

الأزمات الثقافية والاجتماعية في رواية ميراث الخسارة

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المخلص

يستعرض هذا البحث موضوع الهوية الثقافية في رواية ميراث الخسارة لكيران ديساي. في هذا العمل، تؤثر هويات الشخصيات وتتأثر بالعوامل والخلفيات الاجتماعية والثقافية والسياسية والاقتصادية. كما يتتبع هذا البحث كيف تعود بنا رواية ميراث الخسارة إلى فترة ما بعد الاستعمار في الهند، حينما أُجبرَ الأفراد على الخوض في أماكن غريبة وجديدة سعياً منهم لإيجاد معنى وتعريف لحيواتهم. على أي حال، تظهر لنا الكاتبة عدم نجاحهم في تحقيق هذا المسعى. علاوةً على ذلك، فإنه سواءً في وطنهم الأم أو خارج حدوده، من المقدّر لهؤلاء الأفراد ألا يحصدوا سوى الخسارة. يصوّر هذا البحث تفاصيل حياة المهاجرين التي لا تعرّفها سوى الصراعات والصعوبات والأزمات والخسارة. ثم يتابع البحث مناقشة ما يرثه الأفراد حقاً عبر الأجيال. أخيراً، فإنّ العمل يؤكد على أنّ ما ترثه الأجيال عبر الزمن ليس سوى الخسارة والتشتت والضياع

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية، الهجرة، الخسارة، التفوق والدونية، الطبقات الاجتماعية،

أراضي الموطن والمهجر.

Cultural and Social Dilemmas in Kiran Desai's

The Inheritance of Loss

Abstract

This paper explores the theme of cultural identity in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. Characters' identities in this novel affect and are affected by the social, cultural, political and economic backgrounds in which they are introduced. This research tackles how *The Inheritance of Loss* takes us back to a postcolonial India whose individuals throw themselves into strange places seeking a meaning for their lives. However, Kiran Desai shows how such meaning is never earned. The paper also shows that whether in homelands or abroad, characters are never destined to reach or gain anything but loss. Moreover, it depicts the details of the immigrants' lives whose defining terms are only those of struggling, harshness, discrimination and other postcolonial dilemmas. Then the paper goes on discussing what is actually inherited through those generations. The novel shows that heritages of loss, fragmentation, inferiority and crisis poignantly pass through generations.

Key words: Identity, Immigration, Loss, Superiority, Inferiority, Social Classes, Home and Host Lands.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* introduces us to a story that shifts in place between India and New York. The author presents the struggle of her novel's main characters, showing the issues that led to this struggle and the consequences that followed it. *The Inheritance of Loss* is about the loss of identities, cultures, defined relations and real values with the related themes of the postcolonial dilemmas. The story, told from the Indian side, is set at the 1980s in the Himalayan region and covering the political events of that period; while the American part of the novel uncovers the invisible uncivilized world which immigrants live through. Through this juxtaposition and moving between these two worlds, Desai uncovers the human difficulties and identity dilemmas that these characters experience. From the beginning of *The Inheritance of Loss* we are introduced to Sai, a teenager who lives with her grandfather, the judge. The judge is also a central character in the novel. Throughout the novel we come to know a lot about his past and how it affected the way of his life. Also, a

cook lives in a cottage near the judge's house. He has spent a long time living with the judge and taking care of him. On the other hand, Desai depicts Biju's, the cook's son, current suffering in America and, on the other side, the recalling of the judge's memories in Britain over 47 years before. Through this way of narrating, Desai explores a prolonged history of the suffering of the individuals who are always believed to be 'inferior' to whatever they are in front of. Eventually, it is not only an issue of the judge and the young man; it is the issue of remaining a 'colonized' figure even after ages of the end of the colonial period.

