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Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* :A Quest for Identity

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Abstract. In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* twin strands straddle across continents mapping the contours of the ethno-racial and historical relationship between people from different cultures. Primarily it is about Love, Longing, Loss and Identity Crisis. It depicts the pair of exile of post-colonialism and the blinding desire for a "better life". In New York the racial discrimination makes Jemubhai retreat into solitude making him a stranger to his own identity in quest of a 'better life'. Sai appears at the outset of the novel. She interprets love as the "gap between desire and fulfilment". This sets the very theme of the novel, a tryst with loss at all levels. In a parallel narrative we are shown the life of Biju who belongs to the class of 'shadow-immigrants', moving from one ill-paid job to another in search of a green card. The experiences of Biju in America expose how the dream of globalization has become a threat to the identity of the ethnic community. As a student in America Jemubhai feels barely human but on returning to India, he finds himself despising his ostensibly backward Indian wife. The Anglophilic seeds in his bosom culminates in beating and drawing away his wife. All characters in the novel struggle with their cultural identity. The novel ends with the return of Biju. The present paper intends to focus on the theme of identity crises in the novel.

Keywords : Identity; culture; immigrants; loss; Anglophilic; shadow-immigrants

Kiran Desai, the writer of the critically acclaimed *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, was educated in India, England and the United States and like the characters in her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* she continues to divide her time between places mixed with results. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, for which she won the Man Booker Prize in 2006, twin strands straddle across continents, mapping the contours of the ethno-racial and Historical relationships between people from different cultures and backgrounds. But primarily it is about Love, Longing, Loss, and Identity Crisis. It is especially about the loss of identity. The novel bounces between an insurgency in India and the immigrating experience and these scenes will resonate with anyone who has been compelled to compromise with their heritage, their identity. It deftly shuttles between the first and the third worlds, illuminating the pain of exile, the ambiguities of Post-Colonialism and the blinding desire for a "better life".

The novel is vast in scope from the Himalayas to the immigrant quarters of New York where Jemubhai Patel finds accommodation with great difficulty and humiliations after "he visited twenty-two homes before he arrived at the doorstep

of Mrs. Rice on Thornton Road". (Desai 38) The racial discrimination there makes him retreat into solitude that grew in weight day by day. Desai writes:

> For entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things... The Solitude became habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow". – All this making Jemubhai a stranger to himself, a stranger to his own identity—the same man who had left his mother crying "Don't let him go, don't let him go," the man who had thrown away the plantains so affectionately packed for him by his mother; the man who had not thrown the coconut and had not cried. All this for what? Only to lose his own identity in quest of a "better life". Desai writes "Never again would he know love for a human being that wasn't adulterated by another, contradictory emotion. (36-37)

Kiran Desai writes of the post-colonial India, of its poor as well as its privileged, with a cold eye and a warm heart. Although the novel focuses on the fate of a few powerless individuals, it manages to explore every contemporary international issue. A nation's tragedies, great and small, are revealed through the hopes and the dreams, and the all-too- human feelings of a superbly realized cast of characters. The novel begins and ends with the description of Kanchenjunga :

> Briefly visible above the vapor, Kanchenjunga was a far peak whitted out of ice, gathering the last of the light, a plume of snow blown high by the storms at its summit. (1)

Sai appears at the very outset of *The Inheritance of Loss*. Sai, one of the central characters in the novel asks "could fulfilment ever be felt as deeply as loss? and goes on to interpret love as the "gap between desire and fulfilment. This sets the theme of the novel, a tryst with loss at all levels. – personal, social, political and cultural."(2) She is a teenage Indian girl, an orphan, living with her Cambridge-educated grandfather, a retired Chief Justice named Jemubhai Patel, in the town of Kalimpong on the Indian side of the Himalayas. Sai, after four years of her stay in the convent school, for the first time in her life, has come to live with her grandfather—who in Desai's words in the opening lines of chapter seven is "more Lizard than human" (38) after bidding "Good-bye" to the perversities of the convent about which Desai writes, "The system might be obsessed with purity but it excelled in defining the flavour of sin" (29). But here too, in Kalimpong, Sai's hopes are shattered. Sai is in love with her math tutor Gyan, the descendant of a Nepali Gurkha mercenary. Eventually Gyan recoils from her obvious privilege and falls with a

group of ethnic Nepalese insurgents. In a parallel narrative, we are shown the life of Biju, the son of Sai's grandfather's Cook, who belongs to the class of 'Shadow immigrants' in New York. Biju spends much of his time dodging the authorities, moving from one ill-paid job to another on an elusive search for a green card. Biju's life abroad is miserable. Desai writes, "Above the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican, Indian, Pakistani." (21) That the other side of the world is not all green and beautiful is manifested in Desai's depiction of the pain of exile amongst the "Shadow Class" represented by the Cook's son Biju. His experiences in New York showcase the falsity of the empire's claim of providing equality and dignity to all human beings irrespective of their caste, creed and colour.

