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WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, ONLY THE TOUGH WILL GET GOING:
A STUDY OF LOSS AND REDEMPTION IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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ABSTRACT

Kiran Desai, the 1971 born, daughter of the renowned Indian English novelist Anita Desai won the Booker Prize for her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006. It deals with the victims as well as the survivors comprehensively. This paper covers the survival and revival issues of these two groups of people and how their dreams of survival and revival were shattered by the socio economic turmoil owing to different internal as well as external elements. In spite of their migration and loss of identity, the awakened mind of the major characters Jemu, Biju, Gyan and others struggle for their survival and in spite of their loss, in order to retain the cultural values and ethnicity to which they belong to.

Key words: Kiran Desai, The Inheritance of Loss, Booker, Loss and Redemption, Diaspora.

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"America is in the process of buying up the world...One day, you'll be working for an American company there or here...If you stay here, your son will earn a hundred thousand dollars for the same company he could be working for in India but making one thousand dollars. The world..where one side travels to be a servant, and the other side travels to be treated like a king. (The Inheritance of Loss 269)

The 21st century Indian writers in English have started to touch the context of globalisation and the agony of the illegal immigrants from the third world countries carrying strong social subjects. The widening gap of the poor and the rich remains the other constant theme of these young writers, especially of the Booker winning Indian writers.

The sad story of the 'shadow class' immigrants pictured in *The Inheritance of Loss* makes John Sutherland, the chairman of 2005 Booker committee to remark that Desai's novel has registered "the multi-cultural reverberations of the new millennium with the sensitive instrumentality of fiction" and continues to remark "it is a globalised novel for a globalised world."

The parallel story of this ambitious novel ricochets between Kalimpong town, located in the western part of Darjeeling Hills in Eastern Himalayas of India and New York in the U.S., the new haven of world-wide

fortune-seekers. It extends to the lives of the poor class representing Biju, an illegal immigrant struggling in the U.S. to seek his destiny by serving in the squalid restaurant kitchens and the revival emergences of the poor class representing Gyan and of the middle class constituting the Indian counterpart by Jemubhai and his anglophile neighbours amidst the turmoil of the Gorkha insurgency during the 80s.

The disparate characters from the East as well as the West shared the similar historical legacy, experiencing powerlessness, restlessness, pain, experience of impotence and humiliation. Supremacy of the West over the third world people, post colonial despair leading to self-assertion of ethnic groups and consequent violence, globalisation, consumer-driven multiculturalism, green card mania, economic imbalance, fundamentalism, racial-discrimination, colonial hegemony and cultural subjugation are the other closely examined themes of the novel that challenges the survival skills of the characters.

True globalisation was intended to be interdependent, but the sad truth is that it is degenerated for exploitation. Developed nations started to exploit the socio economic and cultural heritage of the third world nations. At the micro level the weaker section are exploited more, so they become the unconscious victim of the unknown superpowers.

Kiran realises the politics of migration moves to the new power centre of globalisation. Donald Trump's recent repeatedly disparaged statement on the restriction of people from particular countries, building a wall on the border between Mexico and the United States and to deport illegal immigrants are the central themes of the political talks. As the Italian immigrants came directly from the slums of Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, now most of the illegal immigrants like Biju travel to the U.S., engaging in some ill paid jobs using tourist visa. The illegal immigrants in the US constituted 12.2 million in 2007 and there has been a decline to around 11 million in 2014 and it's because the U.S. economy tanked.

The immigrants, legal or illegal, arrive the affluent countries to seek economic prosperity. It is to be recalled here that the First Lady of the U.S., Melania Trump, affirmed the reason for her emigration from her native Slovenia: "I wanted to follow my dream to a place where freedom and opportunity were in abundance. So of course, I came here." Officials confirmed that the illegal immigrants are more likely to come from India, China, and other parts of Asia and these days from Mexico. Even the Indian immigrants like Odessa and Baz, who settled peacefully in the U.S. running Brigitte restaurant had the common fear of the Americans that the U.S. may be inundated by the immigrants from the Asia, Africa and Latin America. Kiran substantiates that the American businessmen plan to gain large profit in the recently expanded markets in Asian region.