A great deal of discussing the theme of identity in a postcolonial work such as *The Inheritance of Loss* should depend on how the characters grasp and understand their own existence. As mentioned above, people from the Third World countries believe in their inferiority. The *position* from which they look at themselves is a position of weakness and uncivility. Furthermore,

while the Indian immigrants are seeking to get the Green Card in America, they desperately try to convince the American authorities how *civilized* they have become after their being in America. In this process, and while Biju is proposing for the Green Card; he performs before telling the employees there: “I’m civilized, sir, ready for the U.S., I’m civilized, mam.” (183). However, in order to be accepted by the West, they accept to be humiliated and discriminated, “In this room it was a fact accepted by all that Indians were willing to undergo any kind of humiliation to get into the States.” (184). Moreover, Indian immigrants who ‘accept humiliation’ begin to believe that they are superior over their own people who are still in India. They refer to their native people using the terms ‘black’ and ‘they’: “Black people, living like monkeys in the trees, not like us, so civilized [...]” (185). This “us” is uttered by an Indian immigrant, a *black* person who now describes the black people as uncivilized and primitive. These double-standard perspectives have no clear basis: Are they the

outcomes of immigration? Are they a reaction towards receiving humiliation at the first place? Or are they a previous sense of self-hatred which reveals itself only abroad?

One of the portrayals of the postcolonial identities in *The Inheritance of Loss* is the character of Sai. Sai is shown to be affected by the colonial ideologies even though she has never been under the colonial system. After the death of her parents by a harsh accident in Russia, Sai moves to live with her grandfather whom she has never known before. The inheritance of loss presented in this character is the loss of values and roots. Sai has no connection to her mother culture and always adopts the Western lifestyle. What is really special concerning this character is the ways she reflects her attachment to the Western life and detachment from the Indian life. Sai's adoption of the Western values appears in her ways of acting, thinking, speaking and even celebrating. The colonial and postcolonial effects on the characters' identities are present in Sai. Her mimicry of the

Western values and manners are most poignant than any other character since she has never been to Europe or America. The western values are imposed on her without a direct contact with Western people or customs. Furthermore, Desai skillfully portrays how Eurocentrism keeps dominating the lives of the characters of her novel. These characters believe that European standards are a privilege over any other culture. Concerning Sai, her Eurocentric ideas appear in the ways she prefers to behave, the kinds of food she likes and the events she tends to celebrate. A good example on this point is when Sai, the Indian girl who has spent her childhood in India, was asked by her grandfather to make tea. She simply says that she only knows how to make *British tea* and never knows how it is prepared in the Indian way.

Throughout the novel; Sai and Gyan, her physics teacher, develop a romantic relationship as they show admiration to each other since the first time they had met. The perspective of social classes gets deeply into the beliefs of people and affects the

details of their life. When Gyan asks about Sai's family, she knows that if she told him about her parents' space program, he would feel inferior to her and ashamed of himself. Such a perspective comes from Sai's knowledge of Gyan being a Nepali, the thing he feels proud of. However, and throughout the novel we see how Gyan himself begins feeling *inferior* and *ashamed*.

Moreover, the sense of being inferior keeps haunting every detail related to presenting any individual who once has been under the colonial system. This is actually what Stuart Hall argues through analyzing the colonial and postcolonial experiences. He states that "They had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as 'Other'" (225). Inferiority is depicted as a sense related not only to race, nation, color, beliefs, nature or place; but also these characters consider their bodies as 'uncivilized'. Describing the judge's feeling after his return from Britain, Desai writes: "he felt his digestion work as super efficient as—as *Western transportation*" (167). According to Hall, this is how the "traumatic

character of ‘the colonial experience’” (225) positions itself. This is also how these characters are actually positioned: “But profit could only be harvested in the gap between nations, working one against the other. They were damning the third world to being a third-world. They were forcing Bose and his son into an inferior position.” (205).

