

LOST CULTURAL IDENTITIES AND THE DYNAMICS OF CLASS IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA: A STUDY OF KIRAN DESAI'S, 'THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS'

DR. NUZHAT F. RIZVI^{1*}, DR. AARTI KALNAWAT²

¹Assistant Professor, Symbiosis Law School Nagpur,
Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune India

*Email nuzhatrizvi@slnagpur.edu.in

²Assistant Professor, Symbiosis Law School Nagpur,
Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune India

*Email nuzhatrizvi@slnagpur.edu.in

Abstract

It is an interesting and intriguing pursuit to note how the mechanism of colonization functions and pervades in post-colonial India. Although colonialism does not function in its formal form in the present scenario, it manifested itself in various hues and shades. Earlier, colonization was a system of force through which superior nations controlled the fate of underdeveloped and weaker countries by subduing the rebellion. This was effectively done by 'educating' the natives and instilling in them a sense of inferiority, which still lingers in their psyche. Moreover, the process of globalization also went on to contribute to the reinstatement of cultural and linguistic imperialism, in the post-colonial world. This well thought maiming of the colonized psyche and mind led to his admiration of the colonizers. Kiran Desai's Booker award winning novel 'The Inheritance of Loss' brought the author in the global arena of literature and placed India at the literary center stage. Her characters, in the narrative, represent a class of people who feel defeated and humiliated of their native identities and are in pursuit of being accepted by the 'superior other'. They are living a life of lost identities and are blindly following the west. Through her seemingly feeble characters, in the novel, the author fantastically exfoliates the mechanism of colonial imperialism and foregrounds the futility of believing and aping the colonizers.

Keywords: colonization, post-colonial, globalization, natives, colonizers, 'superior other', imperialism, lost identities.

Table of Contents

Introduction

1. An Overview of 'The Inheritance of Loss'

2. The Mimic man

3. The Colonial Hangover and the Anglophile Characters

4. The 'Macaulay' mind set and Eurocentric Education: Cultural Imperialism Revisited

Conclusion

Introduction

The aim of this research paper is to critically analyze and examine 'The Inheritance of Loss' which fetched the prestigious Man Booker Award for Kiran Desai in 2006. The paper intends to research the work with respect to projection of individuals in search of identity, in a multicultural society and also to explore the dynamics of power relations assumed with respect to these issues.

Moreover, these issues seem decisively political in terms of establishing a cultural regime, especially when the diversity of culture presents it as an ultimate qualifier for entry into the world of opportunity, accomplishment and supremacy.

In this cultural regime, attitudes and mannerisms which are inured by the "dominant" culture is considered to be a signifier of "normalcy" and thereby 'desirable'. Therefore, we see that efforts are put in to establish a colonial discourse that is "devoted" to control the cultural thoughts and ideologies of the selected individuals, actually belonging to the cultural margins of the 'other'. This is to ensure that these individuals behave and act not like 'others' but like the 'desired' culture representing the

colonial stereotype. This move is focused on creating the 'colonial stereotype' (Bhabha, 1994) as "desirable". The British upheld their supremacy over the natives of colonies. It was a well planned and executed mechanism through which the colonizers control the destiny of the colonized. They infused into them a sense of lowliness and disdain for their native values and culture. (Fannon, 1982).

Kiran Desai was awarded with the most coveted Man Bookers Awards in 2006. This recognition brought the author the opportunity of mounting worldwide book sales and an entrance to the most glittering place -- the congregation of Indian literary star raconteurs of cultural muddle and amalgam hyphenated migrant identity. (Lal, 2006).

Kiran Desai's cultural heritage, literary inheritance and social order inclined her to present an insightful narrative, "The Inheritance of Loss" which encompasses and dwells into every current global problem that is Globalization, Multiculturalism, financial disparity, fundamentalism and extremism which is reflected by her apparently helpless human figures. She shares a lot of similarity with her forerunners like Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie for the reason that she was given birth in one nation with a composite environment with plentiful literary insight and skillful mastery over the colonist's language and raised up in other nation.

