

The Awakened Mind: Rediscovery and Realization in Kiran

Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Indian Writing in English has undoubtedly made significant contributions to the World English literature. Kiran Desai in her Man Booker's Prize novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, attempts to focus on the concept of globalization and presents her analysis of immigration and settlement of people beyond the boundaries of their homeland. This novel holds an exotic blend of her views on, cultural shock, displacement, loss of identity, marginalization, etc. It also presents a female writer's exposition of the male psyche and its various responses to challenges faced in an alien world filled with hardships and an Indian American writer's perspective of the collision of the Eastern and Western values in the modern post-colonial world.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai presents the post colonial view of a powerful and privileged West and an underdeveloped and oppressed East, describing how various characters struggle to live in the social hierarchy - some for survival alone, and some in order to obtain better standards of living. The problems of migration and loss of identity are vividly portrayed through the principal characters, Jemu and Biju.

This paper tries to present the awakened mind of the various characters, a result of their rediscovery and realization of the lost world after their struggle through post colonial dilemmas.

Indian writing in English has earned a unique place in the vast realm of English literature the world over. With women writers in Indian writing in English articulating specific concerns of women – both from a social and feminist view point, Kiran Desai takes it to an all new level. In the Man Booker's Prize novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, the Indian American writer, Kiran Desai, retains her personal experiences and attempts to expose the problems of racism, loss of identity, displacement, exile, marginalization, etc., of multicultural societies in the world through the lens of migration and multiculturalism in a postcolonial setting. Also, disproving the fact that a female writer can portray only the female psyche and characters in her novels, Kiran Desai, has sharply and acutely portrayed the male psyche in this novel. She intensely exposes the masculine response to global and psychological issues. Highlighting the fact that the issue of migration is one of predominant themes of history, Lone (2008) has in his thesis tries to find an answer as to why some people end up being discriminated, and how such discrimination is represented in Literature, with emphasis on the tense relationship between the East and the West and how the connection between the colonizer and the colonized has influenced this situation. He concludes that difference in social class exist, and this inequality in society influences the human mind – both on the individual and the universal level. Lone infers that social differences also prove to be a reason for oppression and discrimination.

Jemu who goes to England for his higher Education, gets mentally disturbed by the treatment at the hands of the people in England and his alienation begins and develops into a complex. It makes him to learn the value of life and his homeland. Similarly, Biju's migration leads to his longing, as he is unable to permanently settle in U.S. and so he decides to return with hopes and dream failed. Desai portrays Biju as a dislocated character who has experienced the pain of exile in America. It is through characters like these, Desai exposes the problems of migration that has two sides, a positive side that provides the migrant person with fruitful experiences, and conversely a negative side, that are filled with experiences of bitterness and alienation.

This consciousness is enlisted aptly by Swaraj Raj (as cited by Shweta Arora, and Anita Parihar, 2010):

Curious accretion of a homing desire and a state of homelessness; a state of belonging and the awareness of not being able to belong; the contradictory pulls of the nostalgic longing for the home left behind and the desire to feel at home in the new dwelling; and the discrepant centrifugal pull of staying at the margins of the centre to maintain cultural difference and the centripetal seductions of assimilations in the adopted culture (17).

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai a diasporic writer, also expresses her stance and realization on multiculturalism, cultural clash, displacement and dislocations as she says that, "The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys (of her grandparents) as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is this I wanted to capture the possibility to have new knowledge. This diasporic experience can be the source of creativity".

It is this understanding that makes it easy for her to bring out the collective issue of alienation and the sense of uncertainty and loss of identity of her characters in the novel efficiently and realistically. This novel not only portrays the life of the people who suffer as migrants in other countries, but also presents characters who feel displaced and alienated in India, their motherland.

As she portrays the various losses faced by the principal characters in the novel, it is possible for the reader to identify that the origin of displacement begins in the mind. It works in the mind unconsciously and gives feelings, concepts, or desires of being transported from their basic object to a new environment. When characters in the novel attempt to settle abroad, but struggle to root themselves in a foreign land the feeling of displacement gets introduced in their mind. Subsequently when they become mentally disturbed, the alienated feeling starts to gain roots.

The main plot of the novel revolves around the place Kalimpong which is situated at the foot hills of mount Kanchenjunga in the North Eastern part of India. The novel mainly narrates the experiences of disenchantment due to their displacement. Jemubhai Patel, a typical bureaucrat from Gujarat was the first person from his caste to go and pursue studies abroad. "Jemu would be the first boy of their community to go to English university. The dowry bids poured in and his father exhilarated weighing and tallying: ugly face –a little more gold, a pale skin– a little less. A dark and ugly daughter of a rich man seemed their best bet" (*IOL* 89).

