

Multicultural Concerns in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Dr V. Francis

Asistant Professor of English,

St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract: Multiculturalism has become the order of the day in metropolitan cities all over the world. Mixture of different cultures or practise of various cultures within a boundary is known as multiculturalism. Multiculturalism has become one of the commonest features of anthropogenic age. Metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Kolkatta, Chennai, New Delhi, Bangaloru and other metropolitan cities all over the world accepted and effectively practise multiculturalism. In cities like London, Paris and New York, we could find people of all the nations living and working together. People migrate from their native country to another for various reasons. As soon as they reach a new nation, a number alien atmospheres creep around them. They feel the sense of loneliness and rootlessness. They often indulge in nostalgia about their home country. They do not merely undergo the geographical relocation, but they also undergo social, political, cultural, economic, religious and psychological relocations. They neither have the hold of their native country nor the adopted country. This paper tries to explore the multicultural elements found in Kiran Desai's acclaimed novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Key Words: multiculturalism, indigenious, colonialism, diaspora, green card

Introduction: The term 'multiculturalism' is of fairly recent origin. But the existence of cultural diversity is found in various societies for a very long time. Multiculturalism or cultural pluralism has become the order of the day in many countries at present. There are countries, where cultural diversity in a common phenomenon – people speak different languages, believe in different faiths and practise various cultures and customs. Culture is a distinctive way of life. Great cultures emerged through noble practices carried out by many generations of people. *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Sociology* (Vol.3) defines;

... multiculturalism both celebrates and seeks to protect cultural variety (e.g. minority languages), while at the same time focusing on the often unequal relationship of minority to mainstream cultures. After decades of persecution, the prospects of indigenious or immigrant cultures are now helped somewhat by the support they receive from international public opinion and the international community (e.g. the United Nations). (537)

India is one of the multicultural countries which is deep rooted in its rich diversity. It is a country with varied cultures, affluent languages, many faiths and different practices. Canada is often hailed for its excellent practice of multiculturalism. Many of the western countries have realized that multiculturalism is one of the key elements day.

Multiculturalism is the by product of globalization and colonialism. Though the term globalisation is of recent origin, even in ancient times people travelled from country to country for trade, and to spread religion and culture. Emperor Ashoka sent his son Mahendra and daughter Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka; and several monks to central Asia to spread Buddhism. Chinese travellers, Fa Hsien, Sung Yun, Hsuan Tsang and I Tsing visited India between 400 and 700 AD to collect Buddhist scriptures. Rajendra Chola I conquered Sri Lanka, Maldives, Malaysia, Southern Thailand and Indonesia and spread Tamil culture and religion. After the discovery of sea-routes, a number of people from the West came to the East for trade and to spread their religion. Late 19th century and early 20th century witnessed a tremendous exchange – exchange of things, ideas, culture, religion, philosophy, etc. Initially, globalization was linked only with economic activities but soon it found its connectivity in other realms like culture, education, religion, environment, politics and migration. Mallikarjun Patal in his work *Literature and Cultural Studies* highlights the following reasons for the growth of multiculturalism: "... political invasions, migrations, renaissance, industrial revolution, enlightenment, science and technology, colonialism, imperialism..." (74).

British Colonialism played a key role in promoting multiculturalism. The British expanded their colonies from the late 16th century to the early 18th century. They had 24% of the earth's total area under their control. Apart from trade, they also spread their culture, language, religion and education. The English people are often acknowledged for gifting their colonies with the English language. The English language is one of the foremost tools that promotes multiculturalism. The present scenario shows that a large number of people migrate to English speaking countries like; the U.S.A, the U.K, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Postcolonial writings are the by-products of multiculturalism. K. V. Dominic in his work *Multicultural Consciousness in the Novels of R. K. Narayan* views postcolonial literature in the following way: "Postcolonial writings are attempts at reviving the ethnic cultures, traditions, beliefs, languages, etc. The postcolonial literature inculcated pride in one's own ancient culture and traditions. It abounds in patriotic feelings. Postcolonialism aims at developing the national identity in the wake colonial rule." (5)

The improvement and innovations of modern technology too has paved the way for the spread of multiculturalism. The English language and the advent of internet have shrunk the world into a global village. The use of social media has still furthered the concept of global village. From 'around the world in eighty days', we have reached 'around the world in one day'. Today, we have reached a point, where things get exchanged at the fastest level. Migration from the East to the West and the vice versa has become a regular phenomenon. Since people are exposed to various cultures, they easily adapt themselves to the new culture and its ethos where on earth they settle down. Except a few Islamic countries; all the others extend their open arms of acceptance to the people of any nation, irrespective of their colour, culture and religion. Arvind M. Nawale and T. Sasikanth Reddy in their article "Dynamics of Diasporic Writings in India and Abroad: A Panoramic View" aptly note the feelings of the migrants: "A Diasporic person lives in two lives simultaneously; he/she lives in two cultures at the same time." (3)

