

Food for Thought, Culture and Identity: A Study of Kiran Desai's

The Inheritance of Loss

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A society's customs, arts, music and even their food habits are certain means of expressing one's culture and identity. But usually, scholars give emphasis to language or religion and overlook the importance of food and cuisine. But food is a powerful tool that can be used to express one's social identity and culture. It plays a major role in defining a person's attitude, lifestyle and character.

A cultural group might consider its every day food as ordinary and will not associate it with one's culture. But for people outside that culture, they could easily identify this and connects it with individual culture. For instance, Indian families usually stick on to their traditional food habits and immigrants from India sometimes find it difficult to adjust with the western food culture and most of them struggle and nostalgically yearn for their traditional food.

With the phenomenon of globalisation, world has shrunk into a global village and customs and food habits are not static and is in a phase of transformation where continental and Chinese food are easily available even in a small town in India. So globalisation has created a global food system which further progresses the distribution facilities and at the same time it advances the rate at which the foods change its regional contexts.

Food connects people with their traditions and they can express themselves and their identity through food. All over the world, food has deep underlying connotation which links it with warmth, sharing and togetherness. It can always be considered as a symbol of warmth as it always allows people to connect and make intimate kinship with others.

As Robin Fox says,

Food is almost always shared: people eat together: meal times are events when the whole family or settlement or village comes together. Food is an occasion for sharing... for the expression of altruism". (I)

The present study analyses how food act as a binding force among the various characters in the novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai. It also analyses how the novelist uses food as a medium for expressing the attitudes, identity and lifestyles of the different characters. Though the novel analyses a number of serious themes, a close analysis reveals how the writer prudently uses

food as a tool in exhibiting the changing cultural dimension of the locality. This paper also analyses how globalisation and immigration influences even the food habits of individuals.

Kiran Desai's Booker Prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* celebrates so many serious themes like multiculturalism, post colonialism, impact of globalisation and immigrants' bitter experiences. But this paper attempts to discuss how food acts as a tool which symbolically represents the changing identity and culture of the various characters. Food is closely related to Indian culture and preparing the various traditional dishes using so many spices and ingredients is an art in itself. Here, in this novel, the novelist represents food as a symbol which reflects the isolation and psychological colonisation of the different characters.

The novel mainly tells the story of Jemubhai Papatlal Patel, a retired judge in Kalimpong and his relationship with his granddaughter Sai. In a parallel story, the novel sketches the life of Biju, the son of the judge's cook who is an illegal immigrant in New York. Sai falls in love with her mathematics tutor, Gyan who is a descendant of a Nepali Gurkha family.

The novel opens itself by describing the "cavernous kitchen" (1) where the cook prepares tea for the Judge and his granddaughter Sai. The three of them communicates rarely among themselves but they at least fumble a few words over their food. Mostly it will be an accusation by the judge of the inefficacy of the cook and the lamenting of the cook in return. Sai always tries to lighten the situation or sit as a mute witness to everything.

From the beginning, one can understand the peculiar character of the judge, for his preference for western lifestyle. He rudely scolds the cook for not serving the tea in the appropriate western way and without "cakes or scones, macarons or cheese straws". (3) The novelist gives an idea of the lifestyles of both the judge and Sai through their food habits. The readers become aware that Sai has no idea of Indian cooking when she helped the cook in preparing tea for some hooligans who attacked their house and demanded tea and refreshments. "She only knew the English way" (6).

When Sai reached Cho Oyu for the first time, the cook prepared a many course dinner to welcome her. He even,

"modelled the mashed potatoes into a motor car, recollecting a long- forgotten skill from another age...The car sat in the middle of the table, along with paddle-shaped mutton cutlets, water- logged green beans, and a head of cauliflower under cheese sauce that looked like shrouded brain. All the dishes were spinning steam furiously, and warm, food- scented clouds condensed on Sai's face" (32)

But the warmth of the food got dissipated in the presence of the judge. He became angry and shouted at the cook for not bringing the soup on time. So from the very beginning, the character of the judge is revealed through the symbol of food and it also reflects the extent to which they got westernised.

