
**MULTICULTURALISM IN THE WRITINGS OF KIRAN DESAI WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS**

P. SATEESH KUMAR

Abstract: The stunning second novel from Kiran Desai is set in mid-1980s India, on the cusp of the Nepalese movement for an independent state. All characters in the novel struggle with their cultural identity and the forces of modernization while trying to maintain their emotional connection to one another. In this alternately comical and contemplative novel, 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. The *Inheritance of Loss* shows certain multicultural concerns like diversity, identity, minority and ethnic rights and post colonialism. This paper explores multiculturalism in the writings of Kiran Desai with special reference to *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Keywords: Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, Multiculturalism, postcolonial fiction, immigrant, identity, heroic characters.

Kiran Desai, author of the Booker Prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, is the product of multiculturalism. Born in India, Desai moved to Britain at the age of fourteen and was later relocated to the US. The people and the society around her aided well for the creation of such a widely acclaimed novel as *The Inheritance of Loss*. "Set against the gigantic backdrop of Himalayas, the novel presents lives of people belonging to different cultures, nationalities, religions, languages and customs and rituals". Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* abounds with themes that make it an interesting social reading. As Desai is an eminent immigrant writer, her themes are of human deprivation, trauma, identity and indifference. In her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* she tried to dive deep into the sea of human psychology and immortalize the literary work. She minutely discusses the issues without suggesting and stressing any particular issue. Though she has not given priority to any specific issue yet we find in her novels the issues of globalism and American dreams most prominently. Her colourful cast of characters rooted in diverse cultures in *The Inheritance of Loss* shows certain multicultural concerns like diversity, identity, minority and ethnic rights and post colonialism. Multiculturalists believe that diversity is desirable and should be celebrated as it is of value to society at large.

"This can be seen, in particular, in terms of the vigor and vibrancy of a society in which there are a variety of lifestyles, cultural practices, traditions and beliefs". It allows cultural exchange between groups that live side by side with one another and fosters cross-cultural tolerance, understanding and a willingness to respect 'difference'. *The Inheritance of Loss* covers a wide variety - different countries, the past and the present, and the social, religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity. The novel, set in India, shows the master craftsmanship of Desai in portraying a wide range of

characters.

"A retired judge, his grand daughter, her tutor, the cook, his son and myriad supporting characters has a lively apprehension of different cultures".

The story takes place in Kalimpong, a peninsular extension of India into the surrounds of Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan. It directly mentions the life and people of different states of India as well as of different nationalities. Biju's experiences at various restaurants show the multiculturalism of a place as a result of the harmonious existence of various national cultures. At the Baby Bistro,

"Above, the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian. And, when a Paki was hired, it was Mexican, India, and Pakistani".

At Le Colonial,

"On top, rich colonial, and down below, poor native. Colombian, Tunisian, Ecuadorian, Gambian".

The Stars and Stripes Diner is shown as a place where the American, Indian and Guatemalan flags fly together. The novel also shows how Indians get accustomed to various cultures all over the world. Sai's life is a perfect example for unity in diversity. The contradictions,

"Lochinvar and Tagore, economics and moral science, highland fling in tartan and Punjabi harvest dance in dhotis, national anthem in Bengali and an impenetrable Latin motto",

have been absorbed by her. *History of Western Art* and *A Brief History of France* show how the Eastern and the Western elements of culture cater to the reading interest of a person. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* shows difference in various aspects of life. But, "the gray had permeated inside" the novel, as it does in *Cho Oyu*, dissolving the divisions and borders. Thus, some kind of unity is achieved in spite of the diversity that abounds the novel. Identity politics strengthens the collective identity and common experiences of people in a

society. It sees the individual as embedded in a particular cultural, social, institutional or ideological context. A pride in one's culture gives people a sense of historical and social rootedness. And, in contrast, a weak or fractured sense of identity leaves people feeling isolated and confused. Multiculturalists accept that people can have multiple identities and multiple loyalties. For instance, they can have loyalty to their country of origin and also to the country of their settlement. Sai Mistry partakes the mist and mystery that dominate the atmosphere of Kanchenjunga.

