work... a blocking or dissociation of a person's feelings, causing the individual to become less effective. The focus here is on the person's problems in adjusting to society. However, some philosophers believe that alienation is inevitably produced by a shallow and depersonalized society. According to Heidegger, "Mankind has fallen into crisis by taking a narrow, technological approach to the world and by ignoring the larger question of existence. (Microsoft Corporation "Microsoft Encarta 97 Encyclopedia") It results in people feeling meaninglessness and purposelessness in their lives.

It is a pervasive phenomenon in the contemporary era which is affected by globalization. The contemporary man fails to perceive his purpose of life and constantly searches for his place in the world. Globalization has improved the quality of life in India, but of course only to a minority of people. Besides this, the gulf between the rich and the poor has also deepened. This created an atmosphere where all relations including the familial relations have become commercial. It has created a society where ethics and human values are sacrificed for the sake of success.

Alienation has been a recurrent theme in Indian English fiction. It has become a major concern for the post-modern Indian English writers and Kiran Desai is no exception. She is the daughter of famous novelist Anita Desai. She was born on 3rd September, 1971. She lived in Delhi until she was 14, and then spent a year in England, before her family moved to the USA. She completed her schooling in Massachusetts before attending Bennington

College; Hollins University and Columbia University, where she studied creative writing. Her mother Anita Desai is the author of many books, three of which have been short listed for the Booker Prize (*Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). As expected from her parental background Kiran Desai is a wonderful story-teller. Her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), which won her Betty Trask Award, is a fresh look at life in the sleepy provincial town of Shahkot in India. She took eight long years to write her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. Published in early 2006, it won the 2006 Man Booker Prize.

The various themes which are intertwined in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* are globalization, multiculturalism, insurgency, poverty, isolation and issues related to loss of identity. Though in the twentieth century the world has become 'Global Village' due to the rapid advancement in Information Technology, the distance between the hearts and minds has increased. This is reflected in the relations between Jemubhai and his granddaughter Sai and other inhabitants of Kalimpong. The worst side of this can be seen in the longing of the Cook and his son Biju to meet, at least to talk to each other. The novel is also a social criticism focusing on the poverty and misery of North-East India, and its religious-socio-political conflicts, presented through subtle humor and irony. The abject poverty of Gyan and other Gorkhas bring to limelight the discrimination faced by the ethnic minorities in the country.

The following excerpts from Kiran Desai's interview to Rediff.com give us an insight into the basic themes of the novel:

The second book isn't a book that is set entirely in India, but one that tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant. On a deeper level, it explores what happens when a Western element is introduced into a country that is not of the West, which is what happened, of course, during colonial times and is happening again with India's new relationship with the States.

I also wanted to write about what happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one. How does the imbalance between these two worlds change a person's thinking and feeling? How do these changes manifest themselves in a personal sphere, a political sphere, over time?

These are old themes that continue to be relevant in today's world, the past informing the present, the present revealing the past.

(<http://www.rediff.com/news/2006/jan/30inter1a.htm>)

The author draws parallel between the stories of Nepali immigrants in India and Indian immigrants in the States, all struggling with questions of what it means to be cheap labor, with the questions of rights and identity.

The title of the book is apt as it speaks of little failures, in a way, passed down from generation to generation. “*Boast of Quietness*”, a poem by Jorge Luis Borges serves as a fitting epigraph for *The Inheritance of Loss*. The poem speaks of loss, of universal human feelings and of the difficulties in achieving contentment.

The novel is set in India and the U.S.A. The retired Judge Jemubhai Popatlal Patel lives with her granddaughter Sai and his cook Panna Lal in Cho Oyu, a crumbling house in Kalimpong, which is located at the foothills of the Himalayas. The geographical location itself reflects alienation in the family and its inhabitants. “They (the Judge and Sai) sipped and ate, all of existence passed over by nonexistence, the gate leading nowhere, and they watched the tea spill copious ribbony curls of vapor, watched their breath join the mist slowly twisting and turning, twisting and turning.” (4) The barrenness is also evident when the author says, “Time might have died in the house that sat on the mountain ledge, its lines, grown distinct with moss, its roof loaded with ferns.” (17)

The judge Jemubhai Patel goes to Cambridge in pre-colonial times (in 1939). He is from a remote place called Piphit where the benches on the railway platform are labeled “Indians only” and “Europeans only.” His father sends him to England because he feels his son going abroad takes them up the social ladder. Ironically the Judge’s father earns his livelihood by procuring false witnesses in courts. Jemubhai goes one month after his marriage and he has not even examined his wife’s face. He boards the ship at Bombay. The author remarks, “Never again would he know love for a human being that wasn’t adulterated by another, contradictory emotion.” (37)

The Judge has reverence for the Queen before going to England, but experiences humiliation in London. He cannot face the oppression by the colonizers. He becomes aloof and withdraws. To escape from the loneliness, he focuses exceptionally on his studies. “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.” (39) For days together no one speaks to them. He is insulted by the young girls saying that he stinks of curry and he washes himself obsessively. He hesitates even to smile as it will highlight his lips and gums which are Indian. Eventually he barely feels human at all. His education in England makes him decultured and makes him a man with intellect but not a warm heart. His futile attempts to fit

into the alien culture make him emotionally barren and spiritually dead. He cannot treat anyone from his father to his cook affectionately. He even loses the basic human ability of communication. He finds solace in the company of his dog Mutt. He was torn apart by the memories of his past and even his Calmpose cannot give him sleep.