Jemubhai Patel is a retired judge, living a secluded life in Kalimpong. He was born and brought up in a poor family in Piphit, an obscure village in Gujarat. The time he spends in England for higher studies is one of extreme loneliness and humiliation. Without any company, he gradually becomes an alien even to himself. Colonisation made Jemubhai consider himself as a lower grade citizen in England. As a result of cultural colonialism, his language, colour, religion, food habits and customs become irrelevant and inferior compared to that of the white masters. As Ngugi Wa Thiong’O has observed in his introduction to *Decolonising the Mind*, “The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity and ultimately in themselves” (4). It was out of humiliation that he tossed the banana and the food packet that his mother had prepared for him on to the ocean when he was travelling to England for the first time. Thus, Jemubhai consciously shuts all his connections with his own people and culture and prefers the western culture and habits. The sense of insecurity and lack of self- belief that Jemubhai feels in the new cultural context is precisely described in the text.

He reiterated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow. With no family or friends in England, he grew stranger to himself than to those around him. He found his own skin odd-coloured, his own accent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh... He began to wash obsessively, concerned he would be accused of smelling, and each morning scrubbed off the thick milky scent of sleep, the barnyard smell that wreathed him when he woke and impregnated the fabric of his pyjamas. 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 (39).

Thus, the judge is isolated from everything around him. His relationship with family, friends and relatives gets ruined because of his adopted culture. His food habits, mannerisms and lifestyle are entirely westernized and even his relationship with his granddaughter appears strange. Apart from their food habits, Sai and her grandfather are also virtually unable to speak the native language of Kalimpong and read and study almost entirely in English. This results not only in the fracturing of the natural culture, but also of the fracturing of their minds and identities. They are constantly torn between the East and the West. Sai speaks English as her first language. Her convent education has transformed her completely. Their food habits, lifestyle and attitude are clearly marked through these words.

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 (30).

Apart from the cook and Sai, the only other person who tries to have a connection with the judge in Cho Oyu is Gyan, Sai's mathematics tutor. But the judge considers his presence at the dinner table as an "insolence" (109) and sneered at him. Gyan reminds him of his own naïve character when he was a student in England. Even though Sai and Gyan love each other, their different life styles keep them apart. Both of them are embarrassed to eat together, "he, unsettled by her finickiness and her curbed enjoyment, and she, revolted by his energy and his fingers working the dal, his slurps and smacks" (176).

The cook's son Biju has a different story to tell. Biju is representative of the thousands of illegal immigrants in the U.S who cannot lead an honourable life there and are unable to go back to their native land. The character Biju's essential nature is one of melancholy and he nostalgically dreams of his father's house, his grandmother and the various sounds and smells of his village. He is staying in New York but cannot identify himself with the food, beliefs, lifestyle and culture of the people there. Out of self-pity, he wept sadly "looking at a dead insect in the sack of basmati that had come all the way from Dehra Dun..." (191). Biju remains a traditional Indian all throughout and he cannot think of eating or serving beef even if there are Indians who have it. The restaurant in which he works provides only one menu of steak, salad and fries. Biju left his job there and searched for a restaurant that does not serve beef. His attitude is perfectly etched in these words. "Job no job. One should not give up one's religion, the principles of one's parents before them. No, no matter what" (136).

Post- colonialism becomes another name for globalisation when it comes to culture, language and food habits. Desai's novel is full of instances of the western culture infiltrating into the third world. And she partially expresses it through most of the character's food habits. The judge's neighbours Lola, Noni, Uncle Potty and father Booty are all examples for this. Lola and Noni's garden at Mon Ami has only western vegetables like broccoli which they procured from England. Later, we meet Lola and Noni, "sipping Sikkimese brandy, BBC news sputtering on the radio, falling over them in sparky explosions" (44). Both colonialism and globalisation attempt to impose an unchanging ideology of progress, development and civilization. Here, most of the characters are aping the west or considers the western way of life superior to their own culture and life style.

Kiran Desai uses language quite artistically and at times she even presents it as if it is a fine delicacy from kitchen. There are so many instances of inserting rich mouth-watering food items to express certain ideas. She inserted them in such a way that they appear to be integral to its structure. Phrases and words like "cosy scoop of minced mutton in charming dimpled wrapping... (257), refrigerated voice (257), hut coming up like a "mushroom" (240), "sand sieved fine as semolina" (78) comes up at the right time.

Kiran Desai realistically portrayed the life on two different continents that demonstrate a fathomless interest for human condition. It makes clear that an all- embracing, humanistic vision of the world is a mirage, but it also suggests an exploration of East in relation to West in a positive

light. As Edward Said said, “Nativism is not the only alternative. There is the possibility of a more generous and pluralistic vision of the World.” (52).

Works Cited

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