


Ruminations on Indian Women Fiction Writers

By

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Ruminations on Indian Women Fiction Writers

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10.
**Rerouting the Political Roots in the
Trajectory of Life: Kiran Desai's *The
Inheritance of Loss***

Prof. Steven Lobo

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai has described her lived experiences in India and explores a range of issues, including colonialism, conflicting notions of loyalty and allegiance, and issues of relatedness. Psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, in their Self Determination Theory refer to the importance of Relatedness as a core need facilitating growth. Desai, thus, throws light both on the plight of the Nepali speaking Gorkhas in Darjeeling who suffer pangs of anxiety about their belongingness in spite of having settled in Darjeeling for years as well as the woes of the illegal migrants from India who lead meaningless lives.

An Indian woman writer, Kiran Desai, writes about the Indian political landscape and her glimpse of India as seen from her mind's eye. She intersperses her recollections of what has happened recently with accounts from a more distant past, and she situates these experiences into surroundings that are depicted with a scientific accuracy and adorned in masterly language that takes on the issues with purposeful strides.

The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is the result of seven years of rumination of the emotional patterns that were inscribed in her mind. In her subconscious mind, she regurgitated all these, shaping them anew, bringing her characters to life, strand by strand. This makes them as real as it is possible to craft within the aegis of fiction.

Usage of italicized Hindi words helped Desai create the Desi flavor in the novel and to provide a cultural context in the minds of the readers. For instance, entire sentences like '*Wahe Guruji Ka Khalsa, Wahe Guruji Ki Fateh*' with religious connotation, Hindi words like *chhang, intezaam, haveli, murdabad, churan, ber, jamun* etc and slangs like *sala* and *bhenchoot* are used. Often, Desai accentuates her narrative with personal opinions even as the story unfolds to reveal the twists and turns taken by her characters. The shift in point of view and in time is accompanied with abrupt changes in the printed form of the novel, which is a collage of italics, capitals, lists, diary writing and changing font sizes.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, very conspicuously, Desai has weaved solitude and loneliness in the lives of her characters. Sai, a teenage Indian girl is an orphan. Her grandfather is a retired judge. Gyan, Sai's tutor is a Gorkha, grappling with two strands of his life, his love interest, Sai and allegiance to Nepalese insurgence. Lola and Noni are spinsters. The positions of the characters, whether it is the experience of being an orphan or retired or remaining spinsters or struggling within the self, all

of them, not only includes the concept of loneliness in their definition but also further exalts the dimensions of loneliness when compounded together.

Besides, in spite of the immense advances made in the field of communication, it is unable to connect nations and overcome the loneliness between the characters. We see this in the experiences of Biju, an illegal migrant. The illegality of his stay keeps him away from the others around him. His only pleasure lies in hearing from his native land but the expectations that they have is so far from the reality that even after a phone call, he is lonelier than ever: "The call was over, and the emptiness Biju hoped to dispel was reinforced." (Desai 232) Desai expresses this sentiment at the beginning of the novel. "No human had ever seen an adult giant squid alive,...., theirs was a solitude so profound they might never encounter another of their tribe". (Desai 2)

Desai juxtaposes the lives of her fictional characters with real people and events. She uses the lives of her protagonists to explore a range of issues, including colonialism, conflicting notions of loyalty and allegiance, and how these shape identities. The judge, ongoing abroad shifted his priorities to include English mannerisms and way of life while unlearning Indian ways. The metamorphosis is so complete that the reader is able to contrast clearly the traits displayed by him on the eve of his departure to England with those on his return. In certain ways, he shocks us. Similarly Gyan's love for Sai is in conflict with his

loyalty to the Indian-Nepali insurgency movement and in course of time it is further replaced by loyalty to his family in the form of professed respect for his grandmother. Budhoo, the Nepali watchman who owed his allegiance to Lola and Noni and Mon Ami parted ways with them as the Nepali movement gathered momentum. Even Biju's romance with radical Hinduism and desire for purity may be construed to be reactionary to Saeed's dedicated practice of Islam.

The loss of loyalty and trust, perhaps, sows the seeds of dissension and super imposes meaninglessness in the lives of the characters. Psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, in their Self Determination Theory refer to the importance of Relatedness as a core need facilitating growth. They claim that when this need is thwarted, it may lead to negative feelings of prejudice and aggression. Applying this theory to *The Inheritance of Loss*, we find that the judge, Jemubhai, who lived alone and felt alienated in course of his study in America depicts both these negative traits while dealing with his wife on his return to India. He illtreats her and this only further accentuates his solitude. Sai, who is also lonely in her early years, fails to have a meaningful relationship with Gyan, another being kept bereft from the feeling of belonging in his formative years. Lola and Noni live in a false world of their own creation wherein they insist on eating foreign vegetables rather than local ones and thereby fail to form a connection with the locals. As a result, they, in turn, also face a reciprocal treatment from the locals that

could be called total disregard of any loyalty, respect or concern for them. When there's a reversal of situation, the locals do not hesitate to abuse them in spite of their long stay in the region.

