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THE THEME OF ROOTLESSNESS IN KIRAN DESAI'S "THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS"

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ABSTRACT

Kiran Desai is the daughter of noted author Anita Desai. She was born on 3rd Sep.1971 in India. She lived in India until she was 10 and after which her family moved to England and lived there for a year and then moved to the United States.

'Inheritance of Loss' is her second novel which was published in 2006. The novel is a unique blend of guilt and liberation. While working on this novel, she lived a peripatetic life that took her from New York to Mexico and India.

The novel has its center a Cambridge- educated Indian judge living out his retirement in Kalimpong with his granddaughter until their lives is disrupted by Nepalese insurgents. She has very well portrayed the predicament, joys and sorrows and mainly the issue of identity of men and women of Indian diaspora in the alien land. The various themes which are intertwined in the novel are globalization, multiculturalism, insurgency, poverty, isolation, the connection between place and culture and issues related to loss of identity.

In this novel she is bewitching and perceptive but the readers find it difficult sometimes to relate with the story of India and New York.

Kiran Desai is an Indian born American author who was born on Sept 3, 1971 in New Delhi. She lived in Delhi until she was 14, and then spent a year in England, before her family moved to the USA. She is the daughter of the known Indian writer Anita Desai, who is the author of many books and three of which have been shortlisted for the Booker prize.

Kiran Desai seems far from writers like Zadie Smith and Hari Kunzru whose fiction takes a generally optimistic view of what Salman Rushdie has called, " hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combination of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies , songs."

In this proposed paper, a modest attempt will be made to analyze the theme of rootlessness in the works of Kiran Desai with special reference to The Inheritance of Loss. She is the product of multiculturalism and post colonialism, an immigrant well read, well bred, whose rootlessness it has become a kind of shelter.

However, to the second generations' i.e the children born of the immigrants, the country of their birth is not similar to the country of their origin. This fact makes the difference in the development of identity of those children as they are tossed between two different cultures and societies, one of the host cultures and another of the home culture which is held steadfastly by their parents in the land of migration. Thus, torn between two polarities they develop a sense of in-between ness which result either in the loss of identity and

alienation or result in hybrid identity which means adoption of both elements of home and host culture in their bearing to their convenience which has also been termed as plural identity.

Kiran Desai's second novel, 'The Inheritance of Loss' was published in early 2006 and won the 2006 Booker Prize. This second novel of remarkable breath and beauty won the 35 year old Desai National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award and the 2006 Vodafone Crossword Book Award.

When she began this more realistic and contemporary novel, she drew on her experiences of living both in and between two cultures. She describes this dual life as an imbalance that can profoundly affect a person's feelings, thoughts and ideas. Certainly, her characters in "inheritance" are affected by a sort of imbalance in 1980's India. When talking of the characters in 'The Inheritance of Loss' and of her own life, she says:

"The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but those journey (of her grandparents) as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is this I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance."

Kiran Desai has touched upon many different issues throughout the book such as globalization, multiculturalism, inequality and the different forms of life. The book describes and evaluates every aspect of Indian life. The various issues raised show the condition of Indians all over the world. The novel is not autobiographical in essence though its location was very well known to the author as her roots are in Kalimpong area where she spent her childhood in a house called 'Chomiomo' and she used to go to school in Kampong's St. Joseph 's Convent which shows many resemblances to her character. Sai however, Desai in her interview for Rediff India Abroad (Desai, Rediff India Abroad, [online], 2006)¹ insists that the similarities were used just for literary reasons. Much has been made of the parallels between the book and Desai's family history but it is not an autobiography. Desai herself has said that in places it's about experiences within her family- such as the experience of immigration and going back to India.

'The Inheritance of Loss' has a plot that is set in two places, the hills of Kalimpong and New York. Its veritable cast of characters includes Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a retired, cranky judge who lives in an old colonial house in Kalimpong. He has a granddaughter Sai who is an orphaned seventeen year old girl and Biju who is the son of Patel's cook. It includes a tribe of neighbours and Gyan, who is Sai's love interest.