We need to get aggressive about Asia, the businessmen said to each other. "It's opening up, new frontier, millions of potential consumers, big buying power in the middle classes, China, India, potential for cigarettes, diapers, Kentucky Fried, life insurance, water management, cell phones—big family people, always on on the phone, all those men calling their mothers, all those mothers calling all their many, many children; this country is done, Europe done, Latin America done, Africa is a basket case except for oil; Asia is the next frontier (IL 136).

Desai's presentation of the post colonial perspective of the powerful West against the underdeveloped East, drawing different characters battling to survive in the social power structure – some for their own survival, and others to find better standards of life in abroad needs deep insight. Kiran unambiguously draws the plight of Indian diaspora in the U.S. by outlining the disgraceful betrayal of the poorest Indians in the U.S. by their western counterparts. "It was horrible what happened to Indians abroad and nobody knew but other Indians abroad. It was a dirty little rodent secret" (IL 138), yet for their survival sake every sort of bitter humiliation is swallowed.

Biju is presented as the post colonial counterpart of Jemu. Jemu drudged over his academic pursuits in England, whereas Biju battles hard to stay afloat in the U.S. But both are sandbagged by their encounter with the West. Biju belongs to the "shadow class" of illegal immigrants in New York restaurants, hopping from one ill-paid job to another and working under miserable conditions. Everyone rushes towards the West preparing to swallow up all sorts of humiliation for the sake of material gains, for rich and dignified life. Kiran harps on this ambivalent attitude through the bitter encounter of Biju with Harish-Harry, "it WAS so hard and

YET there were so many here. It was terribly, terribly hard. Millions risked death, were humiliated, hated, lost their families—YET there were so many here” (IL 189).

The survival strategy of Biju’s illegal immigration to New York with a dream to make his life comfortable made him get disappointed that he was forced to lead a pathetic life as he has to sleep in shifts or to sleep on the floor of the hotel where he works. But he prepared to undergo any kind of torment to make his ends meet. He was fighting to establish his own identity as he adapts to his life in New York. He worked in cold hours for about seventeen hours a day, to deliver food to the customers. Ghosh considers in his *Kiran Desai: Life and Works*,

Biju is a representative of these teeming millions who suffer due to continuing western hegemony in the late twentieth century discourse of global politics and economics and who crowd the American cities to realise their unfulfilled dreams of better life nurtured in the lap of third world poverty and superstitious backwardness. Everybody from every corner of the world rushes to this land of wish fulfillment to share a fraction its seemingly inexhaustible material resources, as a means of securing better, more comfortable and dignified living.

To get the visa for the U.S Biju stood in the long queue with the dream to bid adieu to the doglike life of his father. The cook dreamt of sofa, TV, bank account and even imagined that his daughter in law would serve him food chick crack his toes and he would be swat with his grandchildren like flies. Biju battles hard to stay afloat in the U.S. Much to his surprise, Biju found that people from all the Third World countries had been gathering in the U.S., most of them are illegal immigrants like him, trying in vain to settle in their dreamland. He was green-eyed on the legalized foreigners settled in the U.S, shopping at “discount stores for the miraculous, expandable third-world suitcase” in contrast to the people like him “who lived and died illegal in America and never saw their families, not for ten years, twenty, thirty, never again.” (IL 99)

He was moving from one restaurant job to another and living with many others in appalling conditions. He led a fugitive life of an illegal immigrant, shifting from place to place like a beast driven by its hunter. In the U.S. he tried his hand with various roles, sometimes as a kitchen helper, sometimes dishwasher or a carrier of food. He realized and experienced the ugly and disorderly state of the West. Not knowing the troubles of Biju, the Cook writes him to “Stay there. Make money. Don’t come back here.”(IL 191)

