

Colonial Dilemma and the Crisis of Identity in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

Written against the backdrop of the GNLF uprising in the early eighties, Kiran Desai's celebrated novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) delves deep into the colonial dilemma and fractured identity reflected in the behavior pattern of the important characters of the novel. This study critically examines the real face of the main characters hidden behind the façade of a civilized life. The paper explores how at the end, the characters have redeemed themselves and attained maturity. The paper also affirms that migration to the far off places leads to the loss of dignity, crisis of identity and the threat to belongingness.

Key Terms : colonial dilemma, fractured identity, facade, dignity, belongingness

Introduction

Set against the backdrop of the ethnic uprising of the GNLF movement in the early eighties, Kiran Desai's Man Booker Award winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) is based on the life story of Jemubhai Patel, who, after his retirement from the position of the Chief Justice, has been living a reclusive life in Kalimpong, a small hill town situated at the foot of the Mount Kanchenjunga. The narrative lays bare the life story of Jemubhai, who as a young man, had moved to England for higher studies, and returned as ICS, and secured a position among the upper echelons of India.

Desai's narrative also portrays the uprising of the Nepali people who had unleashed a reign of terror, against the colonial and bureaucratic infrastructure of the region. The GNLF movement was an uprising of the disadvantaged and marginalized people against the patronizing attitude of the local and provincial government which never thought of improving their social and financial status. The Nepali people living in India feel that they are the 'marginalized subaltern' (Chaturvedi, 200) first colonized by the British rulers, and later by the Indian establishment in their own country. People in these hill towns have suffered "subjugation, domination, diaspora and displacement" (Bhabha, 1994, P.171) in their own homeland.

The Inheritance of Loss delves deep into the events unfolding in the colonial and post-colonial India. Craze among the Indians to go to a foreign country began during the colonial times, and continues till date. Going deep into the problems of migration, Desai observes that people who move away from their home get alienated, and eventually suffer from the crisis of identity. Taking into account Jemubhai's passage to England during the British rule and the migration of Biju to the United States in the recent time, Desai outlines migration and its consequences as one of the major themes of the narrative.

Jemubhai Patel

Jemubhai Patel, the retired judge and the erstwhile ICS, has been living with his sixteen year old granddaughter Sai, his dog Mutt and a cook in a colonial mansion Cho Oyu in Kalimpong. By virtue of being an ICS, Jemubhai had achieved the status of an upper class Indian along with its privileges and snobbery. While living in England, Jemubhai had realized how insignificant he and his compatriots were to the whites, nevertheless, he desperately wanted to be identified as one of them. Though out his life Jemubhai remained in awe of the English grandeur, and abandoned his own cultural roots. Jemubhai's Englishness, borne out of colonialism, is linked to his unreasonable form of Anglophilia, which feeds his self-hatred and contempt for his Indian past, other Indians and his homeland (Kondali, 2018, 112).

Jemubhai has lived a wretched family life filled with tortuous relationships. He inflicted cruelty to his wife, Nimmi, which expedited her death, and abandoned his own daughter in a convent boarding school and severed all the ties when she got married with a Parsi. Jemubhai estranged himself from his parents and extended family forgetting the fact that it were they who had supported him financially in sending him off to study at Cambridge in England.

Jemubhai never showed his gratitude to his family and relatives, rather, he maintained a cold distance with all his acquaintances.

However, the transformation came, when the Judge's dog Mutt is stolen. More than any human being, the Judge was emotionally attached to his dog. At the loss of his dog, the erstwhile powerful ICS became vulnerable. He started asking the plumber, the electrician, the deaf tailors, if they had seen Mutt anywhere. At his back, these people referred to the dog as *Kutti* and gave a blank stare and ironical laughter. People insulted him :“*Saala Machoot---* what does he think? We're going to look for his dog ? (Desai, P. 296). When the Judge goes to the SDO, he snubs him by saying : A dog! Justice, just listen..... People are being killed.....We are in an emergency situation....., and after this the SDO fixed the judge with a certain gluey look that convinced him he meant to be rude” (Desai, P.298). Then, the Judge goes to the police station where the policemen were waiting in the front room. “They begin to snigger. Ha, ha,ha ha. Come about his dog! Dog? Ha, ha ha ha ha *Madman!* Don't waste our time, they said, Get out” (Desai, P.298).