The book also describes the journey of Jemubhai Patel, who went from small town Gujrat to Cambridge. It tells us that Jemubhai started from a small town, completed his education and got married early. He was married to the daughter of a wealthy man because he needed money to go and pursue his education in Britain. After the marriage, he left to study law in England, where he had to face many difficulties, isolation and racial abuse being some of them. He becomes the victim of racial discrimination of skin, smell, habits and generally for being an Indian. He has to struggle a lot to survive there. This shows the attitude of people towards Indians in foreign countries. They view us as second class citizens, as has been portrayed in the book.

Besides, the novel also brings to the picture the male dominated society in India, which is depicted through the behavior of the judge towards his wife as he considers himself to be superior to her as he had acquired education in England and his wife was just an uneducated, uncivilized, illiterate village woman. He has the same apathy towards her as there was against him in England.

His experience in England completely changed him and made him a grim man. He strived for British perfection and paid least regard to his own culture. The most important implication of this was that he was frustrated with his wife, because she was a country bumpkin and cast a shadow on his own life. Then, after a series of constant conflict , which also involved that he sent her home for the delivery of their first child he never lets her come back¹.

Another important issue rose by the novel which clearly shows the present Indian mentality that Indian people is ready to do anything to go abroad. Indians go abroad with lofty dreams and wishing to live the American Dream but wind up doing menial jobs and getting on respect in a country far away from their

¹ Desai, Rediff India Abroad, [online], 2006

homeland. In some cases, they are so traumatized or are so disappointed with failure that they are unwilling to go back to their own country because of the social implications.

The major plotline in the novel is the life of Cook. The Cook, despite being very poor, pays through the nose and sends his son to America, thinking that he would have a better life there and do well for himself that he does not realize the consequences of illegal immigration which son has to suffer. The Cook's thinking is far from the truth of Biju's animal existence. He is a fugitive, was an illegal immigrant in America doing odd jobs and working in restaurants. He also faces the problem of isolation and racial abuse, as is expected in foreign countries. He has to keep running from immigration authorities in the perennial hope of getting a green card. Biju's life in America also shows that Indians are very culture oriented. They cannot deviate from the values taught to them whatever the situation may be. But at the same time, it talks about the westernization taking place in our country.

Another theme she has addressed is "what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant" as well as "what happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one." These events occurred not only in her book but also in Desai's own life.

She explores a parallel between the immigration of Indians to the USA and the Nepali workers who immigrated to India as a cheap labour during the colonial period. In both cases, it is believed that both of these groups have to deal with the questions of rights and identity.

This novel can be viewed as a Diasporic novel. The various themes which are intertwined in the novel are globalization, multiculturalism, insurgency, poverty, isolation and issues related to loss of identity.

One of the major character in the novel is the Judge and he had to, at his youth, face the racial hatred in Britain but when he came back to India, he, despite his British experiences, clings to the British culture and seems to despise everything Indian. He fails to understand and to be understood by the British but refuses his own culture and is therefore caught in a limbo which transforms his insecurity into hatred and cruelty to his family and to other people. Sai, on the other hand was brought up in a Westernized Convent and later lives with her grandfather. She, therefore, is strongly influenced by Western culture even though she lives in Eastern society. Her identity search intensifies when she too understand the reason for her boyfriend's sudden nationalism and his accusations of being a servant of the West.

Biju, the son of the cook who leaves India in hope of better life in America finds out that he is not able to understand the foreign culture and in the end is relieved to be back in India, where he, despite its imperfections, finds security in well-known habits and customs.

Most of the characters in Desai's novel seem to be in search of their personal identity. They try to find their place within the society they live in. For Sai, therefore, it was very difficult to find her own identity among so many different influences. (For example- cultural clash with her grandfather and his cook).

The theme of the connection between place, language and culture is studied in this area of relationship between one's identity and place often appears in 'The Inheritance of Loss'. Desai's belief in these theories stems from her personal experience and is mirrored in her writing where she successfully shows the feelings of a person in a foreign country. The character which documents this issue most vividly is Biju, the son of the cook who travels to the USA as an illegal immigrant but finds too difficult to understand the new culture and in the end returns to India. He realizes that he cannot find any connection between himself and the place because he does not understand the language and cannot find any cultural bond with the location. His bitter experiences help him to realize that he belongs into his own culture. He went to the USA in hope of financial success and although he does not achieve it as all his belongings are stolen on return to India. He appreciates being in his own culture, where he can understand its customs and people.