"Sai, sitting on the Veranda, was reading an article about giant squid in an old national Geographic".

In her seeming isolation, Sai reaches out to the larger world through her global magazine. The giant squid, National Geographic, and the omnipresent mist transcend the isolated region, rising towards universals:

"They slipped and ate, all of existence passed over by non existence, watched their breath join the mist slowly twisting and turning".

Desai recreates the twists and turns of fate and history as they are deeply related to one's identity. Sai is the daughter of a Zoroastrian father and a Hindu mother who were "free and brave, part of a modern nation in a modern world". She is a product of multi-religious background. Sai is thrust from the bleak, regimented sheltered convent boarding school into the lush, misty Himalayan city of Kalimpong in North Eastern India, where a growing Nepalese insurgency is about to unravel her life even further.

"Sai became aware of the enormous space she was entering".

Her life at the doorstep of a grandfather she has never met is full of conflicting thoughts. As a girl who adopts and imbibes certain aspects of the English culture her identity is questioned by Gyan, her Nepali Tutor. Gyan is of the opinion that only one's own tradition and culture could shape one's personality. So, her identity is a 'fault line' for him. But, Sai says:

"If I want to celebrate Christmas, I will, and if don't want to celebrate Diwali, then I don't find Nothing wrong in a bit of fun and Christmas is an Indian holiday as much as any other".

Gyan's attempt to join the violent separatists agitating for an independent state is an extreme measure of asserting one's identity. He is strongly convinced that only by the worldwide approval of ethnic rights could they find their individuality. The identity of Jemubhai Patal, the retired judge, is influenced by the rural Gujarati culture as well as the Cambridge-educated culture. Running parallel to Sai's story is the story of the cook's son Biju who lives as an illegal immigrant in New York. Biju is an individual as well as a type. He is a representative of all those people who are displaced in the diaspora. A

person's identity is formed by his relation to the society. But, Desai presents a situation where one's society keeps on changing day by day. "You lived intensely with others, only to have them disappear overnight, since the shadow class was condemned to movement. The men left for other jobs, towns, got deported, returned home, changed names". The absence of an address, which is a common problem to all these people, shows how constant wanderings negate a chance of fixed identity. Desai also presents how people's identity gets affected in a multicultural society. The recognition of minority rights is a major concern for the practitioners of multiculturalism. The culture of ethnic minorities should be accepted as a part of the mainstream culture of the majority people and they also should be given due representation in administrative measures.

"Generally, multiculturalism is assumed to speak not only for the interests of immigrant cultural minorities but also for the aboriginal people who are minorities in modern states".

The Inheritance of Loss sets its characters against the political struggle of the Himalayan region. Sai's twenty year old Nepali tutor Gyan is portrayed as the champion of ethnic rights. He is an activist of the Gorkha National Liberation Front which is fighting for the independence of the Nepali Gorkhas. A conscious awareness of their own rights made them demand recognition of their identity.

"...There was a report of new dissatisfaction in the hills, gathering insurgency, men and guns. Their struggle for freedom has its roots in suppression just like Indian Independence movement. It was the Indian- Nepalese this time, fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority".

