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FEMINIST TRENDS IN 'THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS' BY KIRAN DESAI

Dr.RAJIVA RANJAN

Professor in English



Dr.RAJIVA RANJAN

ABSTRACT

Nimi in 'The Inheritance of Loss' portrays the subaltern position of women in Indian society. In this novel, Kiran Desai depicts not only Nimi but also gives a voice to various female characters. Some of them are traditional, some are timid and submissive, some are vain and lost, and some are assertive, confident and self-dependent. Desai has represented various faces of womanhood through various female characters but the oppression and the degraded position of women in the society are best depicted in the character of Bela.

**Key Words:** Feminist trends, The Inheritance of Loss, Kiran Desai

Feminist literature illuminates the blatant experiences of women who have been denied assistance in every aspect of their lives. They are without options, as their lives are circumscribed by tradition and culture. In the story, Kiran Desai illustrates the reality of female oppression through the character of Bela Patel, the hapless wife of Judge Jemubhai Patel.

In the beginning, the judge is fascinated with his young, under-aged wife. Bela is only fourteen when she is married off to Jemubhai, and so terrified that she begs to be spared the wedding night. Through Bela, Desai highlights the plight of young, girls who are expected to comply with the long-held tradition of early marriage.

In conjunction with child marriage dowry system has also been exposed in the novel. The bride must bring dowry to her groom's family. In Bela's case, her dowry included, 'Cash, gold, emeralds from Venezuela, rubies from Burma, uncut *kundun* diamonds... lengths of woolen cloth...'

Another thing which has been bared is the change of name of the bride on the day of marriage. In this case on the day Jemubhai and Bela marry, Bela's name is unilaterally changed by Jemubhai's family, and she is renamed Nimi. By this, Kiran Desai highlights the suppression of a woman's life-long, personal identity and foretells Nimi's sidelining in her own marriage.

In course of time Jemubhai is selected for ICS and leaves for England for training to become an Indian Civil Service officer, he leaves his wife behind and conveniently forgets her existence. When he returns to India after training, he keeps the English ways he learnt and even takes to powdering his face in order to appear lighter-skinned. But the worst thing after his return from England is that now he proceeds to terrorize his Indian-born wife who is no longer suited for him.

Bela who is fascinated by her husband's treasured powder puff, appropriates the pink and white puff for her own use. When Jemubhai discovers this, he becomes enraged. Already embarrassed by his family's ridicule of his self-obsessed English ways he attacks his wife in their bedroom.

'... he could disguise his inexpertness, his crudity, with hatred and fury...He would teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself.'

With his return from England with elevated position; his cruelty and oppression towards his wife goes to the next level. Physical violence against her begins by her husband who ironically happens to be a law

custodian. Not only this; her in-laws also assist her husband for an uninterrupted torture by locking them in a room on the pretext of 'taming' her. There she was tamed (?!) by being repeatedly raped.

As time passes on, Jemubhai's treatment towards his wife deteriorates. He deprives her of food if she fails to name any particular food item in English.

When he goes on tours, he leaves Bela behind. With every cruel retort and mind game he reduces a beautiful young woman to a pitiable caricature of her own self. Her toiletry and beauty items are summarily discarded, and she is ordered to take off her traditional Indian jewelry because they don't conform to her husband's western tastes. As a result of his economic, emotional and physical abuse, she withdraws into herself. She falls out of life altogether.

As weeks went by; she started facing social isolation. She spoke to nobody; the servants thumped their own leftovers on the table for her to eat, stole the supplies without fear, and allowed the house to grow filthy until the day before Jemubhai's arrival when suddenly it was brought to luster again.

Her husband insulted her, every day, not only physically but also mentally. Due to physical violence, psychological oppression and social isolation, she develops pustules on her face, which prompts Jemubhai to further denigrate her waning beauty.

"When Jemubhai saw her cheeks irrupting in pustules, he took her fallen beauty as a further affront and felt concerned the skin disease would infect him as well. He instructed ... servants to wipe everything with Dettol to kill germs ... He powdered himself extra carefully with his new puff..."

The effect of such treatment reflected as, 'Nimmi made in-valid by her misery grew very dull, began to fall asleep in heliographic sunshine and wake in the middle of the night...'

The quieter she was, the louder he shouted, and if she protested, it was worse. She soon realized that whatever she did or didn't do the outcome was much the same. Nimi comes to realize the hopelessness of her existence.

Later, the text strongly suggests that the judge paid bribes to have Nimi's murder look like an accident. When the news comes that a 'woman had caught fire over a stove,' the judge 'chose to believe it was an accident.' After all, 'Ashes have no weight, they tell no secrets, and they rise too lightly for guilt...'

This was a systematic and complete annihilation of a beautiful creature: by her husband, by her in-laws, by society and by law custodians!!!

But there is a ray of hope even in the ashes; and Kiran Desai is not without a solution. Her feminist perspective highlights alternatives to the kind of fate Nimi endures. In the story, Noni, a spinster, tells Sai, Nimi's grand-daughter, that if she hopes to escape the fate of so many before her, she must choose her life for herself.

"Listen to me...if you get a chance in life, take it...You must do it on your own, Sai."

Towards the end of the novel, we find Sai deciding to do just this, as she begins to envision the possibilities the world can accord her. As evidenced in the novel, Desai's feminist voice rings clearly, and she speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves.

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#### **Biographical details of the author**

Dr. RajivaRanjan was awarded a Ph.D. degree in Humanities from Magadh University, India in 1998. Since post-graduation, he has been teaching English language and literature in different institutions both at home and abroad.