Biju, the cook’s son, is an illegal immigrant who has immigrated to America dreaming of a luxurious life and a great hospitality. However, through the progress of the novel, we come to see how all Biju’s dreams have been shattered. Desai skillfully shows how people who immigrated to Europe or America got lost within the process of trying to get acceptance in the new country. The judge went to Britain in his youth and struggled to get acceptance in Cambridge University. He was raised under the colonial period in India which has completely affected his personality. When he was in Britain, the judge tried to imitate the Western way of life to a degree that he no longer admits or likes

his native culture. The judge represents the status of being lost, the loss of identity. He can never be admitted of or recognized as a British man. On the other hand, when he tries to go back to his homeland; he finds great difficulties to be reacquainted with his native culture and people because he has already gone too far. However, this production of the self is never a complete form of identity because it belongs to neither of the cultures. It is neither Western nor Indian, it is lost in between.

Through the judge's recalling of memories, the author shows in details the difficulties he had faced in Britain and the identity crisis he lived. The judge has been impressed by the Western lifestyle so he tries to imitate the British people in almost everything. On the other hand, he disdains his native culture and people, always tries to speak, wear, eat and behave like the British people. Despite all his efforts, he is not recognized by the British people, he experiences humiliation and discrimination. Moreover, he even humiliates *himself* when he fails to do

something exactly like the Western people. When he first arrives to Britain he feels ashamed of eating in front of other people “[...] given that he couldn’t eat with knife and fork.” (38). In order to avoid being embarrassed in front of the British people, Desai portrays how the judge and his friend, Bose, avoid walking in streets where they might meet a British person. They try to follow the ‘British standards’ to the extent they even avoid reading books about anything but the British. They are keen on reading books about the history of Western art and philosophy. The judge is always concerned with “keeping up standards”, hiding his personality behind a mask so he can glove his embarrassment.

Similarly, Biju as an illegal immigrant, experiences all the outcomes of immigration. He endures loneliness, issues of humiliation and racial segregation; he also struggles to get a place to live in and faces the difficulties of attaining even a very low paid job. Typically, as a young guy seeking to work in the kitchen basements in New York City and repeatedly shifting places of

works; Biju is abused by his bosses and his daily routine becomes that of receiving comments of discrimination because of his color, his accent and his nationality. On the other hand, the cook is unaware of all these contradictions that his son is fated to face. The former seems proud among his mates, boasting about the fact that his son works at an English restaurant and cooks for the English people; he “was sure that since his son was cooking English food, he had a higher position than if he were cooking Indian.” (17). The cook’s perspective of what his son might be achieving in America comes from his ignorance of what Biju is really suffering. Biju does nothing in America but, despite cooking American food, losing the very little belongings he has. His life becomes an empty space where he keeps roaming in meaningless circles that displace him from any real perspective of life. These circles are evacuated of any meaningful form of human relations, void of family and friends and full in all kinds of misery and anguish:

And yet, another part of him had expanded: his self-consciousness, his self-pity—oh the tediousness of it [...] Shouldn't he return to a life where he might slice his own importance, to where he might relinquish this overrated control over his own destiny and perhaps be subtracted from its determination altogether? He might even experience that greatest luxury of not noticing himself at all. And if he continued on here? What would happen? Would he, like Harish-Harry, manufacture a fake version of himself and using what he had created as clues, understand himself backward? Life was not about life for him anymore, and death—what would even that mean to him? It would have nothing to do with death. (268).

A good parallel could be established here in the match between the judge's and Biju's experiences of alienation as an example (bearing in mind the temporal difference between their experiences). As mentioned above, the judge's reaction towards the inferiority he felt in Britain makes him tend to imitate the Western lifestyle. However, while feeling ashamed of every detail in his personality, the judge throws away his native customs, feels the hatred and rage towards his own people and culture. His journey has affected each detail of his personal life. His native people, neighbors and family become strangers with whom he no longer feels any ties. Upon his return to India, his wife seems to

him an unbearable and uncomfortable figure whose existence is nothing but a burden: "What would he do with her? He had forgotten he had a wife. Well, he knew, of course, but she had drifted away like everything in his past, a series of facts that no longer had relevance." (166). Moreover, and as a result of his attempts to imitate the West; the judge brings to India some stuffs that he thought they would grant him a privilege over his people. For example, he carries with him a hairbrush and a skin powder that nobody in his village could understand what these products are used for.

