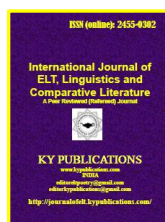




## FEMINISM AND SUBVERSION OF IDENTITY IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

ASHIKUR RAHMAN

Asst Professor, Dept of English, Pramathesh Barua College, Gauripur.



### ABSTRACT

Feminism, subversion of identity are often explored certain elements of a diaspora, including language, religion, politics, and the arts. The acceptance of cultural hierarchy leads to some enduring personal dilemmas resulting into identity crisis. This research work explores the effects of increased mobility on the cultural, linguistic and literary identity of literary works in relation to the Kiran Desai novel "The inheritance of loss". The novel projects the dark side of globalization – a great gulf of difference between the rich and the poor. It paints a shocking portrait of people with crumbling hopes nurtured on the western notion of rationality and superiority of the white race; the global secession and the bursting of the American bubble. Prime significant female character named Sai, who delineates the picture of a competent and liberated woman. Through all above three generations Desai exhibits women's search for liberty and right in real sense. The novelist has fabricated the three generations to depict feminine quest for identity. This study finds that these characters are struggling with an identity dilemma which induces their inner-conflicts: double-consciousness, resistance and othering, due to the dominance of the colonial system. Finally it was observed that understanding and recognition upon an individual's identity leads to complications and conflicts which the self of the individual suffers

### Introduction

For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued. 'Feminism' is certainly a developing circumstance in the present-day critical practice. According to Mohanty<sup>1</sup>, the 'Third World Women' as a monolithic systematic category, denies any historical specificity to the position of women as subordinate, powerful, marginal, central, and power networks. Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006)<sup>2</sup> is a good point to start discussing my extensive project as many countries and cultures-- various classes and communities of India, England, the United States-- interact with one another within the text, politically, as well as through mental and emotional pressures on individual people. Accordingly, through the analysis of this text, I will introduce ideas and concepts that will be taken up at various points in the present paper. Among other things, Desai's text will help to begin discussing questions of cosmopolitanism and femininity, both of which are important to the research work

Julia Kristeva<sup>3</sup> manages to capture the complex space of split subjectivity in the postcolonial world when she writes:

it is perhaps on the basis of that contemporary individualism's subversion, beginning with the moment when the citizen-individual ceases to consider himself as unitary and glorious but discovers his incoherences and abysses, in short his 'strangenesses' – that the question arises again: no



longer that of welcoming the foreigner within a system that obliterates him but of promoting togetherness of those foreigners that we all recognize ourselves to be. (*Strangers* 2-3)

Kiran Desai is an author who wrote incredible novels. One of her works is *The Inheritance of Loss* which likewise discusses feminism. Kiran Desai published *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006 and it was also awarded the Man Booker Prize for Fiction. Desai's novel has a more global scope as it deals with the lives of a group of Indian characters who live across various cultures, from England to India to the United States.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* has become a simultaneous critique of the changing power structure and an act of de-conditioning and reconditioning realities. With a feminist awareness, Desai encompasses the protest of all the marginalized include those men who have been subordinated. The foregrounding of the hitherto oppressed experiences of Indian men entails a critique of the normative masculinity in its moment and milieu. Her strategy involves acts of subversion. These acts take shape through the forging of new narrative strategies that include language, style and diction. In nutshell, Kiran Desai initiates a move towards a literature of one's own that embeds within its own problematic as she throws plethora of drama on failed masculinities for a close examination. This not only maps the changing thematic of contemporary Indian women's writing but also tries to unravel its socio-political dynamics.

*The Inheritance of Loss* narrates the story of simple hopes that have been frozen on the rooftop of the mid 1980s India. Set in different parts of world, the unlikely events of characters' collapse that inspired the writer are dramatically narrated. In an Anglophiliac family in Kalimpong, Indian girl lives with the remains her Cambridge-educated grandfather. The cook who has been relegated to be treated even less than Mutt; the retired judge's dog is another image of suffering and humiliation. Sai's first love; the Nepalese math tutor becomes seduced by the masculinity of the Gurkha's movement and leaves her spiraling into heartsickness, anger, and frustration. Biju, the Indian illegal immigrant, realizes the trauma of his uselessness that chases him in an alien land. The writer to whom every word in the story mirrors her attachment to India; the motherland, effectively conveys the difficulties involved in the subjugated efforts to make their voices heard. Obviously these men who try to recuperate their status get frustrated as their approximation to "masculinity" is not perfect. All men in the novel are disturbed and have lost the ability to belong to their own masculinity.