1. An Overview of 'The Inheritance of Loss'

'The narrative, foregrounds the all credible haunting repercussions of colonization on two classes of people from South Asia --- the ones who endeavor to move away from India and the ones who stay back in India. The Cambridge return Judge, Mr. Jemubhai, after superannuation, resides in Kalimpong, at the foothills of the Himalayan region with his parentless granddaughter named Sai and his cook. The makeshift domestic neighbors comprise of a bunch of Anglophile characters.

In her novel, Desai adroitly moves amid First world and Third world nation, revealing the agony of expatriate, the uncertainties of Post Colonialism and the mad yearning for a "better life", where we find that one person's prosperity signifies other's poverty.

The author has inherited diverse cultures from her relationship with Bangladesh, India and England. She suffuses in the texture of "The Inheritance of Loss", a wide and broad perception on the idea of exile and displacement. She talks about globalization, terrorism, multiculturalism and identity crisis. It was this feeling of being caught between two continents that infuses 'The Inheritance of Loss' a saga brimming with grief over globalization.

Every contemporary issue whether political, cultural or racial has been spanned by the narrative. The struggles to simultaneously adhere and distance from ethnicity are both consciously subjective and objective. Culturally patterned forms of behavior and confrontation with the Western modes of culture are the basic patterns followed in "The Inheritances of loss."

In her narrative, in opening chapters we are introduced to an assortment of characters which earmarks the cultural diversity and issues of multiculturalism, which is one of themes highlighted that lends to the complexity of the narrative. The group of characters portrayed in the novel are diverse and represent a broad spectrum of regions, religious faith, castes and communities. The judge is a Gujrati, while Sai's father was a Parsi, Gyan the tutor is a Nepali, and the cook is from Uttar Pradesh. Sai's social circle in Kalimpong is a geographical conglomeration- Uncle Potty is from Lucknow, Father Booty from Switzerland is a Christian Priest, and the two sisters are Bengali etc.

The cultural hybridity highlights the biophysical, psychological and ideological boundaries. Through her narrative, Desai provides an understanding not only into the anguish of the refugee experiences revealed in alienation, marginalization and identity crisis, but also into the complication and variety of the experiences of those who are left behind in India. The novel very sensitively touches upon the ethnic divisions, mixed races, complicated boundaries, diffident faiths and geographical concerns in many parts of the Indian subcontinents.

The award winning narrative, though is placed in the backdrop of India after the colonial period, nevertheless, the portentous hangover of the colonization can be perceived and sensed throwing its shadows on a nation that is basking in the celebrated morn of freedom with its inescapable hurdles.

The narrative foregrounds vital contemporary issues in a strong and convincing way. It reflects the author's deep interest in the complications of time and history. However, it is the added layer of the influence of British colonial culture which outlines the thematic and formal concern of the novel.

The writer exquisitely exfoliates how the complex and intriguing ways of colonial inheritance function in particular contexts. Colonialism does not exist in a formal form any more but it is not easy to eradicate colonial attitudes which are engrained profoundly in the psyche of the colonized.

Kiran Desai formerly remarked in an interview that, one of her objectives of writing the fiction is to explore, on a profounder level, “What ensues after a western component is inserted into a nation that is not of the West” which was seen during the colonization period of the British, and can be seen, at present, with Indians new relationship with the States. (rediff.com, 2006). We see that almost all her characters in the narrative are stunted by the west.

Critical analysis of ‘The Inheritance of Loss’ with respect to representation of individuals with lost cultural identities and the dynamics of class and power relations is an interesting pursuit. Most of the characters in the novel represent a class of people who feel defeated, humiliated and ashamed of their native identities and are in pursuit of being culturally accepted by the superior ‘other’. They are living a life of lost identities and their efforts are blindly directed towards aping the West.