Though the term 'diaspora' had its origin in connection with the dispersal of the Jews, today it has become a common term and used all over the world because of its global nature. Movement of the people from one country to another has become the order of the day. People usually migrate or get dislocated themselves for the purpose of study, to find job or due to religious or ethnic problems. Initially the migrants faced a lot of problems and stood odd in the new place where they migrated. Today, the spirit of multiculturalism has created tolerance and acceptance among people and many have begun to look at migration in a positive way. Arvind Nawale and Nibedita Mukherjee in their work *Dynamics of Diasporic Identity in Commonwealth Literature* view migration in the following manner; "In recent years the rate of migration has increased, in most cases, it is a willing and volunteer transfer in search of better livelihood and professional gain,..." (xii). Diasporic writing has gained a new momentum in the field of literature and has rose to the level of a separate study in many universities and colleges. We have a good number of Asian and African diasporic writers writing from countries like the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and from many other European countries.

One of the major concerns of the Indian diasporic writers is their multicultural atmosphere that they encountered in their lives. At present, we have a good number of Indian-diasporic writers who have enriched the genre of diasporic writing and have pulled the attention of the entire world through their ingenious and mesmerizing writing. Indian-American writers – Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Meena Alexander and Kiran Desai have received great acclaims for their commendable literary contribution. Kiran Desai is an Indian-born American author and the daughter of Anita Desai. After spending a few years in India, she, along with her mother moved to England then to the USA. She began her literary career with the publication of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. Her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* won the Man Booker Prize in 2006. The novel was highly commended for the excellent fusion of a number of contemporary issues like; multiculturalism, globalization, inter-personal issues, alienation, loss of identity, Anglo mania, border problem and terrorism.

Kiran Desai herself was brought up in multicultural environment. Since she studied in India, England and the United states, she has acquired the first-hand knowledge and experience on multicultural facets. The novel is primarily set in Kalimpong – an Indian hill down in the Himalayas. But the course of narrative runs to different countries like the United States, Russia, England and so on. *The Statesman* in its review of *The Inheritance of Loss* highlighted: “The book’s twin strands straddle across continents, mapping the contours of the ethno-racial and historical relationships between people from different cultures and backgrounds.”

Kalimpong is situated at the foothills of the Himalayas. Since it is a border town, it often encounters cultural mix and exchange with its neighbouring countries. People from various neighbouring countries pass through Kalimpong. The monks of China and Tibet were often found in Kalimpong. The Nepali intruders often entered into Kalimpong demanding weapons from the locals for their guerilla war. The Nepali intruders were fighting for a separate nation called Gorkhaland for which they needed a large amount of weapons. They were in need of “kurkri sickles, kitchen knives, spades, any kind of firearm.” Lola, a character in the novel says; “Beijing had just named Kalimpong a hotbed of anti Chinese activity” (45). Hatt day is one of the festive times of Kalimpong. People from Nepal and Tibet used to throng the markets of Kalimpong with their products and food items. Most of the things they brought were smuggled goods. This festival would showcase the cultures of India, Nepal and Tibet. The novel describes the Nepali and the Tibetan women in the following manner; “Nepali ladies with Golden nose rings dangling and Tibetan women with braids and prayer beads” Thus Kalimpong geographically located at a place of multiculturalism.

The hard times of a fugitive without a green card is presented through the character of Biju. Biju is the son of a cook who cooks for the judge and Sai. Biju reached America with great dreams. Since he had no green card, he was always on the run or hiding. He began his career in a chicken fried shop. He was often humiliated and ill-treated by the natives. He kept on jumping from one work to another – restaurant, bakery, delivery and so on. Looking at Biju, one of the ladies expressed; “He smells,...I think I’m allergic to his hair oil.” Though the cook thought that his son was having a good time in America, in reality he suffered a lot. He was forced to leave the jobs, at times he remained without any job and he stayed in dirty places like, “the fuse box, behind the boiler, in the cubby holes, and in odd-shaped corners that once were pantries, maid’s rooms laundry rooms,...”(51). Throughout his life in America, he experienced cultural malignity.

Jemubhai, the judge recalled his days at Cambridge University. He too faced a number of odd things in England. He could not eat with knife and fork. Similarly, the parents of Sai lived and died in Russia. Mr. and Mrs. Mistry were the parents of Sai. Mr. Mistry was a space pilot in Moscow. The parents of Sai were of different religions – her father was a Zoroastrian and her mother was a Hindu. Her parents were crushed by a local bus and died in Moscow by leaving Sai an orphan. Throughout the novel, we come across a number of multicultural elements, which assert that multiculturalism has come to play a pivotal role in the present society.

References

- Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. New Delhi: Penguin Books. 2016.
- Dominic, K. V. *Multicultural Consciousness in the Novels of R. K. Narayan*. New Delhi: Author Press, 2012.
- Nawale, Aravind M. & Nibedita Mukheree. *Dynamics of Diasporic Identity in Commonwealth Literature*. New Delhi: Author Press, 2013.
- Patal, Mallikarjun. *Literature and Cultural Studies*. New Delhi: Author Press, 2014.
- Sharma, B. B., ed. *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Sociology*. Vol.3. New Delhi: Anmol Publication, 1992.