

Cultural Identity in Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss

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Abstract

Cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to a group. It is a part of a person's self-conception and self-perception and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality, or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. Kiran Desai's second novel The Inheritance of Loss addresses the problems faced by her characters. They often face the problem of identity and become frustrated in the end. All characters in the novel struggle with their cultural identity and the forces of modernization while trying to maintain their emotional connection to one another. The Inheritance of Loss shows certain multicultural concerns like diversity, identity, minority, and ethnic rights and post-colonialism. It describes how Desai depicts the feeling of humiliation experienced by the immigrants due to the inequality of a system. This paper focuses on cultural identity in the writings of Kiran Desai with special reference to The Inheritance of loss (2006)

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Social class, Inequality

Introduction

The Inheritance of Loss is the second novel by the Indian author Kiran Desai. It was first published in 2006. It won some awards, including the man Booker prize for that year, the National critics circle fiction Award in 2007 and the 2006 Award. It was written over a period of seven years after her first book, the critically acclaimed Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard. The Inheritance of Loss is the product of cultural identity and multiculturalism. Born in India, Desai moved to Britain at the age of fourteen and was later relocated to the US. The people and the society aided well for the creation of such a widely acclaimed novel as The Inheritance of Loss. The novel presents lives of people belonging to different cultures, nationalities, religions, languages and customs and rituals. As Desai is an eminent immigrant writer, her themes are of human deprivation, trauma, identity, and indifference. In her novel The Inheritance of loss, she tried to dive deep into the sea of human psychology and immortalize the literary work. Though she has not given any priority to any specific issue yet, we find the issues of globalism and American dreams most predominantly in her novel. Her colorful cast of characters rooted in diverse cultures in The Inheritance of Loss shows certain multicultural concerns like diversity, identity, minority, and ethnic rights and post-colonialism. Culturalists believe that diversity is desirable and should be celebrated as it is of value to society at large.

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“This can be seen, in particular, regarding the vigour and vibrancy of a society in which there are the variety of lifestyles, cultural practices, traditions, and beliefs.” It allows a cultural exchange between groups that live side by side with one another and fosters cross-cultural tolerance, understanding and a willingness to respect ‘difference.’ The *Inheritance of Loss* covers a wide variety - different countries, the past and the social, religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity. The novel, set in India shows the master craftsman ship of Desai in portraying a wide range of characters.

The novel speaks of those who are going back and forth between cultures and homeland as characters in the novel, like the judge (India and England) and the cook’s son Biju to America and then back to India. The longing for another culture other than their own makes them feel alienated and displaced. They are all transformed from their ‘native’ identity into something quite different, a “westernized native.” Rather, they are negotiating with a state of non-identity. Caught between two cultures and often languages the writer also negotiates a new literary space. They are all haunted by questions often asked by an immigrant: Who am I? Where do I belong?

The major themes running throughout this novel are ones closely related to colonialism and the effects of post-colonialism: the loss of identity and the way it travels through generations as a sense of loss. The novel also talks about Exile, Immigration, Identity Diasporic displacement, and Globalization. How people from the Third World move to developed countries for making some money face prejudices from multicultural societies living abroad. They never feel at home in a foreign land, and emptiness prevails through their consciousness. The characters and communities in the novel all go through the examination of their history, inheritance, manner, mind, movement, and culture. All the characters in the novel suffer from a sense of ambivalence that eventually leads them to develop a sense of loss.

Discussion

The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* opens with a teenage girl, an orphan called Sai, living with her Cambridge-educated Anglophile grandfather,

the retired judge in the town of Kalimpong on the Indian side of Himalayas. Sai is also a victim of circumstances. She lost her parents in an accident in Russia. Her father was a space scientist, living in Russia, while she was living in Darjeeling in the convent. So, from the outset, she has tasted bitter feelings of separation and displacement. Sai feels in love with her tutor, whose name is Gyan and throughout the story, they fight to accept the natural love they have created. Their love is doomed from the beginning because he is an ethnic Nepali, and she is an upper-class western-educated Indian girl. The cook watches over them to make sure that Gyan does not take any advantage of Sai’s good heart and at the same time worries about his son in the U.S., whose name is Biju.

