

The Mimic Man in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

Spread over continents, countries and cultures, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) takes us on a tour de force into the realms of multiculturalism and hybridity in Indian culture. It focuses on the changing face of India, amidst East - West encounter, globalization and glocalization. The novel as a postcolonial text puts forth, the authority politics of cultural imperialism, even after the independence of India. This paper appraises the novel using Homi. K. Bhabha's theory of mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence. It concentrates on the mimic man of the novel Judge Jemubhai Patel. This paper focuses on the hybridization of culture along with the making of reformed hybrids who are in a constant conflict with their identity, language and culture on account of the praxis between the culture of the colonized and the colonizer during and after colonization of the colonized. This paper recommends proper mapping of mimicry and hybridity with indigenous culture, values and ethics. It advocates sowing and stringing in cultural amalgamation and westernization in indigenous Indian culture and ethos for a better life and better Indian society.

Keywords: Globalization, Glocalization, Hybridity, Cultural Imperialism, Mimicry and Mimic Man

Introduction

Spread over continents, countries and cultures Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) takes us on a tour de force into the realms of multiculturalism and hybridity in Indian culture. It focuses on the changing face of India, amidst East - West encounter, globalization and glocalization. Spread over periods of colonial and postcolonial India it showcases Indians who choose not to be subalterns. The novel as a postcolonial text puts forth, the authority politics of cultural imperialism, even after the independence of India. The novel depicts the constant conflict colonial and postcolonial Indians have faced regarding their identity, life style, language and culture on account of the hybridity they have undergone and the mimicry they exhibit being colonial and postcolonial subjects. The novel concentrates on the culture merger and separation Indians have undergone for having been under British rule for quite a long time. The novel warns against traps of indigenous deculturation.

The novel puts forth the idea that the tussle of cultural imperialism can't be done away with, long after colonial rule.

Cultural imperialism, a direct result of economic domination, consists of the "takeover" of one culture by another: the food, clothing, customs, recreation, and values of the economically dominant culture increasingly replace those of the economically vulnerable culture until the latter appears to be a kind of imitation of the former. (Tyson 425)

The praxis of colonialism and post colonialism cannot be undone. Superiority of one culture over other exists because of colonization, and continues even after colonization influencing the colonizer and the colonized. It has to be remembered that:

armies had left the land of colonial objects but they influence and change the culture of colonial objects. The colonization continues by attacking the colonial objects psychologically and culturally (Tyson 419).

Problems with praxis of colonial and postcolonial culture occur when people are denied rights to indigenous culture. Identity crisis and double consciousness come into play as an Indian and a postcolonial subject due to colonial and postcolonial praxis. Postcolonial space “specifies a transformed historical situation, and the cultural formations that have arisen in response to changed political circumstances, in the former colonial power” (Young 57).

Discussion

This paper appraises the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) by Kiran Desai using Homi. K. Bhabha’s theory of mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence. This paper concentrates on the mimic man of the novel Judge Jemubhai Patel. This paper focuses on the hybridization of culture along with the making of reformed hybrids who are in constant conflict with their identity, language and culture on account of the praxis between the culture of the colonized and the colonizer during and after colonization of the colonized. In his essay, “Signs Taken for Wonders” Bhabha has stated that:

Colonial hybridity is not a problem of genealogy or identity between two different cultures which can then be resolved as an issue of cultural relativism. Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other denied knowledge enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority- its rules of recognition.

The novel showcases the positive and negative effects of hybridity and focuses on individual freedom and identity that are at stake due to hybridity.

Leela Gandhi explains the term mimicry’ in her book, *Postcolonial Theory: An Introduction* as:

the sly weapon of anti-colonial civility, an ambivalent mixture of deference and disobedience. The native subject often appears to observe the political and semantic imperatives of colonial discourse. But at the same time, she systematically misrepresents the foundational assumptions of this discourse by articulating it. In effect, mimicry inheres in the

necessary and multiple acts of translation which oversee the passage from colonial vocabulary to its anti-colonial usage. In other words, mimicry’ inaugurates the process of anti-colonial self-differentiation through the logic of inappropriate appropriation.