This was a clear cut warning that his clout had gone. “His position of power was gone” (Desai, P.300). His snobbery was a façade he had painstakingly created and maintained, but, once the veil drops, Jemubhai, the masked man gets unmasked, and he started behaving like an ordinary man with all his fears and insecurities.

The Judge got down on his knees, and he prayed to God, he, Jemubhai Popatlal, the agnostic,thus prayed like any commoner to God: ‘If you return Mutt, I will acknowledge you in public, I will never deny you again, I will tell the world that I believe in you..... you..... if you return Mutt’ Then he got up. He was undoing his education, retreating to the superstitious man making bargains, offering sacrifices, gambling with fate, cajoling (Desai, P.308).

The paradox was that people like Jemubhai, a self-proclaimed Anglophile Brown Sahib, hated the common Indians, and the irony is, the colonial masters never considered Jemubhai and other anglicized Indians as their own. As a result, the so called elite Jemubhai lived an isolated life away from the changing reality of the post-colonial Indian society. Taking cue from Lord Macauley's *Minute* on the Indian education, Jemubhai belonged to “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, and in intellect.” (<https://scroll.in> › Opinion › *History Revisited*). He keeps his face covered behind a layer of puff and powder and very cleverly hides the real colour of his skin. With his fractured identity, Jemubhai is the true specimen of the colonial dilemma.

Sai Mistry

Sai Mistry has lost her parents in an accident, and is now living at the colonial mansion of her grandfather, Jemubhai, the retired judge. Though educated in the convent school, she didn't have any class bias. Sai falls in love with her Mathematics tutor, Gyan. However, the romantic liaison did not last long. Gyan got himself involved in the GNLf movement and started humiliating Sai. Gyan reminds her colonial slavery :

Don't you have any pride? Trying to be westernized. They don't want you !!!! Go there and see if they will welcome you with open arms. You will be trying to clean their toilets and even then they won't want you (Desai, P.181).

However, in spite of the temporary bickering, Sai realises that “There was grace in forgetting and giving up, she reminded it; it was childish not to..... everyone had to accept imperfection and loss in life” (Desai, P.259). And so, “in order to salvage her dignity, Sai started out on the undignified mission of searching for Gyan” (Desai, P.259). Sai began her journey to the poverty stricken Bong Busti and witnessed the real existence of her undeserving lover (Chaturvedi, 2006). The romance between Sai and Gyan turns into a fierce battle for insult and domination over each other when Sai tells Gyan, “You're probably just sitting, waiting for your mummy to arrange your marriage.....they'll find you a silly fool to marry and you'll be delighted all your life to have a dummy”(Desai, P.268). Gyan couldn't digest Sai's insult and violently retaliates, “he caught her before she reached him and then threw her aside into the lantana bushes and beating her about with a stick (Desai, P.268).

Unlike the embittered old Judge, Sai feels a genuine humanitarian concern for all the helpless creatures. Even during her phase of emotional turmoil, she retains her senses and feels grateful “for the greatness of this landscape” (Desai, P.316). When the Judge threatens the Cook by saying “If you don't find her[Mutt] RIGHT NOW...I'LL KILL YOU” (Desai ,P.320) and the Cook disappears into the forest in search of the dog, she “walked up and down the path shouting into

the trees for the Cook: 'Come home, it's all right, he doesn't mean it, he is so sad, he's crazy, he doesn't know what he's saying...' " (Desai, P. 320).