Relevant here is to quote Blommaert who aptly describes: “Membership of a particular culture expressed through adaptations of several components such as language, ethnicity, religion, rituals, geographical locations and education, are emblematic things in the society”. (Blommaert, 2007)

The narrative revolves around Jemubhai Patel, an Anglophile judge and his granddaughter, Sai who reside in a small town of Kalimpong in Darjeeling, along with an assortment of characters the cook, the anglophile sisters Lola and Noni, the Swiss Father Booty, his friend uncle Potty, Mrs Sen, the Afghan princess. At the outbreak of the Nepalese insurgency the beauty and mystic of the hills is destroyed. There is a sense of dissatisfaction and unrest which spurs the action of the novel.

2. The Mimic man

Interspersed in the novel are snippets from the judge's past life both in India and in England which provides an insight into his past life and holds a key to his present, for an understating of the present is possible by a grasp of the past.

The judge is portrayed as a bitter and skeptical character to whom the narrative mainly belongs, he actually seems to be an embodiment of what the distinguished author, V S Naipaul has labeled as the ‘mimic man’ (Naipaul, 1969). The novel is replete with numerous incidents about the fruitless efforts of its characters to eventually convert to be the superior ‘other’.

Jemubhai was born to a farmer family in 1919. Little Jemu received education at the local Bishop Cotton School which was started by the British as one of their efforts to modernize India. This move can easily be attributed to the colonizers intention to create a group of men amongst the natives who would be Indian by birth but English in thought and manners and values. Here at the school he was deeply impressed by the statue of Queen Victoria that stood in front of the school building. This marked the grand symbol of imperials.

The author has dexterously described this in her narrative: “In the entrance to the school building was a portrait of Queen Victoria in a dress like a flouncy curtain fringed cape, and a peculiar hat with feathery arrows shooting out. Each morning as Jemubhai passed under, he found her froggy expression compelling and felt deeply impressed that a woman so plain could also have been so powerful. The more he pondered this oddity, the more his respect for her and English grew”. (Deasi, 2006, p.56)

According to Gandhi (2006), the strange oddity is justified in the ‘Orient’s’ longing for its conquering other. Jemu is the first in his family to have received such an edification. His performing good at higher exam prompts his father to give him opportunity to go abroad for law studies.

In England, Jemubhai feels the “dreadful secondariness” (Said, 1989, p.205) of belonging to India. Completely lost in the distant land, he registers the sight of small gray homes with a sense of bewilderment for the wonderful image of England, which he carried in his mind now seemed drab. Great Britain, for him, was a land of splendor and fancy, of magnificence and attractiveness and of prosperity and contentment. That dream is further crushed when he feels alienated and tremendously lonely and draws in his shell. He cuts him off completely from the social world. He sees his own color odd and pronunciation strange. He barely opens his lips in a smile, lest others will see his gums, something that is very private. Washing and cleaning becomes an obsession with him when he is wrongly blamed for

sensing like curry by young English girls. These racist remarks and subjugation play havoc on his self-respect and fractures his psyche. These traumatic transitions have been explored deeply by the novelist.

According to the research scholar Shalini (2009), the journey of Jemu is quite an important sign of his emotional quotient and helps in understanding his later behavior. The judge who qualifies the ICS examination on return to British India could never really acquire the self-assurance to be comfortable in the colonial high office. So he hid his humiliation behind a disguise of 'Keeping up standards'. He toiled at being English with the craving and detestation and for what he would become, he would be hated by undeniably everyone, British and Natives 'both'.

The judge, cultivated in the Majestic West, asserts his wife unbefitting for himself as that way he can standardize himself to the progressions of cultural imperialism and keep pace with his affectations of having become the mirror image of the superior 'other'.

This maiming and crippling of the identity is explained by the argument put by Terry that, generally the Native comes to serve as a semiotic pawn on a chess board manipulated by the white sign maker (Goldie, 1990). The Native, having developed the inclination to become like the master must live with the lie, otherwise he would have to change sides and become Native again.

The judge on return from England is particular for Western behaviors, rites, attitude and the routine way of life. He takes 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. He maintains his anglicized stiff upper lip mannerisms at all times. He chose to stay in Kalimpong and never bothered to learn the local language so that he can enjoy the bliss of being a foreigner in his own country.