After his education he becomes a member of the ICS and is posted in Uttar Pradesh. Later he is posted in West Bengal. He directs his frustration towards all Indians and especially towards his wife because he is a product of a male chauvinistic society. He treats his wife most inhumanely, abuses her physically and finally deserts her for no fault of hers. He felt his wife too uncivilized to be taken to official parties. Thus the Judge's wife who has really provided financial assistance for the Judge to go abroad is double-alienated-once as an Indian at the hands of the British and then at the hands of her husband. Only after he lost his Mutt he wondered "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) He feels compunction over being violent and inhuman to his wife.

Jemubhai's companion at Cho Oyu is his cook. The cook is hired by the judge when he was 14 at 12 rupees a month. The cook was disappointed to be working for Jemubhai. "A severe comedown, he thought from his father, who had served white men only." (63) This shows the alienation suffered by Jemubhai even at the hands of his countrymen. In course of time the cook becomes, "A poverty stricken man growing into an ancient at fast-forward. Compressed childhood, lingering old age." (19) Just like Jemubhai's father who sends his son to the UK in colonial times to improve his social and economic strata, in the post-independence scenario the cook sends his son to the US as he believes it is the only way to improve their lives. The cook receives letters from his son describing his jobs in the U.S. as excellent job and better even later than the last.

The sense of loss suffered by the Judge and the Cook is transferred even to the next generation as evident in the characterization of Sai, the Judge's granddaughter and Biju, the Cook's son. The author delineates the themes of dislocation, disillusionment, nostalgia, yearning for home, and longing for identity through the character of Biju who dreams of the greener life and of course, the Green Card in the US. But he is severely humiliated even when he is issued a visa. He could not even understand the announcements at the American embassy. Thus he experiences a sense of alienation even before leaving the country. Just as the Judge feels alienated in England, Biju feels alienated in the host country because of his race and colour. The author describes the opprobrium heaped on the dark man. His situation

is more pathetic as he is an illegal immigrant unlike the Judge. He leads a wretched life and he is even exploited by his Indian employee Harish-Harry, owner of the Gandhi Café. He is deprived of his basic rights as a worker as he stays there illegally. He despises his father for sending him to the U.S. “Biju couldn’t help but feel a flash of anger at his father for sending him alone to this country, but he knew he wouldn’t have forgotten his father for not trying to send him, either.” (82)

He is deprived of an opportunity to talk to his father when he knows about the turmoil in Kalimpong. He becomes convinced that his father is dead. He decides to return to his homeland. But a bigger disappointment and distress awaits him when he is robbed of everything- his hard-earned money hidden in the fake soles of his shoes and more importantly his dignity. Both the Judge and Biju remain as the outsiders in the periphery of the host countries in spite of their attempts of acculturation.

The predicament of an alienated individual is delineated through the female protagonist of the novel Sai. Prasanta Bhattacharyya opined, “Born of a Hindu mother and a Zoroastrian father she is the true inheritor of a hybrid identity whose secularity is put to the strains of personal tragedy and political vicissitudes in order, as if, to see its chances of survival.” (P 226) Her parents have died in Moscow when she is young and is in India. She comes from St. Augustine’s in Dehradun to Kalimpong to live with her grandfather whom she has not seen once. She is unwanted at Cho Oyu and considered to be a burden as the Judge has disowned his daughter long ago. She is sixteen year old and Sai is unable to connect with the people of her age. The author observes, “Sai was shy around her peers.” (68) In the very first meeting she dislikes her grandfather. “There was more than a hint of reptile in the slope of his face, the wide hairless forehead, the introverted nose, the introverted chin, his lack of movement, his lack of lips, his fixed gaze. Like other elderly people, he seemed not to have travelled forward in time, but far back.” She tries to find solace in books. But even “Books were making her restless.” (68) She felt a terrible desire for the father she did not know. She stands as an example of the countless boys and girls who stay away from their parents for education and who long for love and warmth. Lovelessness makes her feel alienated and frustrated. But as a woman she is superior to her grandfather and does not humiliate others and satisfy her hurt psyche. She retains her human nature till the end. Finally she finds solace in the love of Gyan. But the insurgency in the region interrupts her romance with Gyan which further leads her into chaos. Gyan is swept away by the GNLF movement and feels that his duty is to fight for his people rather than spending time with Sai. He slowly begins to despise the

Anglophilic lifestyle of Sai and her family. He launches into a diatribe against her way of living and goes even to the extent of physically abusing her.