Desai is of the opinion that even nature favours a multicultural condition, for, she describes "the mist charging down like a dragon, dissolving, undoing, making ridiculous the drawing of borders". The instance of Nepali insurgency gives Kiran Desai an opportunity to criticize terrorist violence in the name of ethnic identity. The novel also analyses the problems of national minorities. Migration is a sword with sharp blades on both sides. The feeling of loss when one leaves one's 'matrubhumi' is just as intensive and dreadful as having to leave a foreign home, due to deportation, when one does not have the greencard. Everyone copes with such situations differently. Some don't have coping solutions and it becomes a traumatic experience for the rest of one's life. Thus, Desai strongly argues for equal opportunity to people though they are an ethnic or national minority in a particular place. The love affair between Sai and Gyan is a conscious creation of the author to promote intercultural dialogue between the Neps and

the Bengis. Similar is the case of Biju and Saeed who are in the U. S, meeting and mingling with people from different nationalities. By the representation of difference in terms of social and ethnic status even between her two main protagonists, Desai calls for intercultural interaction which include interaction with foreign cultures, consciousness of one's own culture, stress tolerance, tolerance of ambiguity, and bucketfuls of empathy. Post colonialism which deals with the aftermath of colonialism is yet another theme of multiculturalism. "Post colonial literature can be identified by its discussion of cultural identity. It may be about the change that has taken place as a result of the colonial rule". Post colonial novels tend to analyze and explore the attempts to restore the original culture, conformity to the culture presented by the settlers or the creation of a new culture which combines both. Desai's novel is an elliptical tale looping backward and forward through the twentieth century India, New York, Cambridge, the legacy of British imperialism and the age-old distrust of 'other'. By portraying the continued influence of the British

culture in the lives of Indians, the novelist shows how different cultures can interact and complement each other in a nation or a society. Almost all of Desai's characters have been stunted by their encounters with the West.

"The migration of people from the previously colonized nations can be seen as an important aspect of post colonialism".

Conclusion:

Earlier, the West had conquered the East. But, in modern times, the East is going to the West and thus the meeting of the opposites takes place. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* spans nations, cultures, religions, and races. Desai illustrates her themes without making moral judgements about her characters. Her writing is liquid and beautiful with delightful turns of phrase.

"Dealing with all levels of society, and many different cultures, Desai shows life's humour and brutality and its delicate emotions and passionate commitments in a novel that is both beautiful and wise".

References:

1. Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2006.
2. Gilroy, Paul. "Multiculturalism and Post-Colonial Theory". *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*. Ed. Johns Dryzek, Bonnie Honig and Anne Philips. New York: Oxford UP, 2006. 656-72.
3. Harleman, Ann. "Luminous family saga bridges eras, cultures". *The Boston Globe*. 4 January 2006. 28 June 2009 <<http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2006/01/04/luminous-family-saga-bridges-eras-articles>>
4. Heywood, Andrew. *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*. 4th ed. New York: Palgrave, 2007.
5. Kukathas, Chandran, "Nationalism and Multiculturalism". *Handbook of Political Theory*. Ed. Gerald F. Gaus and Chandran Kukathas. New Delhi: Sage, 2004. 250-61.
6. Makedon, Alexandor. *What Multiculturalism should not be*. 1996. Chicago State University, Cillinoi. 26
7. Mishra, Pankaj. "Review: *The Inheritance of Loss*". *The New York Times*. 9 February 2006. 27 June 2009 <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/09/arts/09iht_idbriefs/a.html>
8. Noyes, John K. "Multiculturalism, Geography, Post-Colonial Theory". *Edward Said. Ed. Patrick Williams*. Vol. 3. New Delhi: Sage, 2001. 356-7.
9. Rao, Prashant. "Treat yourself to this inheritance". 9 January 2006. Chicago. 23 March 2009 <http://www.amazon.com/inheritance-loss-Novel-Booker-Prize_reviews>
10. Shroff, Satis. *Kathmandu Blues: The Inheritance of Loss and Intercultural Competence*. 10 February 2007. 23 March 2009 <<http://www.bologi.com/bookreviews/099.htm>>
11. Carlisele, Michael. "The Inheritance of Loss." *Publishers Weekly* 252 (2005): 34.
12. Chesue, Alan. "The Inheritance of Loss." *World Literature Today* 80 (2006): 36

Asst. Professor of English
 Rajamahendri Institute of Engg. & Tech., Rajahmundry
 E-mail: Satishkumar.english@gmail.com