However, what sounds special about the character of Biju is that he is aware of the fragmentations around him. He never claims having a perfect life in America. Aware of his loss, he never believes that returning to India would be something that has the magical effect to make him recollect himself again. On the other hand, Biju is aware that his father considers immigration to the West as a "heroic act" (299). The cook is ignorant about the

fact that his son has been changing jobs daily, dismissed by his employers and getting humiliated for being an illegal immigrant without any successful attempt to have the green card. Biju is aware that his life is void of any considerable value; he fears to become one of “those who lived and died illegal in America and never saw their families, not for ten years, twenty, thirty, never again.” (99). However, there is a passage in which Desai literally summarizes the immigrants’ suffering at strange places:

The green card the green card. The.... Without it he couldn’t leave. To leave he wanted a green card. This was the absurdity. How he desired the triumphant After The Green Card Return Home, thirsted for it—to be able to buy a ticket with the air of someone who could return if he wished, or not, if he didn’t wish.... He watched the legalized foreigners with envy as they shopped at discount baggage stores for the miraculous, expandable third-world suitcase [...] the whole structure unfolding into a giant space that could fit in enough to set up an entire life in another country. (99).

The title motivates us, as readers, to ask which loss *The Inheritance of Loss* is meant to be about. The novel is mainly about the loss of identity and definition. Each one of the characters has something to lose, a loss of money, love, safety,

dreams, illusions and a loss of a lifetime.. Wherever there is a character in this novel, there is a great loss roaming around it. Sai has lost her parents in a tragic accident and then moved to live with her grandfather who in his turn represents one of the most fractured identities in the novel. On the other hand, Sai's loss is a loss of values, relatedness, definition and roots. Sai's estrangement lays in her lack of knowledge about her roots. From the beginning of the novel, Sai is presented as a lonely character who has no friends or family relations. Moreover, Sai's loss of emotions is apparent throughout the novel. While spending most of her childhood in the convent, Sai loses her emotional connection to the people around her. This appears later when she gets involved in a love relationship with Gyan. Sai spends much of their relation swaying among contradicted feelings of anger and disgust of Gyan's manners which are different from hers. The admiration and love that she had towards him at the beginning of their relation starts to vanish as they have to face the differences

between their lifestyles: “Any sense that Sai was taught had fallen between the contradictions, and the contradictions themselves had been absorbed” (30).

Concerning the concept of loss in the novel, we can come across many other figures that are actual applying of this theme. For example, from the beginning of the novel, the reader may question the significance of Mutt, the judge's dog. Mutt is excessively present at almost every scene in which the judge is mentioned. Through his long sittings on his veranda, his breakfasts, lunches and dinners; Mutt is always there sharing him almost every moment. In spite of the great love and care he surrounds Mutt with, the author deprives the judge from his beloved dog. Mutt is stolen by a poor man and his daughter-in-law. They intend to sell the dog since they know how ‘expensive’ she is. Poignantly, Desai depicts the judge's discovery of Mutt's disappearance and how he moves sightlessly searching for her. He roams all the mountainside asking every single person in the

village about her. However, the judge has never shown such grievance before. He keeps shouting for her, repeating the words he used to use with her, crying without minding of the people mocking him. The loss is not new for the judge; but every loss he faces seems to be another burden collected upon each previous loss just to torn this man more than he is, already, torn. The judge's loss of Mutt is not the first loss he faces. Towards the last pages of the novel, he lays in a tragic scene, drunk, bursting into tears, calling her name and facing his last loss as he has never faced one before.

Immigrants, regardless of their nationalities, their home or host lands, experience an endless suffering which produces nothing but loss. This suffering never gets erased by returning to their homelands. We see how the judge lives a serious dilemma while being in the West. The dilemma causes a loss of identity, an identity that can never feel secure and complete again. Even though, people keep repeating the immigration experiences,

repeating histories of humiliation: “Again they lost. Again they would lose.” (205).

