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Reflection of Cultural Clashes in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

Kiran Desai's Man Booker Prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is interwoven from the threads of globally mingled cultures. The novel has issues of cultural hybridity, global multiculturalism, cultural clashes and the characters' efforts to cope up with these cultural differences. It links unusual geography of migration and diaspora, showcasing that just as globalization creates new social and economic gap, it also enables migrants to challenge ethnic and social barriers by forging cross-cultural connections. The present study explores the different cultural issues and trauma and sufferings of the characters as reflected in the novel.

Keywords

Multiculturalism; Identity; Cultural Conflict; Immigration; and Westernization.



Kiran Desai, as a modern international expatriate Indian novelist writes about the cultural hybridity of the postcolonial migrant and the deplorable condition of the individuals. Her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* set in 1980s, partly in Indian city Kalimpong of West Bengal and partly in New York with some flashbacks from England, takes on big themes such as colonial legacy, love and its limits and the conflict between native culture and western influences. It is a novel that tries to capture what it means to live between two worlds and two cultures and the problems faced by the people of a country where a Western element is introduced. The novel is about a retired judge, Jemubhai Patel, who lives a disillusioned and disenchanting life in Kalimpong, a hillside area in Himalayas, his westernized granddaughter Sai, Biju, an illegal immigrant, a Nepali insurgent Gyan, Lola, Noni and other characters. But it is actually the story of two characters, Biju who lives illegally in New York, and the judge who is residing in the mountains of India, and the conflict between the traditions of Indian way of life and shiny opulence of England and America. The paper tries to explore how the meeting of East and West Culture brings complications and sufferings in the lives of people.

Desai introduces her characters as they live their difficult lives in the background of the continuing fights. The clash between the two cultures of Hindus and Nepalese appears in the very beginning and it declares clearly that the violence and injustices are skilfully disguised under the false pretence of freedom and social welfare. Desai also describes how the incident of Nepali insurgency influenced behaviour of people against each other. Desai's characters carry colonial legacy deeply in them. It is reflected not only through the experiences of immigrants but also through the conflicting relationship between East and West. The characters remain trapped in their identity and as the time goes by they find out that they have completely lost their identity.

In the novel, Kiran Desai interweaves the inherent and fragmented stories of the victims of the pangs of the colonialism, in one way or the other,

yet she reveals these characters extolling the spirit of fighting back to the neo-colonialism and the shadow of colonialism still at task. She intricately interweaves the stories of different characters in the changing cultural worlds between Kalimpong, a small Indian town and New York, a capitalistic hub of the United States. From the very beginning, it is clear that the characters of the novel are fighting between two cultures for their own existence and their own identity, as a nation and as individuals. Desai attempts to handle the cause of suffering of the modern societies in the novel. Most of the time, she merges cultural environment to create a complex setting for her characters. They are torn between the dominance of Western influences and native civilization. Therefore, they are prone to a questionable identity.

Desai minutely paints the characters of Jemubhai and Biju who are the great admirers of Western culture. Jemubhai grows up under the colonial project and follows the British culture blindly. Biju, also fascinated by Western culture, goes to West in search of a good fortune but both the characters suffer cultural dilemmas which lead them towards isolation, nostalgia and identity crisis at the end. She portrays the dislocation, nostalgia and the longing for the identity of the Indian people through the character of Jemu and Biju. Jemubhai, living in Kalimpong in his house named Cho-Oyu, suffers too much because of cultural conflicts and even loses his identity in the West. He prefers to live his life with British culture that's why he is unable to get himself free from the manacles of traditional Gujarati and Indian mentality. As an offspring of colonial legacy, it seems that he believes in the superiority of white people to brown. He is a man who is caught between past and present and between native and foreign culture. He is treated like strangers by the people who do not belong to their own world and community. He cannot protest against the wrong image of his race and ethnicity that figures in the mind of the Europeans. The cultural conflict he feels gradually leads him retreat with himself. He works hard to prove his skill and occupy a identifiable place among

his classmates but he finds everywhere disgust and hatred by almost everyone in the novel. During his ICS examination too, he suffers much due to cultural clashes. He can impress one only through his pen and not his face and voice because he cannot change the image of people of Third World Countries that figures in the mind of the Europeans. The painful experience of cultural conflict ruins him for the rest of his life. He tries to deny his identity, his origin and it finally reflects in lifelong schism of identity. The consequences of his bad experiences in England have the degrading influence on the people around him. His pretension of a man of a very high standard causes him only troubles.