Hybridity is the process by which the colonized acquire access to the colonizer’s culture. It is a cultural and political mediation between the colonizer and the colonized. Colonial mimicry unlike hybridity is more a necessity than a happening. Bhabha in “Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” has said : “Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence” (86-122). Ambivalence exhibited by the colonized is an admixture of attraction and repulsion between the colonizer and the colonized. Ambivalence is a result of cultural fluctuation. It has to be remembered that mimicry is copying of language, manners and ideas of the colonizer in the available interstitial spaces. It is an evidence of colonial servitude when blindly stuck to, and silent retaliation when the colonized does not conform to colonizer’s ways and culture. Mimicry is a way of negating the bestowed equal, yet not equal status. “For the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory - or, in my mixed metaphor, a negative transparency.” (Bhabha 159-160).

A mimic man is one who keeps himself occupied with the in between space amidst cultures in order to bring about or fake in colonial mimesis, to belong to the colonized and yet not belong. He is a man who imitates knowingly or unknowingly to be accepted and recognized. The necessity to mimic in colonial and postcolonial space is to make one’s presence felt and have a say in culture, economy, value system and space. The variables that promote mimicry are the stance, culture, values systems, life style, power politics, economy, culture etc., of colonized & colonizer along with ambivalence between colonizer and the colonized regarding the aforesaid variables. Mimicry is shown as a way of servitude as well as retaliation against marginalization through the novel.

The novel showcases the life of Judge Jemubhai Patel who is an ardent Anglophile serving his country India as an Indian Administrative Services officer. He is the mimic man of the novel who exhibits, hybridity and mimicry in the available interstitial spaces. "Jemubhai Papatlal Patel... born to a family of the peasant caste, in a tentative structure under a palm roof scuffling with rats, at the outskirts of Piphit where the town took on the aspect of a village again" (Desai 63) dares boundaries thrust on to him by colonial rule. Having paced to power from an impoverished family he exhibits mimicry of the highest order for not being an English man. Having loved the whiteness of white men and finding it mimicable to the extent that "...he would preside white powdered Wig using over white Powdered face hammer in hand" (Desai 62) after becoming a judge. Having studied abroad and worked in India under British raj, he exhibits inextinguishable desire to mimic and ape the west to stay safe in the East. "The judge could live here in this shell, this skull with the solace of being a foreigner on his own country for this time he would not learn the language. He never went back to court" (Desai 29). The novel a bildungsroman of a mimic man traces his life from his childhood to his old age via colonial and postcolonial terminus. Jemubhai particularly "envied the English. He loathed Indians. 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" (Desai 119). Yet, the mimic man Jemubhai's English after all the nearly equivalent imitation has "the twang of Gujarati" (112). After qualifying at the Indian Civil Services examination with the least score he cries for three nights and days for not being like the English.

He worked twelve hours at a stretch, late into the night and in thus withdrawing, he failed to make a courageous gesture outward at a crucial moment and found instead, that his pusillanimity and his loneliness had found fertile soul. He retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit becomes the man, and it crushed him into a shadow. (Desai 39).

The mimicry exhibited by Jemubhai is a token of resistance to the boundaries around him, put forth by the colonizer. It is a way of finding unquestionable

acceptance. It is negotiating change for oneself, carving out his space through the interstitial spaces of cultural ambiguity. Working for the empire and torn between two identities and double consciousness he becomes a star in his own right owning power in his clan and family. The cultural mimicry he exhibits via the language he uses, the Anglophilia he adheres to, the customs and life style he follows showcase how big a hurdle mimicry becomes when blindly followed.

Mimicry on the cultural front occupies the life style and functionality of human life. Cultural identity emanates from the space of ambivalence where cultures meet especially the culture of the colonized, the colonizer and the cultures that influence both. Born in Piphit in a lower middle class family Jemubhai dreams of becoming a judge after witnessing few court sessions.

