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POLITICS OF CLASS AND CULTURE IN GENDER RELATIONS: A STUDY OF KIRAN
DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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ABSTRACT

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with multitude of interests, of which cross-cultural discord and symphony, gender relations and conflicts, political interests and Diaspora are foremost. This paper is concerned with searching for how social hierarchy, class and culture as well as political and social issues may infringe into gender relations and distort them. Desai's intention may have been to put many aspects of gender relations within the course of a novel, which goes through twists and turns of events, and which offers a broad panorama of dissimilar cultural contexts, social interests and an assorted population of people living with different ideals, manners and thinking. This is how the novelist offers to study that the form and course of inter- personal relationships are largely dependent upon the external circumstances in which they thrive.

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Society is a structure of many "apparatuses", in the words of Louis Althusser, which constitute together an organizational whole. Here each apparatus has a unique place and importance. The "apparatuses" are political, economic, religious and cultural structures (qtd. in Abrams and Harpham. P.161-62). When it comes to the social life of individuals within this structure of a society, every apparatus lays its emphasis and effect. Apart from the value and significance which the social system carries, there is yet another aspect of it that how does it act in bringing complexity into gender relations. Long rooted notions of order, justice, love and devotion are based on customized perceptions of universal human behaviour and theory of correctness applied to them, but in the modern world of shifting ideals these notions too are following a zigzag way. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* follows the new current of gender relations which are being guided and controlled by the factors which exist outside the emotional sphere. It is the society, class and culture which are no less preponderant than inter- personal conflicts and problems. Sai, the female protagonist of the novel was always going through a personality clash with her grandfather who had agreed to take care of her. Jemubhai belongs to a generation when patriarchy dominated and patriarchal domination was accepted as a regular affair. His education and success in life had trained him for these things, and he would not admit those people into his house, or in his affections who did not need his standards, socially or financially. Sai shared these prejudices with her grandfather. She had been educated in a convent school, where western ideas and manners were taught with devotion to the students, likewise shaping their perceptions. She had known only

that class of society which enjoys the facilities provided by money, which lives in a pseudo- English culture. Sai, having been brought up in such atmosphere too, relished the so- called English taste in everything. Whether or not she was conscious of her position as a member of upper class, but she had surely not perceived anywhere the naked reality of poverty and misery. Instead of feeling kinder to the people who did not have money, she felt hatred for them, for being miserable in their own lives. Her class consciousness dominates when she feels that coincidentally she has been linked to this low- standard life of Gyan and his family, she is infuriated only with a thought of it. Sai thinks;

Perhaps he'd hoped he'd wheedle his way into Cho Oyu; maybe his whole family could move in there, if he played his cards right, and use those capacious bathrooms, each as big as his entire home. Cho Oyu might be crumbling, but it had once been majestic..." (257)

Sai's life was a lonely affair and the grandfather and the cook were no substitutes for a man- someone who could satisfy the urges of the women in her. It maybe the lack of warmth and love from her grandfather too, as well as the hatred which she nurtured in heart for him, because of his distant behaviour that she gradually felt attracted towards Gyan. Gyan, the tutor, was the only male who was of her age group. Sai's affections adhered to Gyan as soon as she meets her. Her repressed sexuality of a female, which could not assume it's true colours in the dull and monotonous atmosphere of Cho Oyu, was eager to bloom up to fullest. She had been conscious of the fact that her beauty and sexuality is being spent in vain in the company of two awkward males. She mused if she had to continue in the company of " Two bandy- legged men, in this house in the middle of nowhere, this beauty, so brief she could barely hold it steady, would fade and expire, unsung, unrescued, and unrescueable."

Gyan belonged to a poor family and was a sympathiser of the Gorkha causes, and had become politically oriented. Sai does not approve of his policies because she felt that both she and likes of her would be losers. Even, when later in the novel Father Booty gets booked for using camera at a prohibited place, and is forced to leave India promptly, she accuses Gyan for being a sympathiser of the cause which troubled Father Booty. But, this does not prevent her from having a tepid romance with Gyan during the course of her tutorial. Since no man who was any better than Gyan came into her life, her relationship with Gyan also started warming up, and her interest in chap became more and more intense. When Sai, at this slightest opportunity, visits Gyan's hut, she is taken aback by the miserable poverty and ignorance. The sight of misery upsets her so much that she rejects Gyan at that very moment, and decides to wean away from her girlish affections and fixations. Gyan suddenly becomes nothing in her heart. Not that he was anything much earlier, but now he was reduced to the level of a sub- human being. The idealism which attended the marriage of her parents, and which had made her mother revolt against Jemubhai disappears from her heart. She had taken after her parents and in her heart of hearts and had decided to be like that because the grandfather values success and money more than anything else. This inversion of values and change of heart inside Sai is something one would not accept from a true feminist. On the contrary one would expect Sai to not only love Gyan but sympathise with his political cause and plan how best she could pull the family out of ignorance and darkness into a better life. There is the class conflict, as well as the conflicts of interests. The class barrier prevails and feminism loses, where Gyan is dumped by Sai in a determined manner. Sai might have despised her grandfather for being too distant in his behaviour with her, but inherently she too follows the ideals of a hypocrite living. She speaks English and is not fully accomplished in any Indian language. She eats cheese toast, momos, soup and cakes in English manner, reads English novelists and celebrates Christmas, much to the dislike of Gyan and likes of him. Gyan and his folks hated those people who possess half of the wealth of the country, yet are not in love with anything which belongs to this country. On the other hand Jemubhai and the likes of him, including Sai felt distaste for those people who did not have the "class", a vague concept however. Jemubhai makes fun of Gyan for being unawares of English poets (though he had also been subject to the same kind of humiliation in England once), and Sai terms Gyan as a "hypocrite", who criticises things because he is unable to get them. She says;