Kiran Desai has portrayed many female characters with various colours that paint the picture of successive generations of women. Description in detail will throw adequate light on Desai's stances regarding female. The first generation belongs to Sai's grandmother Nimi, second generation of women include Loli, Nona, Mrs Sen and Sai's mother, and Sai comprises the third generation of women in the novel. Desai in the present novel *The Inheritance of Loss* has expounded basically two categories of women; one denotes the rustic, illiterate class and second educated and urban ladies. Nimi represents first category and Nona and Lola second, first is shown as subjugated by the patriarchal setup whereas second exhibits life of liberation and meaning. The novelist has touched three generations to depict the odyssey of women from subjugation to liberation. Very skilfully Desai has described that seeking promising career people drifts to England, Europe, USA, London etc. but under the multiculturalism they start to lose their own culture. The best example of such character is Jemubhai, who suffers lots in England. He is humiliated and oppressed there but he always hides his embarrassment behind a facade of "keeping up standards" (119). While fact reveals that he marries Nimi only for financial support to go abroad. So their marriage was negotiated to incur a sumptuous dowry:

The dowry included cash, gold, emeralds from Venezuela, rubies from Burma, uncut kundan diamond, a watch on a watch chain, lengths of woollen cloth for her new husband to make into suits in which to travel to England, and in a crisp envelop, a ticket for passage on Strathnaver from Bombay to Liverpool.(91).



In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, feminist point of view is appeared through the Protagonist character, Sai, when She falls in love with Gyan, her mathematics mentor. Despite the fact that Gyan is from a lower class, this does not prevent Sai from beginning to love is not considered a prerequisite. In India, most marriages are arranged, so becoming hopelessly enamored isn't viewed as an essential. In her every daily life, Sai addresses the judge and the cook as though they were breaks even with. Sai is a feminist. She is strong and ambitious. She is liberal about her general surroundings.

Desai's feminist point of view likewise features contrasting options to the sort of destiny Nimi, the spouse of Judge, perseveres. In the story, Noni, an old maid, tells Sai, Jemubhai's terrific little girl, that in the event that she would like to get away from the destiny of such huge numbers of before her, she should pick her life for herself.

"Listen to me...if you get a chance in life, take it...You must do it on your own, Sai."

Towards the finish of the novel, Sai choosing to do only this, as she starts to imagine the potential outcomes the world can accord her. As prove in the novel, Desai's feminist voice rings plainly, and she represents the individuals who can't represent themselves.

While for the character of Biju, the perspective becomes different. Biju, is really antifeminist. In his perspective, Biju still imagines that Indian lady ought not have an aspiration about picking the couple of marriage. As a culture, Indian lady ought to have a spouse from Indian likewise, not western. Here, we can examine that Biju doesn't need Indian lady crush the custom of Indian.

For those inhabiting the masculine world of rigid identities in *The Inheritance of Loss*, the more amorphous feminine characters become the safest targets for the projection of their deepest fears and even regrets. For example, the judge, Jemubhai Patel, is represented as an old man attempting to seek atonement, for his cruelty towards his wife and daughter, through his granddaughter. Moreover, he showers his pet, Mutt-- a female dog, who is quite explicitly aligned to the principle of femininity as defined in my argument-- with all the affection and attention previously denied to his wife. All individual men and women are victims of larger social and political power structures. However, where the masculine are awarded more central positions within these structures and sub structures, the feminine are sidelined within these socio-political hierarchies. Accordingly, as seen in *The Inheritance of Loss*, the masculine and the feminine respond in different ways when these structures threaten to give way.

The feminine-- in this novel represented more often than not by women-- are shown to be important for their masculine counterparts only in that they, by way of their passivity, end up signifying the particular social and cultural systems within which they are embedded. They are looked upon as agency deprived symbols that can be cherished or destroyed, as the occasion may demand. However, perhaps to compensate for this lack of explicit agency, the feminine women and men in the text are shown to be more resourcefully flexible, and seem somehow programmed to compromise and adjust to their surroundings. They prove either to be the survivors in the disintegrating environment of the novel or are victimized by their more inflexible counterparts who take advantage of their unformulated natures. Accordingly, as seen in *The Inheritance of Loss*, the masculine and the feminine respond in different ways when these structures threaten to give way.