The stature of Sai gets elevated when she makes tea for the Cook and empathises with him. Though she has been insulted and hurt by her lover, she will always have a special place for him in her heart. After seeing Biju, climbing hills in the dark of the night, she cries: "Gyan? she thought with a burst of hope. I will love you after all." (Desai, P. 331). Her fortitude enables her to foresee the message that Kanchenjunga has been giving since ages: "the five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, briefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it." (Desai, P.333). Unlike her grandfather, Sai understands and accepts truth which is beyond human comprehension.

Gyan

Gyan was the twenty year old Nepali boy who gave tuition to Sai. Gyan and Sai fell in love with each other. However, Gyan was not happy with his identity as a tutor-cum-lover of a girl living a sheltered life in a colonial mansion. The world of Sai appeared quite feminine to him. Joining the insurgency gave him the masculine feeling of an adult which he temporarily relished. It was an exciting proposition to be an activist, and he felt proud to carry the flag as one of the staunch advocates of the GNLF movement. Desai observes:

It was a masculine atmosphere and Gyan felt a moment of shame remembering his tea parties with Sai on the veranda, the cheese toast, queen cakes from the baker, and even worse, the small warm space they inhabited together, the nursery talk..... It suddenly seemed against the requirements of his adulthood. He voiced an adamant opinion that the Gorkha movement take the harshest route possible." (Desai, P.168)

Gyan became an aggressive GNLF activist, and vented his anger against people who imitated the colonial life style. He saw the judge's mansion, "the symbol of the colonial hangover. He was shocked to see the way Sai was keen to celebrate Christmas" (Kantanna, 143). He sharply reacted when Sai talked to him about Christmas:

Why do you celebrate Christmas? You're Hindu and you don't celebrate Id or Guru Nanak's birthday or even Durga Puja or Dussehra or Tibetan New year... You are like slaves...running after the West...It's because of people like you we never get anywhere.....It only shows to the whole world that you are a FOOL (Desai, P.170).

However, once the delirium passed, Gyan realized his error of judgement. He felt that he had treated Sai very harshly. The author estimates Gyan's character: "He wasn't a bad person. He didn't want to fight. The trouble was that he'd tried to be part of the larger questions....." (Desai, P.279). Eventually, realization came to him. "But then, the guilt came back strong.....How? How could he have put Sai in such danger? His skin began to crawl and burn. He couldn't lie on the bed any longer. He got up and paced up and down. Could he ever be happy and innocent after what he had done?" (Desai, P.280).

Once anger and excitement passed, Gyan came back to his normal self. He started thinking about his betrayal to Sai. Ashamed and remorseful for what he had done, Gyan started thinking of his reconciliation with Sai. Coincidentally, when he saw Judge's cook in Thapa's Canteen, he asked him to tell Sai that he would find the Judge's lost dog. The hazards involved in the dog's search would perhaps be Gyan's redemption.

Tell her that I promise. I will find the dog. Don't worry at all. Be sure and tell her.
I will find Mutt and bring her to the house."

He uttered this sentence with a conviction that had nothing to do with Mutt or his ability to find her.

But again Gyan nodded his assurance. Next time he saw Sai, he would have a present for her. (Desai, P.321)

At the end of the narrative, Gyan is not the same person. He understood the dignity of human relationship. He realized that joining the insurgency was only an opportunity to vent his frustration, but the pure and unconditional love he had received from Sai was priceless. He rejected his conflicting identity and decided to move on the path of love and compassion.

Biju

Biju, the only son of the Judge's cook, lives in New York as an illegal migrant and works as a cook in the basement kitchens of the Manhattan. While working in New York, very soon, Biju comes to know that he has become a part of "the desperate—young men from around the globe who work at dirty, underpaid jobs and sleep crowded together on the floors of unventilated tenement basements (Halpern, 2007, P. 19). As Biju had no legal document to stay in the US, he kept shifting from one restaurant to another. "Biju changed jobs so often, like a fugitive on the run—no papers" (Desai, P, 10). Living the life of an undocumented migrant, Biju is always scared that he would be caught, and would be deported back to India. Drifting in the dark web of New York, Biju's dream of a better life gets frustrated. He felt that there was not an iota of dignity left in his life. He was humiliated at each step of his life.