If this is what you've been thinking, why didn't you boycott the cheese instead of gobbling it down? . . . Hundreds of pieces of cheese toast you must have eaten. Let alone the chocolate cigars... So greedy, eating them like a fat pig. And tuna fishes on toast and peanut butter biscuits! (259)

No false accusations indeed. Sai is capable of counting those relishes which she offered to Gyan. She may be emotionally dependent on Gyan, as she soon craves for reconciliation between them after every tussle, yet she is not ignorant of the discrepancy which prevails between them in living standards and manners. It is not that the conduct of well-groomed, well-bred and feminism oriented women has been above doubt capable, as they are, of being insincere and clever in their personal relations. They can be smart and materialistic to the bone. Theoretically, they may be supportive of philanthropy, but in real life situations, money matters and class interest can prevail and self interest becomes the most important thing.

The relationship between Sai and Gyan is also marred by political and cultural unrest which prevailed in Darjeeling. It was the time when the motto "Gorkhaland for Gorkhas" was high on the agenda and demand for liberation and emancipation of Gorkhas was gathering momentum. Gyan was attracted towards Sai and wanted to enjoy a romantic relationship with her. But, as soon as the coyness and infatuation of new love subsides, Gyan becomes acutely aware of Sai's social status and her manners. Sai's behaviour and her attitudes, everything seems to Gyan to be motivated and guided by the class to which she belongs. He feels it is as if Sai uses her manners and etiquettes to mock Gyan and likes of him, who are under-privileged and consequently unable to get the sort of facilities which Sai and members of her social status easily achieve. Gyan, thus hates Sai for being a member of upper class. He feels it is Sai's mistake that she has assimilated into her personality those attitudes and manners which her society believes in. He thinks that why should he not dislike Sai:

She, who could speak no language but English and pidgin Hindi, she who could not converse with anyone outside her tiny social stratum. She who could not eat with her hands;...who had never been to a temple but for architectural interest;...she who thought it vulgar to put oil in your hair and used paper to clean her bottom; felt happier with so called English vegetables, snap peas, French beans, spring onions, and feared-feared-loki,tinda,kathal,kaddu,patrel, and the local saag in the market. (P.176)

Gyan's critical attitude is not just for Sai, or it is not that Gyan actually hates Sai, for the bond which they share does not allow this until it is something really offensive. Gyan's irritation towards Sai is caused by yet another reason, that Sai for Gyan becomes a representative of that class or society which had oppressed them, exploited them for their own benefits, had enjoyed wealth and left them destitute and curtailed their opportunities. He hates the wealthy class who lead a lavish and luxurious life in contrast to their lives of hardships and struggle. Gyan calls Sai a "stupid little girl" who is content with soothing her "guilty conscience" by forming the notion that "Swiss luxury sets a standard, chocolates and watches set the standard" (258). Gyan keeps calling Sai a 'fool' at one place in the novel because according to him she has no idea of the reality;

"What's fair? What's fair? Do you have any *idea* of the world? Do you bother to look? Do you have any *understanding* of how justice operates or, rather, does NOT operate?" (260)

Thus he releases his frustration on Sai, a member of that powerful class against which he cannot stand or fight, and takes delight in hurting Sai in many ways so that he can satisfy the urge of his hatred against the wealthy class. Similar echoes are found in the character of Jimmy porter of *Look Back in Anger* where Jimmy also makes his wife an object of his own frustration. Gyan was always aware that he comes from a much lower strata of society than Sai, and he always found Sai's behaviour annoyingly elitist. Her behaviour, Gyan felt, was thoroughly shaped in accordance to western ideals, and to the ideals of the creamy layer of the society. Gyan calls Sai a "copycat" for she slavishly follows those manners set up by her class to be high standard and sophisticated (164). Gyan never missed the chance to hit back, even though he was aware of precarious financial conditions of his family. He had not attended the kind of schools Sai had gone to, nor was he groomed like her; but he knew his mathematics well enough to tutor her and earn some money to supplement his family's income. Gyan started teaching Sai to support his family economically, so that things go on easily in

his household. He has authority over the subject he taught Sai, while Sai on the other hand was feeble, childish and little aware of the world. Gyan had a strong persona in the world, competent and tough, but, when he comes at Cho Oyu his personality is overshadowed by Jemubhai's and Sai's status, who sit in the upper part of the social hierarchy to him. Jemubhai was a rich man and Gyan lived in a hut, their thinkings could never have been same. Besides, he belonged to the under-privileged Gorkha community who always felt that they have been exploited by Jemubhai and the likes of him. A natural aggression, thus, arises in Gyan which is directed towards not only Sai, but towards the whole system of snobbery and pseudo-mannerism. At one place in the novel, Gyan criticises the upper class:

"Why do you celebrate Christmas? You're Hindus and you don't celebrate Id or Guru Nanak's birthday or even Durga Puja or Dussehra or Tibetan New Year." . . . "You're like slaves, that's what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself. . ." (163)

The gender relationship of two lovers is here caught in between the struggle for emancipation, hatred for the oppressors and reordering of social structure according to humanitarian ideals. Gyan does not want to be a sensitive and blind eyed emotional lover, but he wants to be "masculine" and "adult" (161), coming out of the world of abstractions to the reality where class, politics, economics and struggle dominates.

Lolita and Nonita the Bengali ladies also came to occupy an irritating position in the eyes of Gorkha activists, who had come to see the vast property owned by them left just for the sake of gardening. The boys of "Gorkha National Liberation Front" were offended by seeing that a large amount of property and land is lying vacant where there is dire need of it elsewhere, where people are deprived of a single roof over their heads. The GNLFB boys forcibly trespassed into the boundary of Lola and Noni's property, and built a number of huts there in order to accommodate homeless people of their community. While their action had a satisfactory explanation for themselves, yet it was motivated by violence, when the agitating boys almost robbed both elderly women of their edibles and essentials, and made fun of them:

They left with the rice and the soap, the oil, and the garden's annual output of five jars of tomato chutney, and as they climbed down the steps, they noticed what they hadn't seen in the darkness of their arrival- how nicely the property stretched into a lawn. . . (240)

Thus, when 'Mon Ami', the sprawling house with a plenty of land and trees is encroached upon by the local Gorkhas, Lola and Noni, decided to approach the local jamindar in the hope that he may be able to provide some solution to their woes. Lola and Noni were not in a position to take any recourse to violence because of their age and gender. The occupation of their property was a foreseeable one, and things been what they were. The only workable proposition seem to them was the use of force on these intruders. The jamindar was definitely capable of applying pressure and of evacuating the unwelcome occupants by exerting pressure. Being one of them, if only because he belonged to the same ways and team the class divide work to the advantage of jamindar, even when the situation was politically explosive. However, instead of nursing class sympathies which could have made him work in support of Lola and Noni, he decides to make fun of them. His reactions reduced the matter to gender conflict and he picks on the two women who have come to him for help and rescue. The jamindar makes fun of the two ladies, finds them to be objects of curiosity and ridicule in that situation. Instead of behaving out of difference for their age, he sarcastically tells them that he would have married them had they not be known. The old age of these two females does not evoke any sympathy, nor does their helplessness make the jamindar any kinder than he could be, on the contrary he decides to take advantage of their pathetic situation created by a political strife. The jamindar mockingly says:

"In fact," he said, "as you can see," he gestured out, "I am the raja of Kalimpong. A raja must have many queens." . . . "I have four, but would you," he looked Lola up and down, tipped his chair back, head at a comical angle . . . The men in the room laughed so hard, "Ha Ha Ha." (244)

This is a tragedy a woman in several comes across, and they become easy victims due to their gender. Male chauvinism in this case becomes also an excuse for making capital out of the problems of Lola and Noni, who were anglicized, and in the perception of their enemies also, the cultural superiors of the jamindar. It was their cultural superiority which was calculated according to the European parameters which had intimidated

the zamindar, and he on the rebound was the hit back without any sense of shame. At another time, maybe a few decades ago when the Gorkhaland issue was in its infancy and the two ladies were enjoying their prime of life, the zamindar would not have had the guts to make gender-biased fun of both ladies and abet in the illegal occupation of the authority. The callousness of zamindar on his part is a behaviour induced by both, the recognition of his own gender and social position. At the first level, owing to both ladies' helplessness, he emerges stronger; and on the second level he was culturally inferior. Zamindar ridiculed the ladies on account of their sexuality and gender, where the atmosphere was not in their favour. Here social, economic and political- all factors are contributing and the ladies as well as likes of them are the receivers of assault at every level.

As far as relationships are concerned, it cannot be assumed that it will always be based on collective behaviour where others are powerful enough to decide. But where social circumstances come in between, which are actually bound to come, things do not go on as easily as it may go. Class-division, cultural difference and perceptions related to gender and sexuality have not recently emanated, rather they have been long-rooted tribulations of the society, which any individual can not so easily escape. Owing to the structure and institutions of the society which promote obsolete ideas to be passed on to further generations, perceptions of individuals are due to be shaped likewise. It may be detrimental on the social and institutional level as well as in the personal lives of the individuals.

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