Not only Jemubhai suffers due to cultural differences in England, Biju, who dreams of Green Card and a happy life in America, is humiliated many times, as he is from the third world country. He also finds the same disgusting treatment in America. Everywhere he suffers due to the cultural difference of East and West. He confronts a struggle to achieve a stable identity but he always feels a cultural conflict which leads him to a wretched life. He is exploited by his Indian employee Harish-Harry and is even deprived of his basic rights as a worker because he stays in West illegally. As the judge Jemubhai wanders from door to door to rent a room, Biju finds no establishment in job, and if he gets, it is always humiliating and disgusting. He lives alone in alien country, separated from his family and he cannot visit them because he would not be able to return to USA again. Cultural conflict can be seen when Biju's father gives him advice to stay away from a Pakistani in New York "Beware, Beware. Keepn away. Distrust" (*The Inheritance of Loss* 143). Here Desai points out the hatred between Hindu and Muslim. Biju is fired many times and lives in a terrible condition. He cannot find a job as he is a part of "a shifting population of men camping out near the fuse box behind the boiler, in the cubby holes and in odd-shaped corners that once were pantries, maids' rooms, laundry rooms, and storage rooms" (*The Inheritance of Loss* 149). This situation describes Biju's inability to adopt to other culture and changing conditions.

Desai wants to point out the difference between America and England from the points of view of immigrants. While working in restaurant, when he sees Indians too eating steaks, Biju thinks scornfully, “One should not give up one’s religion, the principles of one’s parents and their parents before them” (*Inheritance of Loss* 158). In this cultural conflict, Biju decides to work there where beef is not cooked. Between the conflict between India and Biju’s struggle in New York, there is a strong narrative involving the self-constructedness notions of identity versus exterior constructions. Biju struggles to cope up with his Hindu belief of “holy cow, unholy cow” (*The Inheritance of Loss* 135). His inner conflict shapes his identity and forces him to do that work which does not conflict against his cultural and religious tradition.

The conflict between Sai and Gyan appears to be another example of cultural conflict in the novel. Sai, the granddaughter of Jemu, a young girl of sixteen and one of the important characters of the novel, is caught between the Westernized views and native culture while studying in Western school. She speaks English language, eats English food, celebrates western festivals and forgets her native Indian cultural value. That is why, Gyan, a descendant of Nepali Gorakha family, and a science graduate student and tutor of Sai, does not like her western ways of living as he believes only in Indian culture and hates westernized principles. The clash in their love relationship is seen when Sai invites him to celebrate Christmas and he gets irritated, “I am not interested in Christmas! Why do you celebrate Christmas? You are Hindus and you don’t celebrate Id, or Guru Nanak’s birthday or even Durga Puja or Dussehra or Tibetan New Year” (*The Inheritance of Loss* 163). Gyan starts even hating her, because of her adaptation of Western manner. The culture clashes between them become an obstacle in their love-relationship. Both even begin to hate each other because Sai also doesn’t change her mind from Western manners. She also resists becoming an anglophile who despises Indian Culture

like the Judge. This multicultural conflict between Sai and Gyan creates a gap in their relationship and causes them many troubles. Gyan is angry and he wants to be free from “that fussy pair, Sai and her grandfather with the fake English accent and the face powdered pink and white over dark brown” (*The Inheritance of Loss* 192). He blames them for his miserable life. Gyan’s inability of proving his own identity in society makes him to hatred towards all other cultures.