Biju finds the colonial experience at the *Baby Bistro* restaurant, “Above, the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian. And, when a Paki was hired, it was Mexican, Indian, Pakistani” whereas at *Le* “on top, rich colonial, and down below, poor native. Colombian, Tunisian, Ecuadorian, Gambian.” (IL 21)

Biju’s most admirable friend, Saeed saeed, who is from Zanzibar made him survive without giving up his cultural values. His principles don’t allow his survival by giving up his moral values. Saeed had resigned his work at Banana Republic as its owner was a gay and he refused to eat pig at any cost saying, “first I am Muslim, then I am Zanzibari, then I will BE American” (IL 136) that made Biju to resolve to live on line with his moral faith and dignity. His reaction toward the West becomes a little more forceful when later he understands that he was exploited and ill-treated both by the customers as well as his masters and decided to make his livelihood from a vegetarian restaurant. Yet Biju never thought of the survival strategy of the taxi driver who preferred to marry even a disabled or mentally retarded green card holder for his survival. Biju’s lovable friend Saeed also married an American waitress for the sake of his survival in the U.S. Though Saeed disliked his in-law’s food habits and their other behaviour in general, for the sake of his living in the ‘wonderful country’ and as in the words of Saeed, the people of the U.S. are “the most delightful in the world” (122)

The same idea was reflected by Biju’s fellow dishwasher Achootan in the Brigitte restaurant, who had been in England. The English people openly shout against the immigrants and he admits that the U.S. is better than England that at least the U.S. people have some hypocrisy here, whereas in England, they shout openly on the street “Go back to where you came from” (IL 135), for which Achootan had shouted a line repeatedly several times: “Your father came to my country and took my bread and now I have come to your country to get my bread back” (IL 135). A study of ‘Practical Measures for Reducing Irregular migration’ conducted by

the London School of Economics in 2013 reveals that India is the hub for illegal U.K. migration (TOI 8 Jan. 2013).

When Biju had realised his native moral values for the revival of his culture by not serving beef and finding a job at a vegetarian restaurant, his survival strategies were convinced by the logical argument of his friend Saeed Saeed that cows are holy in India, but the cow from which the beef was served in this hotel was not of an Indian cow; therefore it is not holy. But in the next stage, he was caught up with his native conscience that made him to revive or at least to retain his cultural values and finally found Gandhi Café, an Indian vegetarian establishment, as the most suitable kitchen for his living after meeting its owner Harish-Harry, who had his pen hovering over a request for a donation sent by a cow shelter outside Edison, New Jersey. He is satisfied in working with a Hindu establishment whose ambience reminded him of his own home, believing that he could preserve his traditional values and ethnicity.

On realizing the unfair world, where “one side travels to be a servant, and the other side travels to be treated like a king” (IL 269), he was prepared to say bye to the U.S. Moreover his working conditions and his powerlessness with overwhelming loneliness become the reasons to seek his root, India. While asking the Indian travel agent to book his air ticket, the travel agent Mr.Kakkar alarms and explains the difficulties of survival in India,

all those relatives asking for money! Even strangers are asking for money—maybe they just try, you know, maybe you shit and dollars come out. I’m telling you, my friend, they will get you; if they won’t, the robbers will; if the robbers won’t, some disease will; if not some disease, the heat will; if not the heat, those mad Sardarjis will bring down your plane before you even arrive.” (IL 269)

Further he continued to narrate the revival process of the U.S. to be the leader of the world, so that everyone in the U.S. will be a globalised citizen as America is in the process of buying up the world and even after reaching India, he will be working for an American company there or here and convinced to think of the future of his children. But nothing has convinced Biju to continue to lead a dog life in the U.S.