In his service period the worst type of infection comes up when he came across for hearing cases in Hindi. His face wore a mask-like look, something which he had acquired during his experience in England. This mask hangs on him like a real face. His concern over a rigid English ritual began with Bed Tea (or Baadd Tea, as the cook pronounced) and ended with warm water, water bottle, just not in winter but in warmer seasons, in the same way of the colonizers. Even after superannuation the evening tea is more like a ceremonial event served with fanfare.

According to Shalini (2009), the behavioral determinism of the native to mimic the rulers, is due to a sense of loss and it can be explained through psycho-analytical theories that argues the inevitability of loss as a chief field on which the personality, both the individual and social aspects, build itself.

This is the strange love hate relation in the encounter with the West an "implacable enmity between the native and invader". (Parry, 1987, p.32). This 'intimate enmity', (Nandy, 1983) between the colonizers and natives evokes an irresistible temptation to the master's way of living and thinking.

3. The Colonial Hangover and the Anglophile Characters

Cultural imperialism is projected at its best level in the portrayal of the two Bengali sisters Lola and Noni. These Banerjee sisters pine for the colonial days and relish the post-colonial period. They take pride in growing the only English broccoli in the country at their orchard. Their house has a French name 'Mon Ami'. The naming of the judge's house and the Banerjee sister's house also underlies the colonial hangover prevalent among the Post-Colonial Indian middle class. According to Ashcroft et al, "To name the world is to understand it, to know it and to have control over it". (Ashcroft et al, 1988, p.283) Their wash line sags under the weight of Marks and Spencer inner wears. They have their stock of English jams and Knorr Soups. They swear by the BBC and read only English novels. Their fascination for Trollope BBC and joy at Christmas helps them to live under the illusion of colonial period. They are hooked to the bandwagon of the colonial era and virtually live this era surrounded by foreign goods and willful choice of English way of life. Lola takes pride in the fact that her daughter, as a reporter with BBC, has earned entry to the white man's drawing room and so she is in a privileged position.

The capitalist bourgeois forces that are at work even in the post-colonial world invoke such strong feelings of self-negation and national depreciation that the colonized starts believing in the imperialist propaganda and thinks of the same colonizing forces as their savior. Lola has done the same, as is evident from her advice to her now BBC employed daughter.

In the narrative, the following advice given by Lola to her daughter stands testimony to the above. She says, "Better leave sooner than later," she had advised Pixie long ago, "India is a sinking

ship. Don't want to be pushy, darling, sweetie thinking of your happiness only, but the doors won't stay open forever..." (Desai, 2006, p.47)

Desai stresses and highlights the fact that the colonized have been so much accustomed to their own destitute acceptance of the superior 'other' that they have a tendency to desire for them to be in the colonizer's position.

According to Panda (2011), the portrayal of the two sisters projects the two options that the Post-Colonial 'other' has, first to surrender oneself wholly to a westernized and bourgeois way and second to escape to the land of colonizer at the earliest possible. The selection of either option, signifies that they have to compromise with their identity and self-respect.

The protagonist Sai is another anglophile character. Sai, who has had a convent education at St. Augustine, bears a striking resemblance to her grandfather in accent and manners. With Sai's colonial fixation, although in different form than Lola's, is quite present nevertheless; she learns at an early age that "Cake was better than laddoos, fork, spoon, Knife better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ..... more civilized than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds. English was better than Hindi." (Desai, 2006, p.331). Upon her arrival at the judge's house, he decides that he couldn't "send you (Sai) to a Government school.... You'd come out speaking with the wrong accent and picking your nose". (Desai, 2006, p.381).

Even the fallout in the bond between Sai and Gyan has colonial overtones. Gyan is disgusted with Sai aping the west. He ridicules Sai who could only speak English and pidgin Hindi. She could not eat with her hands, had never been to a temple for religious purpose, never chewed a pan nor could sit through a full Bollywood movie.

In fact, all the fanciful neighbors stick together because they share similar views. Uncle Potty is liked for his Oxford education and his famed lineage. All of them were "unanimous in the opinion they didn't like English writers writing about India..... English writers' writing of England was what was nice." (Desai, 2006, p.198). Their mind set betrays that "certain moves made long ago had produced all of them." (Desai, 2006, p.199).

