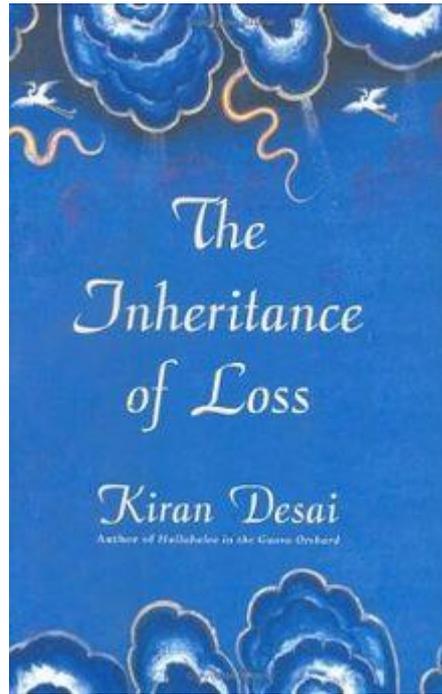


**Westernization Leading to Dissolution with reference to
Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss***

C. Nesavathy



Abstract

This paper explains how people's adaptation of western culture leads to their dissolution. The paper also explains how westernization has greatly affected our traditions, customs, our family and our respect and love for others. Kiran Desai speaks of the hybridization of Indian culture resulting from the contact with colonial world. The novel partially represents both the western and eastern cultures. In between the two it centres round the people, who don't have their own identity in either part of the globe. It explains how Indians run at the back of western culture and neglect the Indian culture which is unique.

The Process of Westernization

Westernization is a process whereby societies come under or adopt Western culture in areas such as industry, technology, law, politics, economics, lifestyle, diet, clothing, language, alphabet, religion, philosophy, and values. “Westernization has been a pervasive and accelerating influence across the world in the last few centuries, with some thinkers assuming westernization to be the equivalent of modernization” (Chauhan 124). Regarding westernization it has also been observed:

Westernization can also be related to the process of acculturation or enculturation. Acculturation refers to the changes that occur within a society or culture when two different groups come into direct continuous contact. Westernization can also refer to the effects of western expansion and colonialism on native societies. (Teggihalli 112)

The Inheritance of Loss

In *The Inheritance of Loss* Desai presents all the characters in one way or the other having colonized minds and their lives are tormented by the seeds of westernization and the blind directions towards the west, resulting in immigration. Desai depicts the characters living in a small village but facing the global questions. All the characters face the same problems of globalization, westernization, racial discrimination, and colonized mindset. Most of her characters display a constant obsession with western thought and a deep investment in western institutions. Even the minor characters like Noni, Lola, Mrs. Sen, and the cook live with their consciousness trapped by the thoughts of western countries like America and England.

Blind Appreciation

The characters in the novel blindly appreciate everything that is related to the western countries. Immigration to the countries like UK and US is considered as a matter of pride and is associated with status elevation. The cook says to everyone that his son has a new job in the USA. In fact, he, himself, has the desire to fly away to America. However, the reality is bitter that Biju has to shift to a new job because he is not allowed to continue or because he does not want to suffer the pain of the previous job. His life in America as an illegal immigrant is like that of a beggar, without home and a proper job.

But in India, the cook is proud of his son’s achievements which are hollow in nature.

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Desai attacks the ignorance of the people of India and their blindness of accepting everything related to the western countries.

Comical Situation

Desai presents a comical situation out of the women's habit of boasting about their daughters' success in western countries. Anglophile Lola boasts of her daughter's success of becoming a news reader in the BBC world channel. And Mrs. Sen's daughter gets the same job in CNN News Channel in America. Mrs. Sen tries to prove that America is the best country in the world and Lola tries to prove that England is the best country in the world. However, their daughter's success and their boasting of the western countries seem futile when compared with the exploitation and suffering of Biju in America and the racial discrimination of the Judge in England.

Colonial Mindset

Desai keeps on highlighting the colonial mindset in India. People in countries like India have great regard for everything associated with Britain or America. The Judge always envies the English people and loathes the Indian people. In Britain he was racially discriminated and was an outcast and even in India he was hated for his Anglophilic attitude. People like the cook celebrate every moment which resembles that of the English. He happily says, "AngrezKeTarah Like the English, AngrezkeTarahAngrezJaise" (Desai 105). Sai and the Judge, for example, immediately thinks of American films instead of popular Bollywood movies. The cook has a fetish for modern western appliances.

Jemubhai Patel, the Judge

One of the major characters of the story is Jemubhai Patel, the Judge. He, being westernized, recoils from everything Indian. He was born in India but went to England to receive the college education. The Judge's life in London was one of loneliness and humiliation and "he retreated 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" (39). He felt himself to be hated and mocked at by the English who said, "Phew, he stinks of curry. The young and beautiful were no kinder; girls held their noses and giggled" (39).

And he became so introvert that he started hating himself, his skin colour, and anything

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that made him Indian, his true identity. The Judge's hatred grew to such an extent that "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" (119).