The Swiss Father Booty decides to settle in the post-Independence India by establishing a dairy farm and to educate the local farmers to set dairy farm, his survival strategies have been shattered with the Gorkha insurgency, when the police had charged him to stay continuously in without renewing his passport. Gyan, the epitome of the modern youth had shown his solidarity by protesting to revive the rights of his Gorkha ethnicity.

The patriotic fervour of Gyan, the spokesman of the modern youth attempts to revive his culture by sending off the hypocritical Anglo Indian people like Father Booty. The indigenous fervour and patriotism for the survival of his people make Gyan to burst out:

Who needs Swiss people here? For how many thousands of years have we produced our own milk?"

“Why don’t you then?Why don’t you make cheese?”

“We live in India, thank you very much. We don’t want any cheese and the last thing we need is chocolate cigars.” (IL 258)

The anti-Western Gyan felt ashamed of his tea party with Sai and her grandfather by ignoring the national spirit of his community. Then he lists out the subsequent grounds why should he not deceive Sai for the interest of the revival of his native people. She could speak only in English and pidgin Hindi; Sai couldn’t eat with her hands; She never chewed a *paan* and had not tried most sweets in the *mithaishop*; She had never been to temple to worship, but only for architectural interest; She couldn’t squat down on the ground; She thought that it is vulgar to put oil for hair; She used paper to clean her bottom; She felt happier with so-called English vegetables – snap peas, French beans, spring onions etc. The judge ate even his chapatis, his puris and parathas, with knife and fork and persuaded Sai to imitate. So, finally Gyan made up his mind to deceive Sai. These facts make him to move to an extent of passing the information about *Cho Oyu*, including the gun, and lack of communication facilities and no one to call for help, resulting in the robbery and humiliation of the judge Jemu. Then he joined his hands with GNLf, which promised to build hospitals and schools, providing jobs with their own people and dignity to their daughters.

Biju was frustrated with not only the unfair treatment of the westerners, but also with the maltreatment of the affluent people from the Third World countries, who are settled in the U.S. His disappointment was to the core when he skidded on the rotten spinach and got his knees broken, he was refused the medical assistance from his master Harish-Harry stating the huge medical expense in New York. Further he accused Biju for his carelessness in maintaining the restaurant floor.

Harish, who refused to provide medical aid to Biju, offered him *Prasad* from a temple. And in that *prasad* "Biju knew not to expect anything else. It was a decoy, an old Indian trick of master to servant, the benevolent patriarch garnering the loyalty of staff; offering slave wages, but now and then a box of sweets, a lavish gift..." (IL 189). Kiran's wry comment on the employer and employee deal echoes Aravind Adiga's presentation of working class, who are considered as the family members of the masters to take responsibility for their master's crimes.

The thought of green card virtually makes him to die. He decided not to return his home without green card. "This was the absurdity. How he desired the triumphant After The Green Card Return Home," and after a while he wistfully pondering over marrying some green card holder, "even a disabled or mentally distorted green card holder would be fine...The green card, green card, the *machoot sala oloo kapatha chaar sau bees* green card that was not even green. It roosted heavily, clumsily, pinkishly on his brain day and night; he could think of nothing else" (IL 191). But, Omar's ambivalent attitude on the white-skinned women for getting the green card is the global symbol of salvation. He says that the white women look good when they're young, but they fall apart fast at the age of forty "they look so ugly, hair falling out, lines everywhere, and those spots and those veins, you know what I'm talking about" (IL 101)

In the post Trump U.S., Anu Peshawaria, a prominent immigration attorney based in the U.S. says, that a large number of undocumented immigrants, employers and agents who help them bend the rules too are likely to face strong legal action, after the Trump government swings into action. Some of immigrants got US citizenship illegally but when detected they can be stripped of their US citizenship and deported. The situation could even get more complicated if the Indian government refuses to take these people back due to lack of papers. Obama may go and Trump may come, yet different survival strategies are adopted by the third world immigrants as they are prepared to undergo any kind of humiliation to get into the U.S.

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