Biju is the typical Indian immigrant who gets a visa to the U.S. and stays illegally, working for slave wages in the kitchen basements of New York City. There he is used and abused by his bosses and is run ragged by one in particular, who also happens to be Indian. Upset with the way of life is turning out, and by how much he misses his father, he decides to leave the U.S. with his earnings and returns to his home and his father. The displacement of Biju, the son of the cook is more poignant than any other characters in the novel. He manages to get a tourist visa. Biju, joining a crowd of Indians scrambling to reach the visa counter at the U.S. Embassy is one of the most harrowing scenes in the novel. However, in the end, Biju becomes an illegal immigrant in New York does odd jobs to survive: “Biju changed jobs like a fugitive on the run” (3). This irony is that his father, the cook in the judge’s house thinks that he is doing well and is proud of the fact that the son is in America. “He works for the Americans: the cook had reported the content of the letter to everyone in the market” (14). But, for Biju America is a world of frustration and hopelessness. He was taken to America as a mechanic, but he ends up as a waiter in a restaurant.

The story of Biju is similar to the judges regarding his experience as a foreigner. He migrates to America without the proper visa. He has to struggle hard to settle down there because of his father’s wish that his son will earn in a dollar and will be a big man. When a person migrates from a society of his/her birth most

of the beliefs of that society follows the migrant to the country of migration the concept which is named in the apt phrase of a sociologist N.Jayaram as the “socio-cultural baggage” carried by an immigrant.

Biju carried with him his prejudiced views of Pakistani and black people. The age-old conflict between India and Pakistan is represented by Biju and a Pakistani cook, who constantly fight and throws cabbage at each other. As a result, the owner of the restaurant fired them. “This habit of hate had accompanied Biju, and he found that he possessed awe of white people, who arguably had done India great harm and a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India (77). His beliefs about different races begin to change when he met Saeed, an African Muslim. They became good friends even though in India, Africans are often thought of an uncivilized as “monkeys” who come to India, “to become men (76). Together they become a part of shadow class. It does not matter which caste, class, religion, a nation you belong to if you are illegal immigrants you are a part of shadow class.

Biju, like the judge, is met with hostility and discrimination from other higher-class cultures. One of his white bosses complains that he smells and even gives him soap, toothpaste, shampoo, and deodorant to subtly tell him this. His experience in America and the basement quarters of immigrants compels him to return to India without being a big and wealthy man. He finds his native Indian identity has come in his way and racist America will never accept him. It is better to be poor Indian in India than a hated Indian in America.

Attempting to get into the imperial center, the skin color becomes the eyesore and the biggest obstacle for the judge. He then figures out the disguise, by using the powder puff. But back in India, the powder is rarely used, and if being used, it is only for the women. The family members cannot understand the judge’s behavior and some even mock him. He is cut off from the colonial center, on the other, he is cut off from his culture and his family. And the double isolation traps him in the ‘identity crisis.’ Sai does not dwell in the past and is glad to be out of the convent where she lived while her parents were abroad. She is young enough to live in the moment, which helps her

overlook some of the issues with her boyfriend, Gyan (20 years old) issues that lurk just under the surface of their affair. As an Indian of a formerly powerful, educated and western- thinking family, Sai’s identity and her relationship with India is very dissimilar from Gyan. Gyan’s Nepalese family lives in poverty, struggling to make ends meet while providing the good education. Gyan’s involvement in the separatist movement is the reflection of young Indian’s deep-rooted frustration, for which Gyan even scarifies his love for Sai. A feeling of “martyrdom crept over him” (The Inheritance of Loss175).

Gyan is portrayed as the champion of ethnic rights. He is an activist of the Gorkha national liberation front which is fighting for the independence of the Nepali Gorkhas. Conscious awareness of their rights made them demand recognition of their identity.

Biju, his disillusionment with the American dream, and his deplorable living condition in America is also the very important section of this novel. In his first letter Biju writes:

Respected Pitaji no needs to worry. Everything is fine. The manager has offered me a full-time waiter position. Uniform and food will be given by them. Angrezi Khana only, no Indian food and the owner is not from India, He is from America itself. (The inheritance of Loss20)

Through Biju, Desai shows how migrants, who “work outside” of their home countries, represent the liaisons to global capitalism. Viewing Biju as the bearer of the commodity, provide through the narrative of kalimpong’s ethnic conflicts, we see that a particular culture is not limited to the nation-state. Biju’s heart remains in India, he misses his father and family ties even he’s earning dollars, Edward said in his essay “ The Mind of Winter” says that “The achievements of any exile are permanently undermined by his or her sense of loss”

His father boasts about his son being a manager in the foreign land but is unaware how Biju is tormented each day by his status of an immigrant who’s discriminated for his color, his nationality, and his accent. This is a good example of those immigrants who for earning a living have to see their generation losing ties with indigenous culture and traditions. The sense of loss never goes away and remains with these characters as part of their displaced living.