The author depicts the alienation in the other inhabitants of Kalimpong such as the sisters Lola and Noni. Lola and Noni are Anglophiles and they long for something beyond their existence. Lola's daughter stays in the UK and Lola brings things from there and boasts of them. But the irony is she cannot bring love from her daughter and it makes her alienated. Noni dreams of becoming an archaeologist. But her parents are not kind enough to understand her dreams. Her father is similar to the Judge who is educated only to give orders. The Judge, Sai Lola and Noni from the elite class are alienated because of their emotional barrenness. Gyan and other ethnic Nepalis are equally alienated. They get deprived of their basic rights and alienated forcing them to rebel and demand a separate nation. They are deprived of even an opportunity to voice their anguish. Their voice of protest is unheard in the main lands of the country. Even in the era of mass communication the media least bothers to cover their plight. In the case of them we can observe a causal relationship between the abject poverty and political discontent. Desai says, "What frightens me most, though, is that while there's a lot of crowing about how we're the richest minority group, we tend to leave out the fact that the poorest people of India are also in the States, betrayed not only by the Western world, but by the wealthier group of Indian immigrants." (<http://www.rediff.com/news/2006/jan/30inter1a.htm>)

The ethnic groups in the North-eastern states are alienated from the rest of the Indian state. The democratic leaders as well as the general public are least bothered about their welfare and basic rights. Their cultural roots and aspirations are neglected. Thus they live in abject poverty while people boast of Shining India. Even the cook who is in the exploited class looks down Gyan because of his ethnicity. He remarks, "Nepalis make good soldiers, coolies, but they are not so bright at their studies. Not their fault, poor things." (73) This type of alienation forces educated young people like Gyan to resort to radical thinking and this radical ideology further alienates them.

The extremist Gorkhaland Movement and the indifference of the locals towards the movement alienate and torture the common people. For instance when a gun is robbed from the Judge's house, an innocent man is picked up by the police. The wife and the father of the man frequent the Judge's house pleading their son's innocence. But the Judge is indifferent towards their plight. Only the cook who is also from the deprived section shows empathy.

The extremist movement also affected a generous man like Father Boot who was ordered to leave the country.

Thus the author Kiran Desai delineates the sense of loss experienced by people of different social strata and its inheritance over generations. Anila A. Pillai observes:

The predominant traits of existentialism are alienation, quest and conflict. Aspects of alienation and conflict are epitomized in the lives of the protagonists. The retired judge, Sai, Gyan and Biju are a study in alienation and existential angst.(172)

Despite creating the characters with the traits of existentialism, the author Kiran Desai concludes the novel in an optimistic note: “The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you need to do was to reach out and pluck it.” (324)

*The Inheritance of Loss* is partly autobiographical. The story is partly from her personal experiences as her family had a house in Kalimpong that was named Cho Oyu and she briefly went to school in Kalimpong's St Joseph's Convent. To quote Sophie Kalkreuth:

Desai spoke of her own hybrid identity as one that contains both extraordinary richness and a terribly difficult perspective: ‘It teaches you to clarify your place in the world. You are forced to see yourself from the outside.’  
([www.swallowwordsmagazine.com](http://www.swallowwordsmagazine.com))

In an interview Kiran Desai says:

I used to live near a bakery like the Queen of Tarts (a restaurant mentioned in her novel) and talked to the people who worked there. And I lived with people from Zanzibar in the neighborhood that I describe, so that is also taken from real life.  
(<http://www.rediff.com/news/2006/jan/30inter1a.htm>)

Sara-Duana Meyer opines:

Surely there is a lot of Desai's own experience of moving and living in between several worlds and histories in her second novel that addresses themes like the colonial past of India, the legacy of class and more recent history of separatism, but also migration, economic inequality, hybridization and the question of the nation-state.(175)

## **Conclusion**

Kiran Desai has created the characters with traits of existentialism like alienation, quest and conflict. She very powerfully delineates the feeling of rootlessness that has started in the colonial times. She also depicts how this sense of loss has been inherited to the succeeding

generations and how it has robbed their lives of the very pleasure of human existence. She also brings home the point how the struggle for existence in the era of globalization alienates the people. But the author concludes the novel with an optimistic note. Biju, the Cook's son rejoins his father and though he loses his hard-earned money he gets the long sought after love. The author gives an optimistic hint that Gyan comes back to Sai with Mutt, the Judge's dog. Thus the author suggests that the Loss will not be inherited to the next generations.

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