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KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*: A STUDY IN IDENTITY CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* in terms of identity crisis. Everyman living in the world is bound to have an identity. Everyone undergoes a conflict with him/her self. He/she remains dangling between two identities and struggles a lot. *The Inheritance of Loss* can be studied from the perspective of identity crisis. The story unfolds various complex issues as it progresses. Desai shows how the lives of Gyan, Sai and her grandfather as well as the lives of their cook and his son are suffered and tossed at horrible turning points. Almost all the characters are the inheritors of loss in terms of dislocation of place, wealth and progress. All of them suffer from sense of loss. Through the delineation of opposite characters Desai illustrates the unfortunate consequences of imperialism. While Jemubhai's quest for identity is discussed through adoption of parameters of class of the whites, Gyan's is through an expression of 'resistance' and vengeance. 'The Inheritance of Loss' represents the mimic individuals struggling for lost identity. This is a story of alienation occurred both in the homeland and abroad.

Keywords: Kiran Desai, Displacement, Identity crisis,

Identity is an integral property which an individual possesses. Psychologically identity is a person's conception and expression of one's individuality. It is also an affiliation with a group or a community as in case of cultural identity. Identity can be defined as "the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual shared by all members of a particular social category or group" (Tiwari 6). It is also observed that individual's identity leads to complications and conflicts which the self of individual suffers. It is this crucial conflict that almost every human being encounters. This conflict is called identity crisis. Many characters from the novel under study suffer from identity crisis due to which they fail in their assimilation in their own land as well as in foreign land. This paper discusses the identity crisis in selected characters from the said novel by examining their experiences in their lives.

The prestigious Booker winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* appeared in 2006. It took Desai eight years to complete this novel. The title of novel seems complex but it is still more informative and readers soon realize that it deals with various themes and issues related with Postcolonialism. The novel is set against the backdrop of the agitation for Gorkhaland in the north eastern hill. An orphan teenage girl Sai is living with her

grandfather Jemubhai Patel, a retired judge. They live in the town of Kalimpong on the Indian side of Himalayas. The story unfolds various complex issues as it progresses. Sai gets involved romantically with her tutor Gyan. The story switches between India and the USA. As the other string of the story, there is Biju, the son of the Cook, who leads very critical life in New York. Desai shows how the lives of Gyan, Sai and her grandfather along with their cook and his son are suffered and tossed at horrible turning points. After the end of colonial era, the world suffered differently, this period is associated, especially in the third world, with economic and political crisis, corruption and violence. Through this novel Kiran Desai points out every contemporary international issue such as globalisation, multiculturalism, economic inequality and terrorist activity. In short, the novel deals with various aspects of Postcolonialism. This paper is a humble attempt to critically examine the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* in terms of identity crisis.

The very first chapter introduces the reader to the major characters in the novel. The novel has one long flash back which traces the incidents that led up in the beginning of the story. There are stories within the story. The main plot is related with the lives of Jemubhai Patel, a retired judge who was educated at Cambridge, his orphaned granddaughter Sai, their Cook who worries over his son Biju struggling from job to job as an illegal immigrant in New York city. Almost all the characters are the inheritors of loss in terms of dislocation of place, wealth and progress. All of them suffer from sense of loss. Jemubhai Patel is an embittered person who often lives in the past. Sai lost her parents in an accident in Russia, the Cook, and his son Biju and Gyan all share one common thing and that is sense of loss. The desperate characters of the novel are bound by a shared historical legacy.

The beginning of the novel sets the introspective and somber tone of the novel. The British influence in India developed a society where the differences between the colonisers and the colonized were distinctive in respect of wealth and power. In this novel Desai juxtaposes two extremes of Indian society. Sai and her society with their Anglified taste and on other hand Gyan with his native habits. In fact, Gyan does not like western culture - "I'm not interested in Christmas!" . . . "Why do you celebrate Christmas?" (Desai 163). Further he asserts, "You are like slaves, that's what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself" (163). Some characters such as Uncle Potty and Father Booty represent the privileged people from the West living in India. On the other hand the Cook represents the poor people who lead their lives under dire circumstances due to poverty. The cook, unknown about reality, is proud of his son whom he imagines to be successful in America. Gyan's postcolonial status makes him perhaps the most complicated character of the novel. Kiran Desai highlights the issue of minority, especially ethnic minority, through the character of Gyan. Desai's characters like Lola, Noni, etc. are western products that generate the feeling of superiority of West. Desai emphasizes on the white privilege or the western influence. The delineation of opposite characters she illustrates the unfortunate consequences of imperialism. The infamous Macaulay Minute of 1835 declares the superiority of colonial education over the native one. Its aim was to mould Indians black in colour of skin but English in taste, morals and manners. Eventually it created a sort of inaccurate doubling of the colonized as a reflection of the colonisers. Desai attempts to locate this consequence of colonialism. Justice Jemubhai is the best example of the colonial aftermath. He holds onto colonial past even he lives in independence India. He has embraced the education, manners and values of white masters. He is ridiculed because of his westernized way of life. The life of Jemubhai is nothing but the mimicry of the Europeans. His obsession with the cleanliness makes him aloof from his own countrymen.

