



A Quest for the Meaningful Identity in Kiran Desai's Novel *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract— *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) novel written by Kiran Desai explores the devastating impact of colonialism, globalization, and displacement through its different protagonists in India and New York City. The story takes place in the mid-1980s and the events in the novel are mainly set in an isolated, dilapidated mansion in Kalimpong which is a hill station situated on the foothills of the Himalayas in Northeast India. Actually, in the wake of freedom in India, a lot of new dreams started to rise in the hearts of people, especially the marginalized who have been oppressed and silenced throughout history. However, the aspirations of the oppressed classes faced numerous obstacles in the form of bureaucratic systems established in the country as well as the colonial legacy. The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai is dedicated to the quest for self-realization in the times of post-colonialism, immigration, and globalization, which tells us about an Indian man called Jemubhai, who internalizes a sense of superiority and alienates himself from his Indian roots, therefore, instead of finding himself in English culture, he only experiences an identity crisis. The narrative of the novel enables readers to observe the actual life of people with their internal conflicts related to the influence of traditions, modernization, and globalization. The characters who cannot adapt to the changes suffer from psychological disorders, despair, and loneliness; while those who are ready for changes, think rationally and are able to interact with other people have the possibility to achieve self-fulfillment. This research paper finds out a quest for meaningful identity through the identification of different issues of identity loss in the perspectives of culture, status, tradition, and home at the same time.



Keywords— post-colonialism, migration, identity, political upheavals, inheritance, modernity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Kiran Desai, the author of *The Inheritance of Loss* and daughter of a well known writer Anita Desai, was born in 1971 in India. Kiran Desai moved to England as a teenager in 1986, because her parents separated, and she accompanied her mother who travelled there for a literary fellowship. After spending one year in England, she and her mother relocated to the USA, where she pursued creative writing in English. Because of the critique of historical, cultural, and political heritage the book *The Inheritance of Loss* won the 'Man Booker Prize' in 2006 and 'National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award' in 2007. Moreover, we should mention that Kiran Desai is not the only one in the family who was nominated for the Booker Prize, as her

mother Anita Desai also got the nomination three times in her life.

The story of *The Inheritance of Loss* is based on the life of a retired judge, who lives in the Himalayas with his granddaughter Sai and his cook, whose son Biju is working in New York illegally at this moment. After reading the novel, we can easily come to conclude that it is about the issues of post-colonial identity, globalization, migration, and conflicts of modernity and tradition. In the broader perspective, post-colonialism means liberation from those who feel hurt by oppression and sufferings, which makes the idea crucial. It focuses on liberating all those people who suffer from oppression, hardships, and other sufferings in life such as: alienation, transience, and liminality. Kiran Desai is one of the Indian authors who expresses her

personal views concerning the issues of her community through her works; she describes all different kinds of things, starting from unique experiences and ending in lost traditions and collapsed social structure. As it is seen from the title of the novel, there are a number of losses, including culture, status, tradition, and home at the same time.

II. A QUEST FOR IDENTITY

The Inheritance of Loss looks at the conflicting search for meaning in a world filled with cultural change, political turbulence, and class struggles in postcolonial India. In Kalimpong, a remote hill station in northeastern Himalaya, the novel shows how colonizers clash with modern hopes of a new India. People from all walks of life, from traditional bureaucrats to the oppressed Gorkha rebels, struggle with isolation, disappointment, and their desire for a cohesive self. In this uncertain world, the question of living a meaningful life is a crucial one. The characters of Desai's novel often find themselves caught between two opposing principles: nationalism and globalization, tradition and modernity, individualism and collectivism.

The Inheritance of Loss also looks at how political conflicts impact the lives of the characters, especially in terms of their ability or inability to reconcile personal desires with social requirements. In this regard, from psychological and sociological points of view it can be stated that characters acquiring self-awareness and flexibility in their thoughts and approaches are able to construct their identity, whereas the characters sticking to rigid ideologies become depressed or irrelevant.

In her novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* Kiran Desai presents a portrayal of Kalimpong society which is rich in dimensions and portrays both horizontal as well as vertical perspectives on Indian society in its various formats. Among them is the impact of colonialism in the form of Jemubhai Patel, a retired judge, his orphaned granddaughter Sai, and their cook, on whose background numerous foreign expatriates surround him such as uncle Potty and father Booty alongside various social rejects and dignitaries such as the Afghan girls like Nonita and Lola. At the end of these authorities are sitting Gorkha rebels led by Gyan and others creating unrest around those whom they consider oppressors.

