

“Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*: Elements of American Dream and Globalization.”

¹Mr.Chandramani, ²Mr. G. Bala Krushna Reddy.

¹Department of English, Gandhi Institute of Industrial Technology (GIIT), India.

²Department of English, Berhampur School of Engineering and Technology (BSET), India.

Abstract: Kiran Desai portrays a story which is thrillingly chaotic, pathetic and a life infused by the great American Dream and Globalization. This article aims to address the dismal sentiments and emotions of her mute immigrant characters that neither speak nor display their inner beings. She has attempted to present her heroic characters in a simplified way to achieve the basic goal of satiation. Their sufferings, pains, traumas and struggles in order to accomplish the desired facilities are worth appreciating. The article gives an insight into their sacrifices and dedication they render as to achieve their minimum wanting for a basic living. The paper also is designed to unravel the interior of the novel’s characters as entwined with expectations and dreams to achieve the material zenith. The novel concludes by showing the major character Jemubhai, who was an embodiment and a puppet of rigid English ideals, realizing his false ideals for which he sacrificed so much.

Keywords: American dream, chaotic, heroic characters, satiation.

I. Introduction:

Kiran Desai sky rocketed to fame after the publication of her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. Her novel focuses not on an individual’s story but on how several people make sense of themselves, view the world around them, and deal with the difficulties that they have with contradictions. “American Dream” is a term not much used for Desai’s novels, which tends to be dominated by other themes like post structuralism and hybridity theory. This term is less used by Desai in the novel because she feels that the readers can better understand the conflicts of identity the characters face. Many of the characters of Desai, in fact, do deal with “The Great American Dream” particularly well and prefer not to avoid challenges to the things they believe to be true. It resulted from globalization, economic disparity between nations, and consumer-driven multiculturalism.

Desai’s *Inheritance of Loss* depicts a cross-section of Indian society in characters such as Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, Panna Lal, Gyan, Biju, Saeed-Saeed, Sai Mistry, Haresh-Harry and the two sisters, Lolita and Nonita, to highlight how the simultaneous experience of the colonial, the global and the local, creates “ambivalence” in the individual’s perception of his/her identity and imparts behaviour in the local institutions of Kalimpong.

II. Thematic concern:

Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* abounds with themes that make it an interesting social reading. As Desai is an eminent immigrant writer, her themes are of human deprivation, trauma, identity and indifference. In her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* she tried to dive deep into the sea of human psychology and immortalise the literary work. She minutely discusses the issues without suggesting and stressing any particular issue. Though she has not given priority to any specific issue yet we find in her novels the issues of globalism and American dreams most prominently. The paradox of globalism is put forward in these following words by Desai:

...Each of them (Sai, Father Booty, and Uncle Potty) separately remembered how many evenings they’d spent like this... how unimaginable it was that it would soon come to an end. Here, Sai had learned how music, alcohol, and friendship could create a grand civilization....

Marjorie Kehe characterizes the novel as “a work full of colour and comedy, even as it challenges all to face the same heart-wrenching questions that haunt the immigrant: Who am I? Where do I belong?”^[1] Carmen Wickramagamage has recently argued that “most people envision relocation as a painful choice between assimilation (betrayal) and nativism (loyalty)” (194). Desai explores both sides of the issue and ultimately challenges the desirability of assimilation and the wisdom of maintaining difference, inhabiting the margins, and avoiding “full and unapologetic participation in the New World” (195).^[2]

Pankaj Mishra argued that “Desai takes a sceptical view of the West’s consumer-driven multiculturalism” and that the novel reveals an “invisible emotional reality” felt by “people fated to experience modern life as a continuous affront to their notions of order, dignity and justice.”^[3]

III. The Novel *The Inheritance of Loss*:

The Inheritance of Loss is set partly in India and partly in the USA. The regional settings in the novel are much relevant if we judge it from the cultural perspective. Desai describes it as a book that "tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant," and goes on to say that it also explores at a deeper level, "what happens when a Western element is introduced into a country that is not of the West"- which happened during the British colonial days in India, and is happening again "with India's new relationship with the States."