Monetary considerations have also been primary in the decision of several Indian natives to go to foreign land. While, at the same time, they were welcomed by the affluent west, who wanted to use their superior economic prowess to fulfill their own selfish goals. The British army recruited the first generation of Gyan's ancestor as he was strong and willing to swear allegiance to the queen and exploited the cheap labour made available by the helplessness of successive members of the second generation while professing to recruit them on sympathy grounds. Desai says,

...all Gyan's great-grandfather did was march for many prosperous years, and he acquired a wife and three sons. But then they sent him to Mesopotamia where Turkish bullets made a sieve of his heart and he leaked to death on the battlefield. As a kindness to the family, that they might not lose their income, the army employed his eldest son...Indian soldiers fought in Burma, in Gibraltar, in Egypt, in Italy. Two months short of his twenty third birthday, in 1943, the spindly soldier was killed in Burma, shakily defending the British against the Japanese. His brother was offered a job and this boy died, too, in Italy, outside Florence, not fighting at all, but making jam from apricots for the major of the

batallion in a villa housing British troops...and then, they were bombed- (Desai 42)

The emphasis is on the loss of the ability of Indians to take moral decisions in the face of poverty. In Desai's view, they become dis-empowered figures, moved involuntarily by the impersonal forces of colonial history. In fact, disempowerment has been a constant feature of society. It has been used as a political tool by all those who don the cap that reflects power. The Poor suffered the most in the unlawful conditions creating conducive grounds to breed hatred. Desai provides a heart rending description of the sufferings, hopes and disillusionment of the immigrants. The story of the survival of the illegal immigrants reveals how the Law can be blinded to untold human miseries, how laws meant to protect the right to work in humane conditions can be turned in to a farce by the very victims working in inhuman conditions. Thus, irrespective of the country, it is the poor and the helpless that are suppressed. Poverty stricken men grow in to ancients at fast-forward highlighting a 'compressed childhood, lingering old age' (Desai 19). The plight of these people describes the imbalance in society, which is less rigid and asking for the rich than it is for the poor:

It was the impoverished who walked the line so thin it was questionable if it existed, an imaginary line between the insurgents and the law, between being robbed and being hunted by the police as scapegoats for the crimes of others. They were hungriest. (Desai 282)

However, at the heart of the narrative, interweaved along with glimpses of the utter apathy for the unfortunate economically disabled is the gatha of the Nepali struggle in Darjeeling. What happened in Kalimpong was a fall out of discrimination and exclusion faced by generations of the Nepali speaking Gorkhas who have settled in Darjeeling. They have always been anxious about their belongingness. Hence, over the years they have evolved themselves into movements that helped mobilize themselves into ethnopolitics in Darjeeling.

Their history documents a shift from the violent Gorkhaland Agitation of the 1980s, which was a violent ethno-nationalist movement to an indigenous-based politics. These people have been severely marginalized since the 19th century. Though they are a majority in the region, they are treated as foreigners or outsiders. Constant questioning about their loyalty to the nation has hurt their sentiments. In fact, the failure of the Gorkhaland movement paved the way for the tribal movement. It proved to be a call for social justice leading to affirmative action and autonomy. However, in 2017, the old demand for Gorkhaland regained momentum when the West Bengal Government made Bengali as one of the compulsory languages in the schools of Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts. The situation turned critical as common people lead the movement. The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) was formed to look into the administration of the hills. Subsequently, the DGHC was dissolved and was replaced by the Gorkhaland

Territorial Administration (GTA). The Kalimpong district was formed to challenge the might of the Gorkhaland leaders. The West Bengal government formed 15 development boards for the different Gorkha communities, which is seen as a method to divide the communities. Kalimpong was once under the Bhutanese and ceded to the British East India Company. It was later added to Darjeeling district in 1866. It became an important trading outpost between India and Tibet. It was also at the centre stage of the violent movement for the demand of a separate state of Gorkhaland in the 1980s and from 2008 to 2011. Police firing on July 27, 1986 in Kalimpong on Gorkhaland supporters wherein thousands were killed, intensified the stir. So, the pulse of the movement captured by Desai is still evident in the hills of Kalimpong.

Another motif in this novel that Desai brings to center-focus is the politics of illegal migrants in America. About 4 million Indians live in the US, half of whom are contract workers and their families. Approximately 6 lakhs plus are illegal immigrants. These illegal immigrants take jobs in the retail or service industry that belongs to the legal Indians. The problems that they face primarily is that of language barriers, employment opportunities, housing, access to various services like health care, legal advice, mental health, social services, etc., transportation issues like procuring driving licences and the challenges of public transit time-tables, cultural differences, problems that their kids face, prejudice and racism, isolation and

the weather. Life is not easy on them because of these factors, the biggest fear being getting caught and deported! By highlighting their plight, Desai has given a voice to the American story through a narration of the chain of events in Biju's life that has successfully exhorted all hopes of a better tomorrow.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* traces seeds of the political strife within the nation as well as ascribes aspersions on issues of identity of the individuals caught within the contours of the strife. It further brings to light the sad plight of those poor who look upon migration to progressive countries like America in order to build better lives for themselves but find themselves check mated in the trajectory of life even in this attempt. Throughout the novel, Desai highlights her concerns for the local as well as the global, emphasizing not only her Indian roots but also her globalised-American identity.

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