Fed he was, to surfeit. Each day, he was given a tumbler of fresh milk sequined with golden fat. His mother held the tumbler to his lips, lowering it only when empty, so he remerged like a whale from the sea, heaving for breath. Stomach full of cream, mind full of study, camphor hung in a tiny bag about his neck to divert illness; the entire package was prayed over and thumb-printed red and yellow with tika marks. He was taken to school on the back of his father's bicycle. (Desai 65)

Jemubhai's humble beginnings take a transnational, multicultural slant after he goes abroad to study. Though not easy, he aspires to be someone beyond the country bumpkin made out of him. Having been a generation that has grown up under the colonizer's gaze, he understands the need to be like them at least culturally, to have his say in a colonized land. His marriage with Nimi brings the change in life and supports him financially to go abroad. "When she married, her name was changed into the one chosen by Jemubhai's family, and in a few hours, Bela became Nimi Patel . . . He was twenty, she fourteen. The place was Piphit and they were on a bicycle....." (Desai 98-315). His marriage changes everything in his life. He gets upward social mobility as he plans to study abroad, after marriage. He is sent to Britain by Nimi's family. "By the time they stood for the ICS, most of the candidates had crisp-ironed their speech, but Jemubhai had barely opened his mouth for whole years and his English

still had the rhythm and the form of Gujarati.” (Desai 119). In Britain, he changes a lot after having seen the Colonizer’s true culture in close contact. “mimicry is an imitation of language, culture, manner and idea of the colonizers that is done by the colonized. Mimicry is a kind of duplication but it being different instead of being same. It means that the colonized tries to copy the colonizer even almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 86). Seeing his colonizers at close quarters, he imitates them blindly to gain their acceptance. He sets the Gujarati twang his English has. He dresses up like the British, eats pies like them and behaves like them. He makes all the necessary amendments to his language, culture and life style to gain recognition in Britain to be heard, seen and recognized. Along with his peers, he understands that conforming himself to mimicry is the best possible way to be heard, seen and recognized. “They had better luck in London, where they watched the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, avoided the other Indian students at Veeraswamy’s, ate shepherd’s pie instead, and agreed on the train home that Trafalgar Square was not quite up to British standards of hygiene.” (Desai 126) The Anglophilia he develops makes him feel better than his Indian Counterparts. He feels that he can overcome marginalization by mimicking the English. He wittingly chooses to be a mimic man for happy survival and material exuberance.

There are a lot many instances in colonial and postcolonial lives when mimicry becomes an obsessive disorder, when power politics and marginalization are brought into play by the colonizers who rule, to keep power for them alone. In the long run, Jemubhai develops an obsessive compulsion for English ways to the extent that he “began to wash obsessively, concerned he would be accused of smelling... To the end of his life, he would never be seen without socks and shoes and would prefer shadow to light faded days to sunny, for he was suspicious that sunlight might reveal him in his hideousness, all too clearly” (Desai 40). Moreover, he finds his own people especially his parents, wife and every one in his life to be subordinate to him as they can’t mimic the English like him. Furthermore, he considers his wife a ridiculous flower “... a ridiculous flower, or else a bursting ruined heart his

dandling puff” (Desai 168). He starts hating Nimi to the extent that sex becomes a “ gutter act” (Desai 170) as she has no qualities of whiteness in her. Behaving like the ultimate mimic man he taught Nimi “... the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself” (Desai 170). He teaches her to loath and hate herself. Love for his much sought after wife, dies very young. Unable to retaliate she gives in to his mimic man attitude:

She grew accustomed to his detached expression as he pushed into her that gaze off into middle distance, entirely involved with itself, the same blank look of a dog or monkey humping in the bazaar until of a sudden he seemed to skid from control and his expression slid right off his face. A moment later... he withdrew to spend a long fiddly time in the bathroom with soap hot water and Dettol. He followed his ablutions with a clinical measure of whisky, as if consuming a disinfectant. (Desai 170)

In his madness to Anglicise her, he becomes a colonizer and colonizes her body, mind and soul. It becomes difficult for her to bear the double colonization thrust on her, one from the English around her and the second from her own husband the ultimate mimic man. He disowns her to the extent that servants “... thumped their own leftovers on the table for her to eat” (Desai 172). As a psychological invalid “She peered out at the world but could not focus on it” (Desai 173). Desai through the novel has shown how yesteryear men under colonization were psychologically controlled by their Anglophilia.