The cultural conflict can be seen in the relationship of the cook and Sai. They both spend plenty of time together but their social status is quite different. When cook’s hut is ransacked by the police in an accident Sai thinks about the thoughtless attitude of police. Desai aims to describe that all the people play certain roles in the society and the truth is that only by superiority over others they are able to identify themselves. When cook says, “My son works in New York. Very Big City....One day soon my son will take me” (*The Inheritance of Loss* 170). The conflict shows both the illusion created in Indians’ minds and their behaviour upon this. The cook feels connected with those whose children are in West. That makes him happy that they have something in common. The cook shows how big gap between the East and West can be. He has lost his love and association with his native culture as he feels regret for not being able to serve a white man like his father.

The Inheritance of Loss is an authentic study of human relationship bedevilled by exile and cultural encounters. Through the novel, Kiran Desai reveals her own situation of migrancy and alienation of from her native country. Through the characters, she gives how her own dual Indian American upbringing which results in desolation. The diasporic Indian writers have generally felt what it means to live between East and West. In fact we all are living amidst the fragmented world full of contradiction and have to perform according to different roles in our lives observes. Most of the people, today, assume a dual culture and dual identities. They are struggling between the

forces of modernity and tradition. Desai also presents a society where one's society keeps on changing day by day. Internal conflicts are complicated elements in the novel, exemplified through the characters such as Saeed. His attitude towards his religion illustrates how he manages to avoid the kinds of internal conflict that paralyze Biju.

The two Bengali sisters Noni and Lola are described as sycophants of Anglophile. They find the middle class distasteful and therefore lived a separated life. After returning from France and suffered from the encroachment of their land by GNLFF. They Rushed out, "This is our land...They shrugged, turned back and kept on working" (*The Inheritance of Loss* 240). Though Noni complains against it, her complaint has not been taken seriously and Pradhan mocks them as they are having the French name to their houses. Desai's characters represent contemporary multicultural conflicts. Lola holds an opinion that, "those Neps will be after an outsiders now but especially us Bongs" (*The Inheritance of Loss* 195). She further continues, "This state-making...biggest mistake that fool Nehru made. Under his rules any group of idiots can stand up demanding new state and get it too" (*The Inheritance of Loss* 196). Here, Desai describes various cultural groups who live close to each other and each of them has certain territorial and cultural requirements. Mrs. Sen another character of the novel thinks that the major cause of cultural conflict and violence in India is Pakistan. She says, "First heart attack to our country, no, that has never been healed" (*The Inheritance of Loss* 200). In Nimmi's story too, when she steals Jemubhai's powder puff, a beloved object he brings home from England, Desai emphasizes powder puff strict association with Britain because "there was no Gujarati word for this invention" (*The Inheritance of Loss* 184). She uses it as an example of how Western education creates a gap among Indians that reinforces of the position of colonizer in the West.

Another victim, who suffers cultural encounter, is Father Booty, the Swiss Christian who runs a milk dairy for his livelihood and helps in the development of the hills than any other locals. He does not want to return to his native, but he is compelled by Gorakhas to run away from thereby depriving his properties to a mere amount. They threaten him by saying, “I have arranged it and you have no choice. You are lucky to get what I am giving you. You are residing in this country unlawfully and you must sell or lose everything” (*The Inheritance of Loss* 222). The feeling of class and cultural differences plays a role in destroying the individual lives. The lives of the characters highlight how the simultaneous experience of local, colonial and the global creates ‘ambivalences’ in the individual’s perception of his/her identity. Apart from the Indian ‘majors’ and ‘foil’, Desai projects some minor American Desi characters like Odessa, Harish-Harry, Mrs. Shah and Mrs. Rice. Apart from these, there are three young Indian students, shifted to Biju’s neighbourhood in America who wished to be gentry one day. Their room reflected their mixed cultural tastes with gold stung Kolhapuri chappals and a chunky Ganesha with heavy accounting books.

The Inheritance of Loss not only reflects the conflict between Eastern civilization and Western culture but also pictures the very different ways of perception of the Eastern culture in West and the Western culture in East. These differences in perception have deep impact on the characters in the novel particularly on Judge who after encountering the Western culture despises himself as an Indian, and in search of a new identity clings to his native habits.

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