“You lived intensely with others, only to have them disappear overnight since the shadow class was condemned to movement. The men left for other jobs, towns, got deported, returned home, changed names. Sometimes someone came popping around a corner again, or on the subway then they vanished again. Addresses, phone numbers did not hold. The emptiness Biju felt returned to him over and over.”

- Kiran Desai, *The inheritance of loss*

The “mist” image is dominant. It is compared to “a moving creature.” It has human attributes. It is compared to the “caress” in the hairs of Sai. It gets lifeful comparison when compared to the dragon. It blurs the thieves. It is so powerful that the sun is hardly mentioned.

The structural unity starts with the description of the five peaks and ends with the same. Like ants, men would make their paths and civilization and their wars once again only to be washed once again. Sai lost her parents. The uprooted revolution gave Gyan loss and affected Sai too. It was an irony that the United States, a country built on the finest principles was the loss to, immigrant Biju. It is a paradox that the question of the homeland was same as in Kalimpong, as is in America.

There is the hope too in the novel. Father Booty tells Sai, to always look at the horizon that always helps. The damp wood was not giving right fire when lit by the cook at the beginning of the narrative. In the end, the soggy match was tried to be lit by Sai, and at last, it lit and flared. The beginning and the end with fire shows structure. The juxtaposition of qualities in the images also speaks of the poetic conversions in the famous novel by Kiran Desai.

In this novel, we can see the sufferings of Biju who has lost his identity and culture in America, and he need to change himself according to his surroundings. Gyan shows his true patriotism for his identity and culture. Sai has lost her identity whose parents were died in car accident in Russia. This novel is the true representation of post-colonial period and multicultural aspects in a true sense. It is simply about “LOSS” the most well-known perspectives of post-colonial period. Biju’s frustration on his experience in America is almost similar to the

judge’s first experience in Britain. He realizes the emptiness and meaninglessness of himself, and he likes people who are struggling to eke out a living, leaving their loving families. The sense of place is also an immersing problem of multicultural society in which people feel frustrated and insecure in the different culture. It is one kind of loss of their culture and nativity. Multiculturalism can be seen as an ethno-political movement to build against western culture and civilization under the mantle of “cultural diversity” while it also can be seen as a separation or cultural nihilism which deepens the gap between individuals. The characters in the novel believe that multiculturalism is to blame for ghettoizing minorities and impeding their integration into main stream society. It has even worsened the situation of racial segregation and apartheid. Their struggle for recognition transcend the narrow confines of their community to give birth to a new culture that will allow them to exist as new beings in new world order.

Moreover, America’s negative portrayal stresses an extreme version of capitalism that destroys human connections. In all cases, migration to the west illustrates the construction of local consent triggered by the desirable values spread by the British and the American hegemonies. At the time, the Indian changing patterns of migration illustrate the rivalry between the two western powers, despite their overlapping discourses.

One of the essential functions of any literary work is to enlighten human beings about human predicaments and make them realize the intricacies of human life. *The Inheritance of Loss* is a sincere expression of human imagination and experience; and an authentic exploration of tragic awareness of life in modern times. Whatever Kiran Desai speaks -about the western countries, India, the judge, his parents, and wife, the cook, and his son Biju, Sai and her lover Gyan, the insurgents and others; sounds true. Artistic craftsmanship of the writer is very impressive because she focuses on the human issues – be it globalization, multiculturalism, immigration, green card, mimicry, love, sex, poverty, injustice, insurgency, nationalism or antinationalism. Desai is a humanist, and all the episodes as contained in the novel reflect her struggle and love for human values-love for reason, truth, and justice, love for

liberty, equality, and fraternity, love for peace and harmony, love for one's native soil, culture and identity.

Conclusion

Identity is the important thing in the world which decides the value of them. In this novel, the character Biju we can see how he fights for his identity in America, but he fails in it. In Uma Parameswaran's drama *Rootless but Green* is the boulevard trees express the loss of identity, culture, etc. In the drama, everyone loses their hope of living in alienated society, but Jayant is the character who withstands the situation and persuades to live in the alienated society without any identity like boulevard trees. I compare the Biju fail in it if Biju understands this he would have survived in the neurotic society.

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