What binds these seemingly disparate characters is a shared or rather common historical legacy and a common experience of impotency and humiliation due to subjection by the economic and cultural powers of the West. But the beginnings of an apparently leveled field of global economy, the seeds of which were sown in early 1980s and the real thrust to the globalization process was of the IMF and the World Bank, serve merely to scratch those wounds instead of healing them. The experiences of Biju in America are dexterously arranged to expose how the dream of globalization has become a threat to the identity of the ethnic community.

As a student isolated in racist England, Jemubhai Patel feels barely human at all and leaps "when touched on the arm as if from unbearable intimacy." (40) But the same man, when he returns to India, finds himself despising his ostensibly backward Indian wife. Whereas, at the time before leaving for abroad he had thought of his wife. He was a one-month married man. He would return... many years from now... and then what? It was all very strange. She was fourteen years old and he had to properly examine her face. Now, when the district commissioner had summoned him to give him the astonishing news that his wife had been part of the Nehru Committee, Jemubhai was furious at the thought of the 'embarassment' that would be suffered by the commissioner himself and the entire civil service. This thought sprouted the Anglophilic seeds in his bosom, culminating in abusing, beating and driving away his wife, Nimy, even in the state of pregnancy resulting in her death, proving Desai's words true in chapter forty-ore, "SATAN IS WAITING TO BURN YOU ALIVE" (267) "The Anglophilic characters, 'aunties and uncles', get a great deal of space in the narrative, serving as the linking thread in naturally-looking ambience in the narrative for the English readers, notwithstanding many inconsistencies in it". (Narain 29-30) The judge takes all care "to ensure that he takes only 'Angrezi Khana', wears a black coat and tie for dinner even when he is in a tent inside a jungle as the cook would tell us, and maintains his anglicized stiff-upperlip mannerism at all times". (107) As his creator points out, "I think transporting a man from a poor family into a supremely wealthy society must have an impact... must result in some kind of mental deterioration. In most cases, it is those back home who take the brunt as the power balance changes. Jemubhai's case is an

extreme. I call him an ogre and believe me, there are ogres in existence." (Ganapathy 46) As Roop Rekha Verma suggests :

> The unreflective or uncritical internalization of a culture is due to non-transcendental choice-closures... and the identities of the individuals formed by them are inauthentic. An inauthentic identity militates against the requirements of modernity, and consequently against those of progress too (Verma 533)

Kiran Desai's second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* tackles the lingering effects of colonialism on two kinds of South Asian people—those who attempt to leave India and those who remain. Jemubhai Popatlal, a retired Cambridge-educated judge, lives in Kalimpong, at the foot of the Himalayas, with his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, and his Cook. The makeshift family's neighbours include a coterie of Anglophiles who might be savvy readers of V.S. Naipaul but who are, perhaps less aware of how fragile their own social standing is—at least until a surge of unrest disturbs the region. Jemubhai, with his hunting rifle and English biscuits, becomes an obvious target. Besides threatening their lives, the revolution also affects the fledging romance between 16 year-old Sai and her Nepalese tutor, Gyan. The Cook's son, Biju, meanwhile lives miserably as an illegal alien in New York. All of these characters struggle with their cultural identity and the forces of modernization while trying to maintain their emotional connection with one another. In this alternatively comical and contemplative novel, when a Nepalese insurgency in the mountains threatens Sai's new-sprung romance with her handsome Nepali tutor and causes their lives to descend into chaos, they, too, are forced to confront their colliding interests. The nation fights itself. The cook witnesses the hierarchy being overturned and discarded. The judge must revisit his past, his own journey and role in grasping world of conflicting betrayal. Desai deftly shuttles between first and third worlds, illuminating the pain of exile, the ambiguities of post-colonialism and the blinding desire for a 'better life', when one person's wealth means another's poverty.