It is just not the upper class and the social elite but even the lower class of the society represented by the cook, who reels under the influence of the condition. The cook was dissatisfied to be serving Jemubhai. The dissatisfaction was rooted in what he considered to be a letdown as compared to his father "who had served white men only." (Desai, 2006, p.63). The Indianisation of the I.C.S. displeased him. He would have preferred working for a white master. It is the result of colonial imperialism when two neighbors residing in Kalimpong fight over their contrary associations to the old and new imperial forces. As Lola flaunts her daughter's BBC job, Mrs. Sen, another woman from the neighborhood boast of her daughter's job with CNN. Both these women take pride in the fact that their worthy children have become a representative of the imperialistic West. These ladies represent those class of middle class Indians who readily discard their own cultural values for the sake of imitating the West.

4. The 'Macaulay' mind set and Eurocentric Education: Cultural Imperialism Revisited


'For the master's tool will never dismantle the master's house'. (Lorde, 1984).

Education is also being used by cultural imperialism in advocating a bourgeois western lifestyle. More than catering to the true education of the post-colonial children, convents, as propagators of such cultural prejudice, contribute to the neo-colonialism practices of cultural imperialism. What Sai learns at school can be summarized in one word 'Anglicization'.

This venture is directed upon the creation of the construct "Colonial Stereotypes" as "Desirable" through a colonial discourse. The English people upheld their superior position over the natives in the colonies. Arthur C.Danto (1991) aptly points out:

"The superiority of Western civilization was never doubted, and one of the premises of Victorian anthropology was in effect that there is a moral direction in history as there is in evolution, that societies and species evolve towards optimality, and that Western Europe was history's masterpiece just as Homo sapiens was (sic) Nature's." (Danto, 1991, p.203)

Colonization was a system of Institutional power. It was a resource by which a superior country controlled the fate of a weaker one. It is now generally accepted that the colonizers intentionally tried



to reduce rebellion on the part of the colonized by 'educating' them and infusing into them a sense of inferiority and contempt for their native values and culture. The conscious maiming of the natives' consciousness resulted in his admiration of the white man. The colonized past has a tenacious psychological hold on the subjects of colonial rule. As Memmi puts, "The colonized lives for a long time before we see that really new man." (Memmi, 1968, p.88)

The procedure of decolonizing the mindset is a tough and intricate because the process of colonization goes deep down than sheer Topographical or surface actualities. It includes and deals with men and thus there are profounder complications involved. In fact, one of the reasons accounting for such complexity is the uncertain and interdependent relationship which the colonizer and the colonized share. "The mutuality of desire which binds them is unique and ironic and this mutuality hovers around perverseness. There can be no doubt regarding the desire of the colonizer for the colony but the natives who are oppressed, nourish an inverse longing for the colonized. How "could the colonized deny himself so cruelly how could he hate the colonizers and yet admire them so passionately." (Memmi, 1968, p.88). This ambiguous love hate desire perhaps has its seat in the emotional bedrock.

The hegemonic white discernment has a certain fixed opinion of India as a country that can never come close to the developed countries because of its extensive backwardness and its dismal attempts to ape the west. The 'Macaulay' mind set of some of India's own educated and aware denizens, which prescribes everything western as perfect and everything Indian as regressive and 'contemptuous' caters to such perception. This assessment is an inheritance of colonialism when Eurocentric education, imparted to the colonized subjects, created an impression of greatness, bravery and loyalty and every positive quality around the white races where as the Colonized subject was projected as inferior, cowardly, sly and cunning.