The Inheritance of Loss is set in the North-eastern Indian state of Kalimpong of the 1980s, the hot bed of communal politics within a nation-space that has evolved a conglomerate of discourses from a unique combination of "the old days of colonization and new age of globalization" (*The Inheritance of Loss*).^[4] The narrative captures the political milieu in which identities are negotiated through a continual collision of institutionalised national narrative with minority narratives as its "discontents."

Desai's novel suggests that the global call for melting borders that became the political statement of the Indian nation in the last quarter of the 20th century also created its reactionaries in the localised spaces of the land, and the contending forces generated narratives that challenged not the phenomenon of globalisation but the politics of exclusivity that invariably conditioned the country's vision of melting borders.

IV. Characters And Their Internal Conflicts:

Kiran Desai 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 this I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance."

Jemubhai Popatlal Patel is an Anglicised Gujarati Judge, who could neither assimilate into the cultures of his origin because of his desire to mimic the English colonial identity nor could he fully don the much coveted Western identity. His convent educated granddaughter, Sai Mistry, is his true heir in that she is a misfit in both the East and the West, and life at Kalimpong fills her with the fear of being left on the shelf. Their cook, Panna Lal, grudgingly works for the judge and waits to be liberated by his son, Biju, who, he believes, will make it big in America. However, Biju fails to become a successful immigrant worker in US restaurants and returns home to further disappointments in Kalimpong. Their lives are intertwined with that of Gyan, a Nepali tutor, whose love for modernity draws him to Sai but, he is restrained by his ethnic realities that remind him, time and again, that his life is one of missed opportunities.

Jemubhai Patel is the sad symbol of the debris of India's colonial history. The novel traces the process of the judge's displacement from centres of power to its ignominious periphery in a well-structured combination of stories from his past and the present experiences in India and England.

Though Desai allows her protagonist Sai to experience romance, friendship, trust and betrayal she empathies her a lot. Sai experience romance with a young tutor, who has conflicting loyalties to progressive thuggery and conservative decency. She learns to cope with compassion and rejection, and to comprehend the reasons for prejudice; she learns as well that to accept the prejudice she has come to comprehend a continuation of that prejudice.

Internal conflicts are complicated elements in the novel exemplified through the characters such as Saeed. He certainly thinks people have a choice. He strongly encourages Biju to change the way he thinks and to accept change. Sai seems to do likewise with Gyan, challenging him to recognize the contradictions in which he finds himself and not to see them as problems. She also resists becoming an anglophile who despises Indian culture like the judge, who also demonstrates a degree of agency, actively maintaining his staunch rigidity and suppressing his own potential for change. Saeed succeeds in New York precisely because differences do not bother him. His (Saeed's) attitude towards his religion illustrates how he manages to avoid the kinds of internal conflict that paralyze Biju. When explaining why he does not eat pork, Saeed tells Biju, "First I am Muslim, then I am Zanzibari, then I will be American" (*The Inheritance of Loss* 136).^[5]

V. Conclusion:

Globalization and Multi-Cultural Identities are taken as giant and vague concepts that are supposed to have meaning. Desai's concept of a new society rather the world is a messy arena for bigoted politics. The people have to compromise circumstances into fate as to fit the weird world. Thus, freedom to them is a luxury that is shared with a loss of certitude. Desai takes as her landscape the air of India rather than its ground soil. She tries to depict the essence of a state shadowing its descendants. Her grasp is on the inheritance India bestows. Thus the theme of rootedness or lack of it is entwined in the novel.

The crux of *Inheritance of Loss* lies in its exploration of the ambivalence that rules the national discourse about globalisation. Homi K. Bhabha's essay, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," explores this issue at length. Bhabha emphasises how the ambivalence between the pedagogy and performance of the narrative of Nation problematizes formation of social authority as it pertains

to a “people” who “represent the cutting edge between the totalising powers of the social and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and identities within population” (297).^[6] Desai contributes to debates about American Dream, Globalization and Identity in *The Inheritance of Loss* by advocating neither the preservation of cultural distinctiveness nor assimilation, but rather ambivalence and flexibility. She shows that the real issue facing post-colonial and immigrant people are not whether they should assimilate but how clinging to cultural certitude leads to disaster. Thus, we get patches of globalization and American dream as the characters mature in the novel.

References:

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