All women in *The Inheritance of Loss* are projected as successful in holding their position in a male-dominated set up. But she doesn't fail to show how they are forced to consider subjugation against men. Despite it she has clearly revealed that the Indian woman has succeeded in redefining herself. Consequently women have come a long way indeed, though a lot needs to be done still. She tightly holds the flag of feminism projecting her female characters with liberty and right. Feminism implies the demand of women for equality- equality for power, right and opportunity.

Feminist writers have given a new direction to fiction in English by asserting feminine identity and demanding sexual freedom in the patriarchal society<sup>4</sup>. The study of subversion identity is all-encompassing



and reaches out to multiple scholastic arenas, including social sciences, psychiatry, psychology, communications and religion. This paper concentrates on the aspects of identity that touch upon linguistics, literature and culture – all wide enough areas in their own right.

This cultural confusion and search for identity is also reflected in *The Inheritance of Loss*, as the following quotations illustrate. First of all Sai's education at the convent school was primarily a catholic British education which did not prepare her for living in India. All things Indian were refuted in favour of British products and beliefs: "cake was better than *laddoos*, fork spoon knife better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ and consuming a wafer of his body was more civilized than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds. English was better than Hindi" (33).

The judge, having fulfilled his parents' hopes by rising from the low caste that he was born in, educated in Britain and raised to keep up the standard – but what standard? – is also searching for an identity but fails to find it because he denies his origin:

He found he began to be mistaken for something he wasn't – a man of dignity. This accidental poise became more important than any other thing. He 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 (131).

Identity is created in the interaction between an individual and society. Identity cannot be defined simply or uniquely from the individual's point of view, or in a simple binary opposition between the individual and society. The two cannot exist without each other and the individual continually communicates his or her identity in a changing world, allowing for multiple selves that exist only from specific points of view and in specific contexts (Auer 478)<sup>5</sup>.

*The Inheritance of Loss* also shows this micro-cosmopolitanism in the lives and interactions in small groups within the larger society. The world of Biju, even after his move to the United States, is small. He moves almost exclusively in circles of illegal immigrants in New York – although a world that is also made up of various cultures and ethnic backgrounds. Biju mainly connects with illegal immigrants from India, speaking only Hindi or broken English. He feels stronger ties to his family and history back in Kalimpong than to the larger New York world that he never really becomes acquainted with. After living in New York for a number of years he is still:

without name or knowledge of the American president, without the name of the river on whose bank he had lingered, without even hearing about any of tourist sights – no Statue of Liberty, Macy's, Little Italy, Brooklyn bridge, Museum of Immigration; no bialy at Barney Greengrass, soupy dumpling at Jimmy's Shanghai, no gospel churches of Harlem tour (314).

To explore the literary identity of *The Inheritance of Loss* we need to look into the theories of colonial and postcolonial literature and into the relations with travel literature and world literature. This chapter aims to outline the position of *The Inheritance of Loss* and its author with respect to these areas.

Other characters in *The Inheritance of Loss* also reflect on British and Indian literature. Sai is an inquisitive reader and has an eclectic taste. She reads American and British authors – *Life with Father*, *To kill a mockingbird*, *Cider with Rosie*, and *Wuthering Heights* – but also a work on the vanishing tribes of India or *The Indian Gentleman's Guide to Etiquette*. She devours dated copies of National Geographic and is interested in the world outside India. But the literary circle of Kalimpong is quite clear in its taste for literature:

Lola, Noni, Sai, and Father Booty were unanimous in the opinion that they didn't like English writers writing about India; it turned the stomach; delirium and fever somehow went with temples and snakes and perverse romance, spilled blood, and miscarriage; it didn't correspond to the truth. English writers writing of England was what was nice: P.G. Wodehouse, Agatha Christie, countryside



England where they remarked on the crocuses being early that year and best of all, the manor house novels (217).

The reader of *The Inheritance of Loss* is continually expected to shift between worlds: to travel from the lonely mountainside of Kalimpong to the underground kitchens of Manhattan restaurants, from the knickknack-laden drawing room of Noni and Lola to the barren bedroom the judge rented in London. The reader needs to be willing to travel between these worlds, times and cultures, and may become as confused and puzzled as the characters in the novel.