The humiliation and suffering which is thrust on the Judge in England made him suspicious towards his life; he would prefer shadow to light, faded days to sunny days. "He sat alone because he felt ill at ease in the company of English" (119). The Judge's encounter with the English culture is so humiliating and filled with such strong feelings of resentment and anger, that he becomes doubly displaced when he returns home. When the Judge returns home, it becomes clear how terribly his encounter with the English altered his cultural identity. He is neither European nor Indian, and becomes an immigrant in his own self. The Judge remains "a foreigner in his own country" (29) and never opens himself up to the human world. He does not even love his granddaughter, Sai. The only creature whom the Judge loves immensely is his dog, Mutt. When it is stolen by two wandering beggars, the Judge gets terribly upset. While searching for her, the Judge sentimentally calls her, "Please come home, my dear, my lovely girl, Princess Duchess Queen, Naughty girl, sweet heart! Muffin, chicki, Diamond Pearl" (293). The Judge has never had such emotional attachment even with his wife. The inhuman nature of the Judge makes Sai comment, "Grandfather more lizard than human, Dog more human than dog" (32).

Self-Centered Cynicism

Influenced wrongly by the western culture, Jemubhai fails to adhere to the traditional Indian culture. He despises Indian culture and the way of life, including his apparently backward Indian wife, whom he had abandoned along with his daughter. He gradually regenerates into a self-centered cynic. The English culture has made him more of a coward. The Westernized and Anglophile Judge detests Nimi's ignorance and typical Indian qualities. The Judge's failure in seeing her from his English vision frustrates and infuriates him beyond any limit. Unable to give up his contempt for Indian heritage and hatred for Indian culture, he treats his wife cruelly.

Fail to Acculturate Wife

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All his attempts to educate his wife, Nimi, in western etiquette and manners, drastically fail. Being a typical Indian woman, Nimi always contradicts the Judges' English expectations. The judge asks her, "Why do you have to dress in such a gaudy manner? Yellow and pink? Are you mad?"(172).He takes her head and pushes it into the toilet bowl, once he finds her footprints on the toilet seat. Moreover, he asks her not to show her face outside when she gets pustules on her face. The narrator observes, " He did not like his wife's face, searched for his hatred, found beauty, dismissed it...An Indian girl could never be as beautiful as an English one" (168). His beastly behaviour with his wife proves to be a mockery of all his English education. He beats her severely and sends her to her parental home after learning that she is responsible for blocking his promotion by being part of the committee that has welcomed Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru at the local railway station. Even the birth of a child does not soften him. Finally, Nimi commits suicide. The Judge treats it as an accident.

Struggle with Cultural Identity – The Case of Sai

All the characters struggle with their cultural identity and the forces of westernization, while trying to maintain their emotional connection with one another. Sai is the chief protagonist in the novel. Sai speaks English and no other local language; she knows only the English method of making tea and she cannot eat with her fingers. She never squats down on the ground and used paper to clean her bottom and has never been to the temple. Sai has adopted the British culture as being superior to India. Sai does not know her own culture and believes in British culture:

The system might be obsessed with purity, but excelled in defining the flavor of sin. This underneath, and on top a flat creed: cake was better than laddoos, fork spoon is better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ and consuming a wafer of his body was more civilized than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigold. English was better than Hindi. (29-30)

In fact, Sai has become absolutely a foreigner to her own culture and country of her origin. Though she has never been outside India, she speaks only English. Her convent education has made her lose touch with the native tradition and culture.

Gyan and Sai

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The impact of westernization is noticed in the relationship between Gyan and Sai. Gyan and Sai bear a lot of differences between them. Sai follows a western life style, whereas Gyan follows a traditional one. Therefore, there is already an unbridgeable gap between them. Sai is a true representative of the globalized world. She is a westernized Indian brought up by English nuns. She represents a type of “estranged Indian living in India” (210). By birth, Sai is part of the upper class or at least upper- middle class. She celebrates western holidays like Christmas, eats English food, and lives in Cho Oyu, which is a fairly nice home with modern conveniences. Sai speaks English as her first language, instead of a more indigenous Indian language. She cannot relate with anyone outside her social strain. Sai is caught between two cultures that are different from each other, the Indian and the Western. She feels herself an exile like her grandfather. Gyan, however, has a different mother tongue and eats more indigenous food.

Gyan disdains and criticizes Sai’s blind acceptance of westernization. Gyan shouts at Sai calling her a slave since she is ready to clasp the western way of living as her grandfather. Gyan dislikes Sai celebrating festivals like Christmas is seen when he asks,” Why do you celebrate Christmas? You are Hindu and you don’t celebrate ID or Guru Nanak’s birthday or even Durga Puja or Dussehra or Tibetan New Year” (163). But Sai wants to have a bit of fun and doesn’t mind celebrating Christmas Day. Gyan attacks Sai by calling her copycat and tells her that “THEY DON’T WANT YOU” (164). Gyan disapproves of her slavery towards the western culture. With Gyan’s reincarnation into a revolutionary man with the aim of attaining a separate state called Gorkhaland, his love-affair with Sai is affected since he becomes more and more conscious of the foolishness in Sai’s imitation of western lifestyle.