The judge, who is a representative of post-colonial regimes, is plagued with colonial impersonation and self-hatred. While he is convinced of his Anglicized life, he tends to stay away from politics. Civic pride, on the other hand, results in Sai, who is young, educated, and innocent in the emotional sense. Her love of Gyan, a Gorkha teacher who is increasingly consumed with nationalistic fervor symbolizes the conflict of the two Indias: the elite and the marginalized.

Their feelings begin to evolve in a carefree and innocent way, as Desai points out: "The dumpling siege of love had prompted them into a cascade of terms of endearment and nicknames" (*The Inheritance of Loss*, p.14).

However, as political tensions increase, their relationship deteriorates. Likewise, Gyan undergoes a conflict of feelings towards Sai and the indignation of her community and after that, he calls her a "copycat" for celebrating Christmas and discards her middle-class ethics and recalls their tea parties that seem to contribute to cultural treason after all. Nonetheless, despite his more radical views, Gyan does not change due to some ideology, he has to affirm himself in a world where he is not counted as worthy. This is the experience of many marginalized people who aspire to personal agency in the world still dominated by exclusion and hierarchy. A scholar writes that the subaltern is the one who has been silenced in colonial rule and thus finds its own way to modernity and development. Meanwhile, Gyan's participation in the political activities is driven by his dissatisfaction, but at the same time, it is aimed at self-affirmation. Nevertheless, the fact that he cannot combine his private feelings and political beliefs, demonstrates how troublesome identity politics can be.

Moreover, Gyan represents a person that militants throughout the novel, uncle Potty, father Booty, and the Afghan sisters often represent a very different attitude, often maintaining their own behavior and remaining unaware of the increasing tensions around them. Their lack of real engagement with the realities of society and politics around them makes their life in the new environment obsolete. Nonita and Lola, the old sisters, remain in their bubbles full of privileges and use only symbolic acts of political engagement such as tea-drinking or gathering in gardens while being indifferent to what is going on in society. The understanding of Sai's education by Noni, who says: "The only way to escape was to go underground, stay quiet when involved, and not express any opinion because then you would be discovered and destroyed" (*The Inheritance of Loss*, p.77) supports the idea of the absence of critical thinking.

On the contrary, some of the other characters of *The Inheritance of Loss* Budhoo, Keesang and Forchemo, accept the true meaning of reality. In this regard, Kiran Desai points out the fact that despite being privileged enough, these characters live their lives in a different way, and, therefore, she says: "Budhoo, Kesar, Forchemo – were leading parallel lives without artifice or comprehension. Yet, this also showed that they were cowards at heart" (*The Inheritance of Loss*, p.48). In the novel, another character Sai, who was shielded but hopeful, undergoes a gradual realization. Her relationship with Gyan deteriorates not only

because of their political views but also because of her dependence on him and a gap in their cultures. Sai's shame and the loss of dignity reflect the quest for identity of young women trapped between tradition and freedom. However, Sai is slowly making progress, while watching the Gorkhas now living in the town, she admits that he would never again think there was only one story, and that it was her own.

In the end, she (Sai) feels a spark of strength and determination and sends Gyan a touching message: "I will love you after all" (*The Inheritance of Loss*, p.324). On the whole, by situating her personal pain in a broader context of changes in culture and politics, Sai becomes a fully developed character. Rather than reverting to becoming a victim, she begins the process of becoming a different person.

III. CONCLUSION

Now summing up the discussion, it can be pointed out that *The Inheritance of Loss*, a novel by Kiran Desai, reveals various emotional and ideological journeys of characters attempting to adapt to life in the post-colonial world. Through the experiences of Gyan becoming political, Sai discovering her true self, and the old upper class suffering from stagnation, Here Kiran Desai seems to make a comment on the flaws of the current systems and the challenges of establishing new identities; people who keep believing in their old myths find themselves lonely or mad. On the contrary, those who are ready to reconsider and develop empathy find new opportunities for agency and connection. Therefore, Kiran Desai's literary works manage to combine personal misery and societal upheaval; these provide the reader with a vivid image of modern India as a country that is not only devastated but also moving forward. In the end, the novel shows that the secret of having a meaningful life is not in fantasies but actions and self-improvement.

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