As rightly stated by Ashcroft et al. that displacement and/or shifting of location results in the crisis of identity. Ashcroft et al. remark "A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place" (*Empire Writes Back* 8). In short, the search for identity is beset primarily with the problem of location. This novel has plenty of instances of displacement and shifting of location as is the case of Biju, Sai or Gyan.

The central characters of this work are seen as engulfed in a struggle to establish an identity of their own. This struggle arises out of the feeling of being conflicted between two cultures- one his own culture and the other alien culture. They are shifted from their native identity to something different. This is ". . . the

transformation of the native into something other than himself – a Westernised native or at least one who is in a crisis regarding his/her own cultural identity” (Abraham 3). Through this novel Desai confronts us to the basic concept of identity and at the same time she focuses on how identity is treated as monolith in postcolonial nations like India. The novel addresses the issue in a direct and most poignant way. To justify her idea, Desai has portrayed the characters that are mostly eccentrics or in exile or both.

The seeds of identity crisis are sown much earlier with colonization which not only destroyed native culture but also induced the natives to abandon their own culture and to imitate the colonisers. However, this can prove disastrous on the part of coloniser. Bill Ashcroft et al. remark:

When the colonial discourse encourages the colonial subject to ‘mimic’ the colonisers by adopting the colonisers’ cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather the result is a ‘blurred copy’ of the colonisers that can be quite threatening. (*Post-Colonial Studies* 124-25)

Jemubhai’s education in England caused him so much pain and suffering that he desperately tried to become as English as possible and hated anything Indian, including his family and his wife. His meeting with English culture was humiliation and that established anger in him for his own culture and men. Further he was rejected in England and this rejection fuelled in his soul a shame and dislike for his heritage, his culture and the colour of his skin. As a result “he retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow” (Desai 39). The result, however, resembles to what Bill Ashcroft and et al. remarks. He is neither European nor Indian. He loses his self and becomes an immigrant within himself. He becomes victim of double identity as is described by Desai in the novel - “He envied English. He loathed Indians” (Desai 119).

Justice Jemubhai begins his search for identity from a position of ‘other’. He tries to become a member of the mainstream by showing and acquiring ‘sameness’ with the powerful. He isolates himself from his original group in order to become member of white colonisers’ group. However, he remains dangling between two identities as he is not granted desired membership of the ‘civilised’ class of white masters nor accepted by his countrymen. Desai describes “He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both” (119).

Gyan’s situation is no longer different from that of Justice. He is from Nepalese descent and is dislocated from Nepal. He also faces the problem of identity as he loves Gorkhaland but does not full-fledged fight for it. Gyan’s journey to seek his identity provides the contrast, i.e. he undertakes the venture not through submission and subjugation but violent resistance through insurgency. While Jemubhai’s quest for identity is discussed through adoption of parameters of class of the whites, Gyan’s is through an expression of ‘resistance’ and vengeance. It can be said that “The feeling of inferiority, indeterminacy, and uncertainty leads individual to a quest of identity through achieving professional success vis a vis social position either through participation in the colonial administration or the insurgent movement” (Sen 103). In fact, many events happened in Jemubhai’s life are seen to be enacted in Gyan’s life. Many times Gyan is represented as dichotomy of Jemubhai. However, with many things in common – misogyny, violence against their respective female counterpart and identity crisis – these two characters are much closer to each other. Both of them struggle with their hybridized identity and at the same time trying to maintain their “recognition that identity makes a difference” (Alcoff 45). All such things can be observed in plenty in Kiran Desai’s novel *The Inheritance of Loss*.

The Inheritance of Loss represents the mimic individuals struggling for lost identity. The individual relations become a site for contest of assertion of identity and power. The plot portrays love, longings, and losses. The characters and actions move between local to global suggesting dislocation, displacement which eventually results in hybridized form of identity and culture as well. The longing of the character is the most important thing in the novel. The characters are desperately desirous of identity for themselves. Moreover, these characters feel the utmost requirement of their public acceptance. The story revolves round issues of identity – personal identity as well as group identity.

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