There was a deliberate move to produce 'colonial stereotype'. With respect to India, it could be said that the infamous Macaulay Minute established the superiority of the English education system. This education taught us to admire our colonizers, to like all that we did not know and hate what we did. It instilled in us a sense of inferiority and awkwardness. It leads to self-hatred and humiliation. This was our psychic affliction. (Itwaru, 1997)

Conclusion

Thus almost all the characters in the novel are stunted by their obsession of the West in one way or the other. It is however the remark by H. Hardless, which Sai finds in *The Indian Gentleman's Guide to Etiquette*, that conveys the stark reality. "Although you may have acquired the habits and manners of the European, have the courage to show that you are not ashamed of being an Indian, and in all such cases, identify yourself with the race to which you belong." (Desai, 2006, p.199). Although Sai is enraged at reading this, nevertheless this remark highlights the heart of the matter. It is like a pin prick to deflate the dream-balloon of the Indians obsessed by the English mind-set, lifestyle and customs. Through the characters and their moves, Kiran Desai focuses on a double awareness- of colonial inheritance as it works within a specific (Indian) culture and of a changing relationship among communities, cultures and countries in the modern world.

Through her literary creativity, Kiran Desai speaks about the fragmented represented mimic individuals, where the issue of identity renders the family as well as individual relationship as a site for the contest of assertion of identity and power.

It is crucial to note here that these characters, positioned in the Post-Colonial India as well as America, are in a state of depraved unrest owing to their colonial fixation. The judge lives a secluded life and has toughened up so much that he has no connection with either his past or the possible future in the form of Sai. The cook, who feels degraded because he has to serve a brown man, one of his own race. Lola has not only to stay away from her daughter but also her land is encroached by the insurgents. Biju has to come back home with his dreams crushed. 'The Inheritance of Loss', thus highlights the futility of trusting in the cultural imperialist and in a understated way inspires the Postcolonial "third-world" countries to explore solutions towards the cause of creating a new, perhaps more equal world order.



References

- Ashcroft, B., Gareth, G., & Tiffin, H. (1998). (Eds.). *Key concepts in Post-Colonial studies*. Routledge.
- Bhabha, H.K. (1994). *The location of culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Blommaert, J. (2007). *Class room lecture on describing and analyzing language model in M.A. in TESOL Program of Institute of Education, University of London-2006 Encyclopedia of language and Linguistics. (2nd Edition) London: Elsevier Ltd.*
- Danto, A.C. (1991). *The shape of artistic pasts, east and west*. In E. Deutsch (Ed.) *Culture and modernity: East west philosophic perspectives*. (pp.331-343). New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Desai, K. (2006). *The inheritance of loss*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Fannon, F. (1982). *The wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gandhi, L. (2006). *Post- Colonial theory: A critical introduction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press
- Goldie, T (1990). *Semiotic control: Native people in Canadian literature in English*. In A.E. Davidson (Ed.), *Studies on Canadian Literature: introductory and critical essays* (pp.110-123). New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Itwaru, H. (1997). *Colonialism and literatures*. In R. K. Dhawan (Ed.), *Post-Colonial discourse: A study of contemporary literature*. New Delhi: Prestige.
- Lal, R. (2006, October 12). *Kiran Desai's new life*. *The times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/Kiran-Desais-new-life/articleshow/2151721.cms>
- Loorde, A. (1984). *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. In Berkeley (Ed.). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. (pp.110-114). CA: Crossing Press. 2007. Print.
- Memmi, A. (1968). *Dominated man: Notes towards a portrait*. London: Orion Press.
- Naipaul, V.S. (1969). *The mimic men*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Nandy, A. (1983). *The intimate enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism*. O.U.P
- Panda, P. (2011). *Cultural imperialism revisits: A study of Kiran Desai's 'The inheritance of loss'*. In V. Sharma & N. Tandon (Eds.), *Kiran Desai and her fictional world* (pp.105-115). New Delhi: Atlantic.
- Parry, B. (1987). *Problems in current theories of colonial discourse*. *Oxford Literary Review*, 9, p.32
- Rediff News. (2006, January 30). *Meet Kiran Desai*. *Rediff.com* <https://www.rediff.com/news/2006/jan/30inter1a.htm>
- Said, E. (1989). *Representing the colonized: Anthropology's interlocutors*. *Critical Inquiry*, 15(2), 205-225.
- Shalini, M (2009). *The Colonial hangover and the Brown sahib*. In S. Sita & B.Reynolds (Eds.), *Critical responses to Kiran Desai* (pp.201-209) Atlantic Publishers.