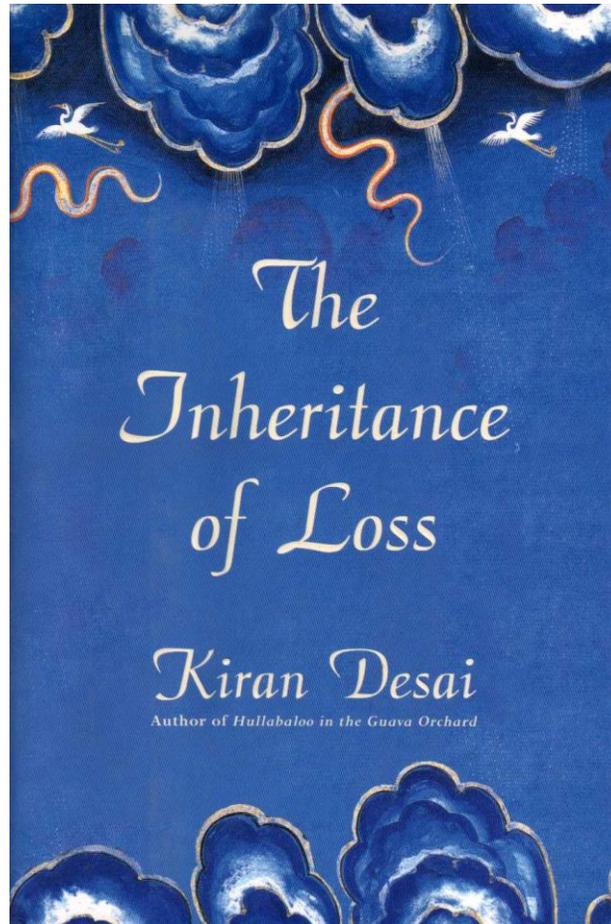


Cosmic - Multiculturalism in the Novel of Kiran Desai's
The Inheritance of Loss

K. Manisekaran



Abstract

Desai's second novel **The Inheritance of Loss** (2005), which won her the Man Bookers Prize in 2006, talks about her inheritance and the disinheritance that had come with world. It deals with a number of present-day problems such as economic inequality and poverty, fundamentalism and terrorist violence, but the major value is on mobility and migration, on dislocation and the subsequent loss of background, of history and of family. Changes that are brought out by craze for western values, manners, language and lifestyle: impact of modernization, pre-occupation and deep-rooted reaction to indigenous values which failed to

sustain life. The novel is set in Kalimpong situated at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga in the North Eastern part of India, which becomes vaporous because of religious and ethnicities struggle to defeat biased treatment by Indians to indigenous people whose culture is more like their neighboring Asians. Primarily, the story of *The Inheritance of Loss* is set in India in the year 1986, a period of great turmoil. From the outset it is clear that the country and the people are crying out for an identity of their own, fighting between themselves and claiming ground for their own existence, as a nation and as individuals.

Keywords: Kiran Desai, *Inheritance of Loss*, Cosmic - Multiculturalism, Ethnic, Modernization, identity, Ideology, Gorkhas, Xenophobia, Culture, Colonial, migrant, Racism, Other.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism has raised important questions about the status of minorities within the nation state. By asking whether different communities are treated as equals within the democratic polity. Multiculturalism has also shown that the presence of many cultures and communities is not enough. Within a democracy what is necessary is that difference must not be a source of discrimination. It must be admitted the existence accommodated and, above all, given an equal position within a democratic polity. However, this multicultural agenda of inter-group equality must be factored along with the concern for intra-group equality. Without the latter it may become a hindrance to, rather than a support for, the struggles for democracy. This is clearly indicated when the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), an actual political party seeks to empower West Bengal's ethnic Nepalis and once led a separatist uprising, the Gorkhaland Movement was established by Nepalese people to seek the establishment of an autonomous Nepalese state within India. This ethnic tension is still going on in the region till today where they are make troubled for a separate Gorkhaland.

The author is keenly aware that she lives and writes in a divided world—divided not only by nationalisms and colonialisms, but also by gender, class and ethnic affiliations. Trying to speak to and about multiple sectors of a global reading public spread across entrenched divides of ideology and identity is not easy. At the same time, for an immigrant writer, someone who lives in one place but writes about another, communicating across such divides is a risk well worth taking. All of these are presented by Desai as fully realized and ultimately frail human beings in recognizable search for love and happiness. Most of the time she merges cultural environments to create a complex and confusing setting for her characters. The characters in the book are in one way or another 'displaced'. They hold on to a questionable or mistaken identity and are unable to define themselves in another, more positive way. They feel inferior bounded and defeated by their Indian heritage; develop complexities which ruin their relationship. With a keen eye for telling detail and profound wisdom.