When he requests Harish- Harry to call a doctor for him, Harish- Harry is terribly enraged, and instead of arranging for the treatment of Biju, he begins to shout, "I hire you with no papers living here rent free..... What right do you have ? Is it my fault you don't even clean the floor? YOU should have to pay ME for not cleaning, living like a pig. Am I telling YOU to live like a pig? (Desai, P.195)

Biju realized "the vulnerability of his position as one of the hordes of transient and disposable undocumented workers, struggling for survival and belonging (Kondali, 109). However, Biju refused to live in that inhuman state and decided to come back home to stay with his father. He thought, "If he continued his life in New York, he might never see his *pitaji* again" (Desai, P.244). The triumph of Biju lies in the fact that he did not compromise with his basic human dignity. Biju's decision to come back home was his emancipation from a false sense of pride. "Biju had shed that unbearable arrogance and shame of the migrant..... for the first time in God knows how long, his vision unblurred and he found he could see clearly" (Desai, P.307). Biju's emotional connect to his father gave him the strength to acknowledge his roots. However, when he came back, he was robbed by the GNLG goons. Biju is once again bare handed, "without his baggage, without his savings, worst of all, without his pride" (Desai, P.324).

Panna Lal

Panna Lal has been working as a Cook in the house of the Judge for the last several years. He didn't have any identity except being the Judge's Cook. Panna Lal feels very proud that his son Biju is in the US. He "considers America as the symbol of Utopia that offers equal opportunity to all" (Olasiji, 2014, 9). Panna Lal, initially shows his superiority over those who have failed to send their sons to America, but later on he develops a compassionate attitude, as he writes to Biju, "*Biju beta*, you have been fortunate enough to get there, please do something for the others..." (Desai, P. 102)

Throughout the novel, Panna Lal has been mentioned as the Cook, and not as Panna Lal. His status is that of an individual who is borne only to serve. However, he is haunted by a sense of guilt for having cheated his master in several other ways. His sense of guilt becomes so acute that his redemption is possible only after a confession to the Judge. After the Judge's dog Mutt is lost, and the Judge threatens the Cook that if he doesn't find Mutt, he would kill him. It was then the Cook opens his heart. He says, "I'm a bad man, beat me, Sahib, punish me" (Desai, P. 326). With his slipper, the Judge beats him hard and kicks him out. Yet Panna Lal keeps crying: "I've been bad...I've been drinking, I ate the same rice as you, not the servant's rice but the Dehradun rice I ate the meat and lied. I ate out of the same pot,.....I did the accounts differently for years My money was dirty, it was false. Sometimes I kicked Mutt, I didn't take her for walks, just sat by the side of the road, smoked a *bidi* and came home. I'm a bad man I watched out for nobody and nothing but myself . Beat me!" (Desai,P.327)

The cook drops his deceptive veneer of integrity, and made an honest confession to obtain spiritual freedom after which he is united with his son whom he accepts in his open arms. Both, father and son attained spiritual freedom and rejected the false pride of living an affluent life at the cost of their dignity and identity.

Conclusion

Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, 'a combination of history and fiction' (Chaturvedi, 2006) focuses on the character's false sense of pride. Jemubhai moved to England for higher education, where he was ill-treated by the natives. The

father of Nimmi married her to Jemubhai with a hope that she would live a better life with a foreign educated man. However, upon his return from England as an ICS, Jemubhai tortured her to death. Biju underwent through the plight of illegal immigrants living a life of humiliation in the US.

In addition, migration and its perils is the underlying theme of Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. Migrants are always at the risk of an existential crisis. Looking for acceptance and belongingness in an alien land is a utopian dream not realized quite often. The dilemma is, "they can neither assimilate the new culture nor can they give up their original culture" (KANTAMMA, 142, 2017). People willingly leave their native land to advance their colonial ambitions, and become both victim and labourer at the other end (Ropero, 2013, 14). Desai has effectively delineated the loss and dilemma faced by Jemubhai and Biju in their quest of a green pasture in a foreign land.

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