The difference between a traveller and a migrant is defined in terms of power hierarchy and level of dependence between the guest and the host society. This is also remarked upon in *The Inheritance of Loss*, when the man selling Biju his return ticket to India, is trying to convince him that he is making a mistake in going back. To him, it is "still a world ... where one side travels to be a servant, and the other side travels to be treated like a king" (295). Biju is not a traveller who can afford to shuttle back and forth between his native country and his 'land of opportunity'. He also finds occasion to contemplate the differences in wealth between his home country and his new host:

Looking at a dead insect in the sack of basmati that had come all the way from Dehra Dun, he almost wept in sorrow and marvel at its journey, which was tenderness for his own journey. In India almost nobody would be able to afford this rice, and you had to travel around the world to be able to eat such things where they were cheap enough that you could gobble them down without being rich; and when you got home to the place where they grew, you couldn't afford them anymore (209).

*The Inheritance of Loss* is a tale of losses and predicaments of immigrants in an alien land with the conflicting Indian identities in colonial India and in postcolonial period of globalizations. Kiran Desai has rocked the world with her realistic and sensitive writing about an illusory dream of globalization.

The novel delineates the stories of Indian elite class of life and of these people's efforts to acquire with modernity and the stories of illegal immigrants in a modern center of globalized economy and politics. The problem of migration always annoyed.

In the background of colonial neurosis and multiculturalism, Kiran Desai explores the impact of globalization expressed in terms of financial security in alien lands, racial discrimination, bitterness of immigration, complexity of high tech society and disillusionment born out of the opulence of the West. Inherited from her personal experiences, Desai handles socio-political ramifications, identity loss, exile immigration alienation, nostalgic experiences and disillusion in the midst of the global community. The Atlantic monthly press reviewed the novel as, "holding out the possibility of hope and betrayal- illuminates the consequences of colonialism and global conflicts of religion, race and nationality<sup>6</sup>." Through the delineation of the experiences of Biju in America, it is exposed how the dream of globalization has become a threat to the identity of the ethnic community. In one of her interview with host Tom Ashbrook It is summed up: In Desai's novel there's a trouble in a global village; unresolved rage and anger from colonial days, stunted alienated half global citizens; first world third world power imbalance; and a global economy that crushes as fast it creates"<sup>7</sup>. Kiran Desai has deftly exfoliated the politics of liberalization, claims of globalization with the advancement of information technology which profess to create wealth and well being in integrating the cultural diversities, but the fact is there is a darker side where millions are deprived of the basic human rights.

*The Inheritance of Loss* depicts in its many details the tragedies of the Third World countries just liberated from colonialism. The main theme of the novel also appears to be the influence of the European powers in India and how Indian is hounded by the Colonization policies. These influences have oppressed and degraded India. Her fiction is set in the modern day India and the story is narrated to depict the collapse of the established order due to the political unrest. Desai tries to bring forth the issues of poverty and hints that globalization is not an easy solution to the problems of the trapped people of the lower social stratas<sup>8</sup>.



This book tells the tale of valor and sacrifice of the Gorkhas, through Gyan whose ancestors have served in India for the last one hundred and eighty six years continuously in the military and para-military forces. The Gorkha clan is well known for their bravery and loyalty. Desai tells the story of Gyan and the injustices done to his grandfather and his great uncles as

In the 1800s his ancestors had left their village in Nepal and arrived in Darjeeling, lured by the promises of work on a tea plantation...he swore allegiance to the crown, and off he went, the beginning of over a hundred years of family commitment to the wars of English... [3]

Gorkhas face an 'Identity Crisis' in spite of being Indian citizens and having contributed to the independence struggle, the formulation of the Indian constitution and the security and development of the country. Gorkha families in the thousands are being uprooted indiscriminately and their situation in India particularly in the North Eastern region is perhaps worse than that was during the British period. In the very first chapter of *The Inheritance of Loss* we can feel the frustration of the Gorkhas who have served in India for many years:

The Indian Nepalese this time, fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority...they wanted their own country or at least their own state in which to manage their own affairs...[3]

The Gorkhas settled in India today are bearing several problems regarding their social and political status. They are neglected both in Nepal and in India. In Nepal they are considered as Indian citizens and in India they are considered as 'Nepali immigrants'. In *The Inheritance of Loss* we go through several pages where these Gorkhas are looked down upon and considered inferior by the characters. As in the novel we see that it is repeated several times that Neps could do no right. They stole, they cheated, they were poor and down trodden and finally they revolted. Even the cook says "Neps are not bright at all. They are excellent army men and coolies but not bright people" Further Lola in the case of robbery didn't trust his Nepali watchman and said Noni: Budhoo?...he's Nepali. Who can trust him now? It's always the watchman in case of robbery. [3]

Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* not only deals with their demands of a separate state but it also deals with the aftermath of the demands-violence, agitation, disturbance in the socio-political, educational, economical set up. Set in the mid-1980, the novel alternates between Kalimpong, and New York City. In Kalimpong, the retired judge 'Jemubhai Patel', his teenage granddaughter 'Sai', and his servant, 'Cook' are the sufferers in the increasingly violent Nepali uprising. Desai has depicted an accurate picture of this movement in the novel. It shows clearly the fear of the north-east region people faced due to the insurgency which turned violent.

Racism, Cultural conflicts and collisions are well shown in the novel. Biju, the one who faces contempt and injustices of the white people and the other Mr. Patel, the judge who as a student of Britain fell victim to a similar kind of oppression. Moreover his effort to mimic "English Colonial Identity" had the tragic effect upon his tortured life. Jemubhai Patel is an Anglicized judge, who could neither blend into the culture of his origin nor accepted by the English. Biju in his desire of a successful life is badly exploited and struggles a lot for his identity. Thus the feeling of being marginalized compels them to come back to India. Desai narrates the story of real experiences and presents the unfamiliar part of the society and she indicates the problems related to Diaspora and globalization.

The author expresses her distress on the fact that binaries exist within the boundaries of home culture also, provides more facilities for foreigners than to Indians. It is a projection of the inferiority imbibed through years of Colonization, as well as within the psyche of migrants of our own country. She admits: "Treating people from a rich country well and people from poor country badly. Its disgrace what this lop sided policy against your own people".





Desai confirms that ethnicity and racial prejudices are a universal phenomenon and globalization can not afford any significant consolation. Kiran Desai presents the overwhelming feeling of humiliation experienced by ethnic groups who arrive at the global village of America to secure a better future. Through the apathy of the life of Biju, she presents the status of illegal immigrants and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates. Relevant here are the remarks of Beena Agarwal<sup>9</sup>: "The dawn of twenty first century, with the emerging trends of liberation and exodus of public has witnessed a social phenomenon where native and ethnic identities are gradually seeking their moorings in the wider centres existing in the axis of Globalization. Uncontroversially, it acknowledges the fractured and unidentified, identity of the marginalized communities for better and wider national solidarities. The idea of globalization made it essential to negotiate how to reconcile the creeping trends of universal civilization along with ensuring the due status to native cultural practices. The concept of universal civilization and "social imperialism" requires the unconditional acceptance of emerging ideologies but simultaneously it also demands a reference to the forgotten past as means of spiritual and psychological consolations. The homogenizing spirit of globalization espouses non imperialistic ideologies but it often shadows the basic identity of minorities and induces new modes of marginality in ethnocentric socio-culture fabric. However the discourse of postmodernism has searched out the spaces wherein "difference" and plurality are accentuated. Spivak and Ahmed have tried to locate such centres which control Third world subjects corresponding to their own constitution of margin.

To conclude, we finally derive to the fact that throughout in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, victory of Indian culture and values is celebrated. The novelist had proved that wherever one goes, ones culture always follows and it is ones strong values only that finally help to overcome the status of cultural shock. Thus, the present paper has a moderate endeavour to show Desai's female characters' quest for identity shaking the traditional shackles which women are tied with. No matter in the life of few female characters there is aloofness, isolation, loneliness and annui. But other characters are shown with adequate potential and capacity to carve new identity on their own way. People worship goddess who is woman but they treat their wives not as human with flesh and blood. Women's voices are unheard while should be heard. As they are not heard means half population is not heard. They should be promoted and respected. In this regard it can be concluded that feminism has awakened them to proceed to have an authentic life as they have right and liberty which should be given in real sense. They know a little attempt is not less important as that may be just like the stone of foundation. On that new edifice can be erected. Overall we can say that, racial and ethnic identities are the main cause for loss; and is the reason for the uneasy relations with the cultural environment of the nation to which they have migrated and an implicit plea for better terms of accommodation. In this respect, *The Inheritance of Loss* occupies an important place in the genre of the recent Indian English novel.

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