Jemubahi, the judge, is one of those Indians who could not rid themselves of what had bruised their heart and whose Anglophilia can only turn to self-hatred. These Indians are also an anachronism in post-colonial India where long-suppressed peoples have begun to awaken to their dereliction, to express their anger and despair. For some of Desai's characters, including Lola, who is one of the judge's neighbours in Kalimpong, this comes as a distinct shock. There is no mistaking the literary influences on Desai's exploration of post-colonial chaos and despair and of course loss of identity. Early in the novel she sets two Anglophilic Indian women to discussing *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul's powerfully bleak novel about traditional

Africa's encounter with the modern world. Globalization and the capitalist market forces have brought forth a new wave of imperialism with their rising powers in the contemporary world. Irrespective of what advocates of globalization like Gracia Canclini put forth, globalization has amply contributed to the reinforcement of cultural and linguistic imperialism in the post-colonial world. As the so-called third world countries proceed towards 'development' and 'modernization', they tend to aspire to become more like their former masters. Lola thinks Naipaul is "Strange, stuck in the past..." He has not progressed. Colonial neurosis, he's never freed himself from it–Quite a different thing now. In fact, she said, "Chicken tikka masala has replaced fish and chips as the number one take-out dinner in Britain." In chapter thirty-three in the novel, Sai has *Wuthering Heights* in her bag." the novel in which the protagonist Heathcliff has no surname, no inheritance, no identification. Similar is the case with other characters in the novel who have lost their identity.

Desai takes a sceptical view of the consumer-driven multi-culturism of the west. She notes the British-accented voice of Lola's daughter who is a newsreader for B.B.C. radio and who dresses like a British woman. In fact, Desai's novel seems to argue that such multiculturism does not begin to address the causes of extremism and violence in the modern world. Nor does it suggest that economic globalization can become a route to prosperity for the down-trodden. Desai observes that profit could only be harvested in the gap between nations, working one against the other.

This leaves most people in the postcolonial world with only the promise of a shabby modernity–modernity in its meanest form, brand new one day, in ruin the next. Not surprisingly, half-educated, uprooted men like Gyan gravitate to the first available political causes in their search for a "better life," a better way. He joins what sounds like an ethnic national movement largely as an opportunity to vent his rages and frustration. Desai reminds us that old hatreds are endlessly retrievable and they are purer because the grief of the past was gone, just the fury remained, distilled, liberating.

Unlike Gyan, others try to escape. In scene after scene depicting this process—a boarding house in England, derelict bungalows in Kalimpong, immigrant packed basements in New York, Desai's novel seems lit by a moral intelligence at once fierce and tender. But the scene in which Biju joins a crowd of Indians to reach the visa counter at the United States embassy is the most harrowing. Poor and lonely in New York, exulting over wealth to be gained in the new markets of Asia. Not surprisingly he wishes to live within a narrow purity. For him, the city's endless possibilities for self invention become a source of pain. The awareness of the expansion of his self-consciousness makes him long to fade into insignificance, to fade into a man of no identity, to return to where he might relinquish his overrated control of his own destiny, to return HOME.

According to A.C. Sinha, the educated "third and fourth generation Indians of Nepalese origin vividly remember the sufferings of their forefathers" and they are "politically aware." They "compete with the local aspirants for the scarce white-collar jobs, which invariably goes to the indigeneous communities. Thus, they are unconsciously made aware that they do not belong to local dominant communities, for whom there is a constitutional guarantee in jobs and welfare schemes." (Sinha 119)

Arriving back in India in the climactic scenes of the novel, Biju is immediately engulfed by the local eruptions of rage and frustration from which he had been physically remote in New York. Desai suggests that for him and others, withdrawal or escape are no longer possible. In the second last page of the novel Sai concludes :

> Never again could she think there was but one narrative and this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it. (Desai 323)

Desai hopes for the return of normalcy once again when "Slowly, painstakingly, like ants, men would make their paths and civilization and their wars once again, only to have it wash away again..." (Ibid.) This is the message of hope as well as warning by Desai in this age of globalization. Then, the novel ends with the return of Biju, and with his return, returns life in the veins of the Cook in which blood had been running without oxygen. "At the gate, peeping through the black lace wrought iron, between the mossy canonballs, was the figure in a nightgown. "Pitaji"? said the figure, all ruffles and colours. Kanchenjunga appeared above the parting clouds, as it did only very early in the morning during this season. "Biju"? whispered the Cook—"Biju" he yelled, demented—Sai looked out and saw two figures leaping at each other as the gate swung open." (324) The Cook's hope for the return of his son, whose letters he had treasured as gems, comes true and once again :

> 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 needed to do was to reach out and pluck it." (Ibid.)

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