Colonized Psyche and Subsequent Westernization

In both the love stories, between the Judge and his wife and between Gyan and Sai, it is the colonized psyche and the subsequent westernization that separate the couples. Western concepts are corroding the traditional life style of the Indians. Gyan’s hatred for westernization and Nimi’s inability to adapt the western culture destroy any further hope of reconciliation. Hence, the forces of westernization have infiltrated into the lives of even those who do not intent to settle abroad. The writer clearly shows the impact of westernization on common people and their relations. This can be clearly seen

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in the case of Gyan and Sai. On the one hand, Gyan's egoistic feeling of martyrdom does not allow him to stoop to the girl's demands, and on the other hand, Sai continues to attack him by calling him a hypocrite who likes to eat cheese and at the same time dislikes westernization, "Hundreds of pieces of cheese toast you must have eaten. Let alone the chocolate cigars....So greedy, eating them like a fat pig. And tuna fish on toast and peanut butter biscuits!"(259).

A Return Journey

Desai, ironically, presents the return journey of Biju from the States to India. Indians still have high regards for foreign things and refrain from questioning the western policies. Desai shows a remarkable difference in the Judge's behaviour before and after his studies in England. In his early days the judge used to love his wife. But once wounded by the west, the judge completely changes into a stranger to his family. He boycotts his family and the whole caste for the same reason.

Noni and Lola are well known in Kalimpong for belonging to the same westernized Indian class as Sai. They are two comical and wealthy ladies who live in a spacious cottage with all sorts of comfort, and keep multiple servants, including a maid, a sweeper, a gardener, and a watchman. The sisters greatly admire the British and adopt as many English customs as possible. They grow western vegetables like broccoli in their garden; they only wear Marks and Spencer garments, they drink English tea, eat English jam and pastries, love manor house novels, and have the complete works of Jane Austen. Part of their obsession with the British is due to Lola's daughter, Pixie, who lives in England and works for the BBC. Lola beams with pride, when her daughter's voice comes over the radio. Lola and a neighbour, Mrs. Sen, whose daughter Munmun lives in the United States and works for CNN, participate in intense battles over which country, America or England is superior. "Instead of identifying with their Indian culture, these women take on western identities so completely that they battle against their fellow Indians in favour of the western cultures they can never truly join" (Pooja 89). Sai, Noni, Lola, Uncle Potty and father Booty went to the library in Darjeeling to exchange their library books. At the library they picked out some books which were written by English writer about England. All of them are unanimous in the opinion that they do not like English writers writing about India. Sai picks out an old book that states

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that an Indian can be civilized but can never be as good as the English. This makes her furious. The narrator comments:

They didn't like English writer writing about India; it turned the stomach; delirium and fever somehow went with temples and snakes and perverse romance. English writer writing of England was what was nice: P.G. Woodhouse, Agatha Christie...Reading them you felt as if you were watching those movies in the air-conditioned British council in Calcutta. (Desai 199)

The Indians run at the back of western culture and neglect the Indian Culture which is unique. The Judge willingly tolerates Sai only because she is westernized. He accepts her not as his granddaughter but only for her fluency and flair for English. One common factor among almost all the characters is that their minds are colonized. The minds of the rich and the poor are equally colonized. They have high regards for foreign things, irrespective of their quality. A kind of unquestioned belief or blindness is to be found among the characters.

Should Adopting Alien Culture Accompany Hating One's Own?

Kiran Desai, with *The Inheritance of Loss*, challenges the dominance of the west. The novel gives a graphic account of westernization of Indian society in characters like Jemubhai Patel, a former judge, his teenaged granddaughter Sai and their cook, PannaLal, who live in a house in the north East Indian town Kalimpong, Biju, the cook's son, Gyan, Saeed, Haresh-Harvy and the two sisters, Lolita and Nonita. All these figures are the inheritors of loss, in terms of dislocation of place, wealth and progress. They are all transformed from their 'native' identity into something quite different, a 'Westernized native'. Caught between the two cultures, the characters are all haunted by the questions regarding their identity. Most of the characters in Desai's novel have their respective experiences, roles in which their identity comes in contact with other cultures which is foreign or alien to them and ultimately resulting in a strong negative reaction.

Biju is specifically the only character in the novel that questions the ideas of culture and ethnicity. His encounter with foreign culture is more positive than most of

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the other characters encounter in the novel. However Biju meets, at a restaurant, some Indian girls westernized in dress and speech, but still clinging onto their caste system. Biju gets disheartened and feels that he has lost his identity, belonging neither here nor there. Almost the entire novel is dark in its description of colliding cultures, but the last pages show a new side to the theme, when Biju returns home penniless and broken; Biju seems to have returned for the better and it is seen in Sai's feeling when she sees Biju, and his pitaji (father) 'leaping at each other' in joy. People's adaptation of western culture leads to their dissolution.

There's no harm in taking good things from the west, but this does not mean that one should completely adopt it and pretend to be western and misrepresent his or her identity. It is understandable that India is growing in every field and assimilating different cultures and their traditions. To some extent it is fine but one should not go to the extent of adopting the alien culture and hating one's own. One has to preserve his or her own identity bearing in mind an outsider's view of India as a land of rich cultural heritage.

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