Three-Way Narrative Split

This novel presents us with a three-way narrative split, relating the stories of the sixteen-year-old Sai, her bitter grandfather and Biju, their cook's son, who tries to make his way as an illegal migrant worker in New York. This narrative split provides us with an interesting view point from which to view two very different sides of the same problem, as Biju's negotiation of his identity as an illegal immigrant in a foreign city is contrasted with the more complex situation

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:3 March 2018

Dr. T. Deivasigamani, Editor: *Indian Writing in English: A Subaltern Perspective*

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of Sai and her grandfather who find themselves as strangers in their homeland due to their education, language and wealth. On two opposite ends of the world, in two immensely discrepant modernities, these characters are at odds with their surroundings and effectually in similar positions of marginality and strangeness.

Undercurrent of Globalization

It's a good narrative with the undercurrent of globalization connecting India's Nepal border with New York City. In spite of being set in two completely different places the action is linked by the presence of the Judge's cook's son Biju as an illegal immigrant in New York, where he keeps moving as a cook from one third-rate restaurant to another, hoping somehow, to procure a green card and the consciousness of the fact that the Indo-Nepalis (or "Gorkhas") are tired of being treated like a minority in their own confinement where they are in majority. This is also remarked upon 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" (TIL 295). Biju is not a traveler who can produce to shuttle back and forth between his native country and the 'land of opportunity'. He also finds occasion to contemplate the differences in wealth between his home country and his host country.

American Dream as a Myth

Kiran Desai tries to unravel the myths about the American dream. That the Indians more than any other community in the world raves high about America is contemptibly brought out by the novelist in a couple of places through intimate dialogues. When Biju expresses his determination to leave the US after he was thoroughly disillusioned, Mr. Kakkar gives a piece of his mind. He says that Biju is making a big mistake by going to India, where he is going to be treated as a servant; according to him, America is always like a king and those who live in America are kingly whereas all others who are living on the other side of the planet are like servants to that king. In a very strong expression, Mr. Kakkar tells Biju, "America is in the process of buying up the world. Go back, you'll find they own the business" (TIL 269). That country (the US) has lots of room. It's this country (India) that is so crowded" (TIL 85). About the US, again and again the cook tells Mrs. Zen, "Best country in the world. All these people who went to England are now feeling sorry...." (TIL 85).

Life in Harlem

Packed into rat infested apartments in Harlem, Biju's life is a juggling act and not at all far from the poverty, which his father believed he has escaped. Unlike the class of Indians who now celebrated their economic success in America, people like Biju jump from one bad job to another, always staying just a half-step ahead of the INS., in despair for them, "Oh the green card, the green card, the ... On TV: A taxi driver appeared on the screen: watching bootleg copies of American movies he had been inspired to come to America" (TIL 99). Biju is baffled at nearly every turn, unable to master the sharp skills that have enabled other immigrants to get rich. When at last he flies home, Biju is immersed with nostalgia. By bringing Biju back to Kalimpong, Desai heightens the connection of New York City with India by devoting a large chunk of her text to Kalimpong's own narrative, particularly the story of the rise of the Gorkha movement. Desai shows us that negotiation of national identity, belonging, and commoditization

are not only features of multicultural formation in the capitalist centers of London or New York, but also in countries often considered on the boundary.

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. With global migrancy the new status quo, issues of belonging, national identity, and racism transcend national boundaries. Looking at the world through Desai's eyes, we see that it's not just those who have immigrated are affected by the West. In this picture, everyone is affected. The life of the immigrant may be rich, but part of Desai's literary exploration was also to examine the burdens that come with that richness. And it is the complications of colonization and immigration that Desai has explored in her book— complications that have received little focus. Exploring the hopes and aspirations of Sai and Biju, the hopes and expectations of their families, the novel creates vivid pictures of the friends and relatives who surround them, evoking vibrant images of a broad cross-section of society and revealing the social and political history of India (Sinha 2008: 141). With great tenderness and humor. In both places, New York and Kalimpong, Indians live similar lives, conflicted by class and nationality. Untouched by globalization and the prosperity it has brought into one class of Indians; people like the cook and Gyan find the vestiges of colonialism in their unchanging poverty, in the unbreachable power imbalance. With a narrative voice that sparkles with compassion at this imbalance, Desai leads the reader into the inner lives of the poor, within the country where they are born.

Reality and Relevance of Personal Journeys

When talking of the characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, and of her own life, she says, “The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys (of her grandparents) as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is that I wanted to capture. The fact that I live in this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance” (www.bbc.co). Jemu, Lola, Pixie, Noni, Biju, Cook, Sai, Gyan all generic characters, reflect the pain of transition. 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. Cosmic Multiculturalism can be seen as an ethno-political movement to built 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 gaps between individuals. In Desai we see multiculturalism as a separation, which is viewed as destructive, unavoidably leading their country to cultural struggle.

The unsolvable “aporia” (word appropriated by Jacques) for them is: how can we celebrate multicultural differences while keeping everyone together in a country? From this perspective, they believe that multiculturalism is to blame for ghettoizing minorities and impeding their integration into mainstream 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 a new world order.

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