Because of his visit to England, Jemu gets a lot of privileges in his life. In order to achieve his personal ambition, he joins the Fitzwilliam College, but in the beginning he feels left alone. He is entirely out of mind and feels that he had forgotten to speak. He feels as a stranger and also isolated from others, because the people over there behave abnormally to him. He also feels strange while travelling in bus as the person sitting next to him moved away, which made him to feel that he was different from others. ". . . –moved over when he sat next to them in the bus, so he knew that whatever they had, they were secure in their

conviction that it wasn't even remotely as bad as what he had"(IOL 39). This makes him to feel alienated and he becomes conscious of his body colour, because of this sudden feeling of separation, he forgets to speak, laugh and he feels that the people over there were so private. Everything looks very different:

. . . Jemubhai's mind had begun to wrap; he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his own skin odd-coloured, his own accent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely manage to lift his lips in a smile, and if he ever did, he held his hand over his mouth, because he couldn't bear anyone to see his gums, his teeth (IOL 40).

Unable to forget the incidents which happened in England, he makes a decision. : "To the end of his life, he would never be seen without socks and shoes and would prefer shadow to light, faded days to sunny, for he was suspicious that sunlight might reveal him, in his hideousness, all too clearly"(IOL 40). It is this decision that develops in him a strong hatred towards his approach to westerners and brings a negative impact on his psyche, aptly portrayed by Desai. Biju, another ambitious character of the novel, who as an illegal immigrant in the United States also undergoes the same kind of suffering.. With great expectations he goes to the US, but his hopes and dreams fail. In America, "Biju had spent his early days standing at a counter along with a row of men" (IOL 15). He gets treated very harshly, and so Biju has to often change his place of work. He gets a job in a hotel and there too he suffers and his condition is vividly explained.

Biju's faces a series of challenges as he enters an alienated world with a feeling of a migrant and an exile. His dream to create a secure future is defeated by the harsh reality. A sense of alienation starts to haunt him continuously just after arriving in America. He possesses "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."(77). In New York, Biju recollects his thoughts of motherland and the joy and comfort he enjoyed in his village. A profound sense of nationalism inspires Biju to return to India.

Before leaving India, his mind gets occupied with the American dream. But after experiencing nightmares, his experiences assist him to originate Indianness in his mind. "The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it."(Desai 324).

In India too, Biju and his father live in poverty. His father not getting high wages, is not given any increment, and is treated by the judge in a bad manner: "His last raise had been

twenty-five rupees. “But sahib,” he had begged, “how can I live on this?” “All your expenses are paid for—housing, clothing, food, medicines. This is extra,” growled the judge” (*IOL* 54). He struggles a lot to survive. These things trigger Biju to undertake a journey to America. He is portrayed as a person, who searches for his identity in a foreign country by the means of green card. “The experiences of a migrant person also engenders various problems and facets of journey and relocation in new lands e.g. displacement, up rootedness, unbelongingness, discrimination, marginalization, crisis and identity, cultural conflicts, yearning for home and homeland etc.” (Tejinder Kaur 8). Biju suffers with the change of culture and atmosphere in the new land. Whatever he earns, he spends the money to get his green card. Of course, Biju is offered some good chances to earn, but he expresses his anger when he is cheated by people: “Without us living like pigs,” said Biju, “what business would you have? This is how you make your money, paying us nothing because you know we can’t do anything, making us work day and night because we are illegal. Why don’t you sponsor us for green cards?” (*IOL* 188). Biju’s words show the readers the appalling condition migrants suffered in the hands of the owners. Desai mentions New York as “... a lovely city . . .an easy city to go back and an easy city to leave” (Sircar 2006). Biju attempts to rediscover a new life for his father with the hope that the new world will have a better living condition to offer.

Through the character of Biju, Desai portrays the dilemma in the immigrants’ life, a dilemma to choose between the east and west. She analyses and depicts the cultural changes of a person from the east and the struggle to adapt to the western culture. In reality a majority of the migrants feel miserable and alienated exactly like Biju. When faced with problems, they realize the fact and start longing for their home land: “Migration is a sword with sharp edges on both sides. The feeling of loss when one leaves one’s home is as intensive as having to leave a foreign home,” (B.Winmayil 233).

In *The Inheritance of Loss* Kiran Desai presents a realistic and emotive picture of the life of the person, who venture into a new world with a hope to secure a good living, only to be filled with disappointments . The identity crisis thrusts them to feel uprooted and brings in a sense of realization through the process of rediscovery. It enlarges their consciousness about so many things which they otherwise would never have understood if they have lived in one place. The awakened mind makes them to think better and understand clearly a subject of universal significance – alienation.

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