Psychologically manipulated by Anglophilia thrust on to him by the colonizer and his culture, Jemubhai’s attitude towards life takes a negative turn from the neutral stance it has been for survival. Societal pressure and peer pressure under colonial gaze worsen Jemubhai’s attitude towards life. Moreover, he dislikes the attention Nimi starts garnering. He imitates English patriarchy and ill-treats Nimi to the extreme extent possible. He resorts to domestic violence to feel better in the space given to him by the colonizer. Wife beating becomes a common thing. In a bad mood:

“he hammered down with his first rising his arms to bring them down on her again and again rhythmically, until his own hands were exhausted and his shoulders next day were strained sore as if from chopping wood. He even limped a bit his leg hurting from kicking

her. "Stupid bitch dirty bitch! The more he swore the harder he found he could hit" (Desai 304-305).

Nimi accepts the request of her peer Mrs. Mohan and participates in meeting to the angst of Jemubhai and invites his wrath. Unable to bear her stay at home, he sends Nimi to their parents place in Piphit. Birth of their child too brings no change in his personality. Jemubhai's father pleads his son to take Nimi back in the name of family hour: "Our family honour is gone. We are lucky Bomanbhai is dead thank god. It's the scandal of the town" (Desai 306). Jemubhai whines and sighs and gives an emphatic no as an answer. Nimi dies after having caught fire from a stove. After the death of a person: "Ashes have no weight, they tell no secrets they raise, too lightly for gravity, they float upward and thankfully disappear" (Desai 308). Like an English man with detachment towards certain aspects of personal space, he further gives up accountability towards his daughter and dumps her in a boarding school till her youth, to see her flee with a man of her choice. His daughter and her husband die in an air crash after giving birth to Sai a girl child who is a mini replica of her grandfather. Existential angst becomes a part of his mimic man life leading to further isolation from people around him. Existential angst in a mimic man is on account of alienation from his indigenous roots and the formidable double consciousness that emanates out of his very existence. Furthermore, double consciousness creates ambivalence in his life.

At Cho Oyu Jemubhai leads the life of a recluse after retirement from service. He sees India move on with its destiny after colonialism. The praxis of colonialism and postcolonialism leaves him spell bound. As he sees India and Indians change, he finds it impossible to forgo his Anglophilia. He sticks to the space reserved for people like him by his colonial masters after colonialism. His obsessive compulsion for English ways slows down after retirement as he is not in close contact with colonizers and their gaze at work place. Yet, the psychological exile he has thrust onto himself never fades. After retirement, he does not have much social mobility owing to old age, and his responsibilities towards Mutt and Sai. The occasional visitors he has are his neighbours Noni and Lolita who are cosmopolitan in their outlook like him. The cook he hires too finds odd working for

Jemubhai for more years with no hike in his salary, but a hike in his ill-treatment reserved for people like him by colonizers, through people like Jemubhai. "The cook had been disappointed to be working for Jemubhai. A severe comedown, he thought, from his father, who had served white men only" (Desai 70). The cook finds Jemubhai's Anglophilia boring and demanding. With neither better treatment nor better salary he sticks to his job reluctantly.

Sai, a recluse like her grandfather finds Cho Oyu, interesting, intriguing and boring. The company of the cook at home saves her. Jemubhai becomes a recluse as he becomes nostalgic about his past, when his mimesis brought him great accolades. Moreover, western way of living becomes a part of the lives of the younger generation growing up before his eyes due to globalization. The younger, western educated youth never see mimic men as a novelty and adore them, as western lifestyle and cultural influx are a part of their lives. Jemubhai gives importance to his pet Mutt than his granddaughter Sai with stoic arrogance. Her cosmopolitan outlook towards life impresses him to a certain extent as she is not like his other family members who are no more. Sai with her English schooling and cosmopolitan brought up finds it difficult to be more indigenous. Though she has Indian values, they ache and strut under western education and her grandfather's Anglophilia. She does not adapt herself to hard core mimesis like her grandfather. In fact cultural mimesis towards the English becomes a part of the life of youngsters like her on account of globalization. Sai like Jemubhai becomes a misfit in her social stratum as she severs herself from her indigenous roots. Her lover Gyan rightly observes that Sai:

could speak no language but English and pidgin Hindi, . . . could not converse with anyone outside her tiny social stratum. . . . could not eat with her hands; could not squat down on the ground on her haunches to wait for a bus . . . who thought it vulgar to put oil in your hair and used paper to clean her bottom; felt happier with so-called English vegetables, snap peas, French beans, spring onions, and feared - feared - loki, tinda, kathal, kaddu, patrel and the local saag in the market. (Desai 176).

Gyan chides Sai for her madness for the West. He tells her : "You are like slaves, that's what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself. It's

because of people like you we never get anywhere” (Desai 163).

While people like Gyan seek solace in globalization as a move towards indigenous roots and culture along with globalization, fed up of globalization alone and ubiquitous westernization, people like Noni, Lola Jemubhai and Sai’s well-known acquaintances along with them see their anglophilia as an asset to reckon with. Lola’s tells her daughter Pixie a news reporter with the BBC : “Better leave sooner rather than later ... India is a sinking ship. Don’t want to be pushy, darling, sweetie, thinking of your happiness only, but the doors won’t stay open forever ...” (Desai 47). Neither Judge Jemubhai, nor Sai reap the benefits of globalization like Noni, Lola and Lola’s daughter Pixie. They stick to western life style for their benefit and social acceptance. Caught against the turbidity of globalization and glocalization, Jemubhai sticks to his recommended dose of Anglophilia as it has given him importance, livelihood and social mobility way back. While people like Biju, the cook’s son are exploited in the name of globalization, few others like Pixie with good education find job opportunities abroad. “In this age of globalization exile is often chosen condition accepted for the hope of a ‘better life’ and when people are disappointed in such condition, the pangs of remaining far from homeland are heart-breaking” (Halder 82).

Conclusion

Jemubhai the ultimate mimic man sticks to his mimicry amidst the conflict of globalization and glocalization as it eases his double consciousness, alienation and existential angst. Moreover, it has given him livelihood, material status and popularity in his professional circle. Jemubhai has way back fallen into the pit of psychological manipulation reserved for him by yesteryear colonizers with ease, and refuses to come out of it. The novel puts forth the tumult of colonial and postcolonial praxis amidst globalization with pictorial ease. Yet, it pronounces the voices of glocalization with equal acclaim showcasing the changes in the Indian sub-continent. The text showcases how ringing in blind mimesis of westernization and Anglophilia bestows marginalization and alienation into a person’s life through the character of judge Jemubhai the ultimate

mimic man of the novel. The novel showcases how upward mobility brought about by blind imitation of the west bestows loneliness and a sense of un-belonging. The novel showcases how westernization and cultural hybridity without attachment to indigenous roots break the Indian family system and bring in marital discord and domestic violence into the lives of people associated with people like Judge Jemubhai. The novel showcases how feelings of nationalism are bulldozed and made very small due to blind imitation of the west. It further portrays how cultural imperialism is stay put by the empire and colonizers to control economies, cultures, nations and power in the long run for centuries. The novel is not against cultural amalgamation or reaping the benefits of globalization, but it shows how severing oneself from indigenous culture, life style, ethos, ethics and roots sever an individual from leading a wholesome life. The text recommends enculturation or acculturation that is rooted in Indian ethos and culture to lead successful wholesome lives. This paper recommends proper mapping of mimicry and hybridity with indigenous culture, values and ethics. At the same time blind imitation of the west and cultural slavery to foreign cultures that exorcise indigenous cultures that are vital, should be done away with. This paper advocates sowing and stringing in cultural amalgamation in indigenous Indian culture and ethos for a better life and better Indian society.

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