Moreover, Biju is a painful example of the immigrant who is moving from one loss to another, from the fruitless attempts to get the green card passing into days full of countless examples of degradation. His identity is still shattered until the very last moment of the novel when he returns to India and meets his father. However, when Biju decides to leave America and go back to India, he returns void of everything but his loss. Biju’s loss is a loss of money, dreams and illusions. All his dreams, as well as his father’s, get shattered by the harshness he faces throughout his immigration. Biju’s experience of alienation leaves him fragmented without a drop of knowledge of even where he has been or what he has done; “Here he was, on his way home, without name or knowledge of the American president, without the name of the river on whose bank he had lingered, without even hearing about any of the tourist sights.” (286). The cook, terribly beaten by the

judge who considers him responsible of Mutt's disappearance, opens the door for a young man who is void from everything but his misery. Through his way back to the judge's house, Biju is encountered by robbers who take his money, luggage and clothes. The scene in which Biju meets his blooded father is dramatic. Both of them gained nothing but an accumulation of loss and misfortune.

On the other hand, the loss presented in Sai's character is a loss of roots, or as Gyan once describes it: "lack of Indianness" (176). In this context, Desai discusses the concepts of India and of *Indianness*. She questions the idea of India's independence through the character of Gyan. When he reads stories about how Indian citizens had demanded the British to leave, he thinks of "India for Indians' [...] If a nation had such a climax in its history, its heart, would it not hunger for it again?" (158). Desai puts in front of us a comparison of what is each character's conception about India. For example, India in the judge's perspective is

something that only existed in the past. There is no scene of the judge's current life in which he comes to this idea. India (and most specially, Piphit) is something that exists only in his memories. When he was still a student in Britain, the judge once reads a book in which he comes across some passages about India where he seems uncertain: "What on earth was all of this? It had nothing to do with what he remembered of his home, of the Patels and their life in the Patel warren, and yet, when he unfolded the map, he found Piphit. There it was." (110). However, after he returns to India, and as a Westernized man who disdains his country and people, the judge considers that "India was too messy for justice" (264), and that is why he finally retired. Desai criticizes the fakeness which people live in the postcolonial period. As for the Nepali people who claim for an independent state, Desai mocks how they demand for schools to teach Nepali, and they have written their demands in English; "Why are they writing in English if they want to have Nepali taught in schools?" (247).

She also comes across the concept of “meaning” by discussing how the postcolonial situation is void from any meaningful understanding of the self and of others as well. Characters have found no result of what their country could mean for them: “What was India to these people? How many lived in the fake versions of their countries, in fake versions of other people’s countries?” (267).

Particularly, what the characters *inherit* in this novel can be discussed on many levels. It is the misfortune which has been “shared with others over many generations” (242). It is a history of contradictions that they have shared and inherited. Contradictions that have grown to a degree that they became what define life. Their lives never represent any clarity of meaning; as Desai writes: “Every single contradiction history or opportunity might make available to them, every contradiction they were heir to, they desired. But only as much, of course, as they desired purity and a lack of contradiction.” (259).

Finally, *The Inheritance of Loss* tells us the destiny of those individuals whose choices have thrown them in an another world. This world defines them as nothing but ‘immigrants’. Their identities are never distinguished as doctors, engineers, cooks, judges or workers; they are nothing more than what this place sees them as. On the other hand, their other choice of going back to their homelands is another burden which they have to carry. Characters, as a result to what they have been through, begin to disdain or express hatred and shame towards their own memories and history. Furthermore, their own past becomes a spot of shame which they avoid talking or even thinking about. This notion has been discussed by Fanon as he states: "Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it." (Fanon, 2004: 170). Therefore, characters no longer consider their past as a source of relatedness, roots or knowledge, rather; it is merely a source of shame and distorted versions of identities

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