Gyan, Sai's tutor represents someone looking for his personal identity as he feels that he is being disadvantaged because of his Nepali nationality. His relationship with Sai represents the conflict between classes and nationalities.

Two sisters Noni and Lola are representatives of a wealthy higher class which is strongly influenced by British culture. They behave very dismissively towards people who are, in their opinion, of a lower class. Lola's daughter, Pixie, works in England for the BBC and both sisters consider everything British as a sign of higher class. However, their ostentatious richness marks them as an easy target during the Nepali riots in the area.

Father Booty is a Swiss priest. He came to Kalimpong on a missionary work after Indian Independence. He stayed there for thirty years. Though he was a representative of western culture but he was the one who accepted the Eastern culture and even though he brought some western influences into the area. He assimilated with the local people. 543 But has to leave India during the riots as his visas are expired and experiences the feeling of displacement when he has to go back to his country.

Interestingly, the book does not depict traditional Indian lifestyle as all the characters portrayed in the novel are somehow influenced by the post-colonial aftermath. This supports the view that Kiran Desai's aim was not to describe the life style of people in the remote part of India with their traditional culture, but rather to show the relationship between East and West as well as the reality of immigrants.

The author wanted to capture "what happens when a western element is introduced into a country that is not of the west." In this article the researcher has tried to explore this issue and compared it with Eastern influences in the West. These influences were shown on characters as Sai, Harish- Harry and the situation of Nepali diaspora living in the region.

Sai was brought up in English Convent where she learnt that:

"..... Cake was better than laddoos, fork- spoon- knife better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ and consuming a water of his body was more civilized than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigold. English was better than Hindi (Desai, 2006, p30)¹. Even though she lives in India, she speaks only English and lives in a very small community of people of higher class."

In other words, she was taught that English culture was superior to the Indian culture.

Another example of western influence on East is well demonstrated on a minor character whose name is Harish – Harry. He is an owner of a restaurant where Biju works in New York. Harish – Harry keeps two version of his name, and also attributes of Hindi as well as other religions because he's not sure which of the religion is genuine. His character in the novel shows that since otherness was not accepted, the duality might seem as a solution of the problem. This solution, however, does not work. This option is further described to be quite common as Desai wits about Indian students, the " half 'n' haf" who visited the Indian restaurant with their American friends but could not decide whether they were more Indians or Americans, having " one accent one side of the mouth , another the other side."(Desai, 2006, 148)². The story of these characters therefore raises questions whether hybridity- the "in between" space does not jeopardize personal identity in an attempt to find a compromise.

In contrast to Harish- Harry is father Booty. He illustrates the example of Eastern influence on West, or rather on a person from West. Even though his religious mission is not mentioned anywhere. It becomes apparent that he originally came to India as a priest. He contributes to the local culture by bringing in a new trade- cheese making, while the local culture influenced him to the point that when he has to leave, he has a strong feeling of displacement. Thus, he can be seen as a representative of a person who adopted the Eastern culture as his own.

On the basis of these, the researcher finds that Desai's aim was to picture the life between the Western and the Eastern culture, the immigrant experience as well as the influence of Western culture on the non-Western culture.

Here, I may conclude that "Inheritance of Loss" is just a saga of loss, hardships and sufferings faced by the people during their life time. It also throws light on the after effects of colonialism, the ills of capitalism, the downside of globalization, immigration, the myth of multiculturalism etc. In my opinion, all the characters of the novel only inherit 'loss' but it is undoubtedly Kiran Desai who inherited the Man Booker!

References

¹- Desai, 2006, p30.

²- Desai, 2006, p148.

* All the citations are taken from Rediff India Abroad, (online 2006)

* Weinreich & Saunderson, 2003, Chapter-1, p 54-61.
