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Research Article:

Dismantling the Metanarratives of the Postcolonial World:

A Study of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

*Najila T.Y.*

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## Dismantling the Metanarratives of the Postcolonial World:

### A Study of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Kiran Desai's in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* explores the various nuanced existences that are the legacy of colonialism. Set in the times of the Gorkha insurgency, the novel examines the problematic existence of the characters situated on diverse points on the spatial and temporal axis altered irreversibly by colonial contact. The novel showcases an array characters that exemplify the various figures of colonial resistance in narrative alternates between the pristine remote village of Kalimpong and the most urban New York. It also alternates between the colonial past and the present. In this study, I propose to analyse Kiran Desai's novel to refute the possibility of eradicating nationalist affiliations entirely for the establishment of a homogenous cosmopolitan world order.

Three narrative threads run parallel interrupted by each other throughout the novel. One unveils the formative years of Jemubhai as he struggles to make the most of an education his father had paid dearly for. The other two set in the 80's trace the lives of Sai and Biju in a remote village in the periphery and the most representative of metropolises, respectively. While Jemubhai's encounter with colonialism left him soul-less, Sai and Biju live in the aftermath.

#### **Colonization**

Jemubhai is the quintessential colonised native who has willingly and painstakingly imbibed the culture and habits of the colonial master to a total reprobation of his native identity. Born to a father who served at the lowest rung in court, he rose to occupy the highest seat of justice. But the journey to the top was certainly not rosy for Jemu. The entire resources of his family were directed to manufacturing a native colonial master. After all, his father had reasoned, why aim

for mediocre when you can reach the very top. Jemu shared his father's enthusiasm for the plan; the execution however did not prove to be a piece of cake. Jemu was on his way to step into the shoes of the master. He was embarrassed of his "lump of pickle wrapped in a bundle of puris; onions, green chillies and salt in a twist of newspaper" (Desai 37). He threw the fruits of his mother's labour of love overboard. "Undignified love, Indian love, stinking, unaesthetic love – the monsters of the ocean could have what she had so bravely packed getting up in the predawn mush" (Desai 38). This was the beginning of his lifelong endeavour to become English and reject anything and everything Indian. Little did he realise that striking his roots, with very little to fall back on, could cost him his self.

Jemubhai voluntarily even enthusiastically lent himself to colonial inscription resulting in the creation of a mimic man who was easily a member of Macaulay's "class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, opinions, in morals and in intellect," but the reproduction by mimicry results in "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 86). "The smell of dying bananas retreated, oh, but that just left the stink of fear and loneliness perfectly exposed" (Desai 38). Jemubhai felt alienated in the land of the Whites and was ashamed of everything about his self. He immersed himself in his studies, the one thing he could do well here or at home. He withdrew into himself so much so that there was no instance of any social interaction. He preferred the shadow to light as it wouldn't give away the odd colour of his skin. He found that even the most repulsive of the English ladies found him disgusting. The prettier ones complained that he smelled of curry. He scrubbed obsessively to rid himself of the offensive stench. He lost his soul in the process of getting anglicized.

Barely clearing the ICS, Jemubhai stepped into the shoes of authority. The colonial drama was enacted all over again with Jemu attended on by Brahmin stenographers and orderlies. He revelled in the position of power giving him the opportunity to reverse the power equations accorded by the caste systems of old. Jemu was so absorbed in his English image that he could not even love his wife as "an Indian girl could never be as beautiful an English one" (Desai 168). The alienated inauthentic self of the colonized native evident in Jemu was anything but hybridised. What we see is unabashed hypocrisy. The pretence he kept up to command respect, dignity and power. Though mimicry here has played out in colonial writing, it has not resulted in any potential insurgency. It is a mockery of colonization as a process but Jemubhai partook from it the authority of the master to oppress those below him.

Jemu envied the English and loathed Indians. We see a continuation of this legacy in Biju who has no direct experience with colonialism. “[Biju] found that he possessed an awe of white people, who arguably had done India great harm, and a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India” (Desai 77).

### **Anglophiles**

The North-Eastern village of Kalimpong has a population that is culturally diverse. The novel focuses mostly on the upper strata of society living out their careful English lives. Sai is emotionally detached from her grandfather, but has some relief in the cook who treats her with tender care. Sai, as a result of her convent upbringing, fits into the judge’s household comfortably. The circle of friends Sai moves around is a group of likeminded anglophiles. Lola and Noni whiled away their time in the romanticized natural setting of the hill-station oblivious to the growing dissatisfaction and unrest around them.

Even the cook who has no claims to the upper class despises Indianness. His father was a pudding chef for the English and he considers it a letdown for him to be cooking for anyone other than a white man. He is proud of his son’s immigrant status and hopes to join him some day. His “connection” to the west is a matter of pride and reason enough to hold on to his anglophile ways.

Food plays a significant role in the novel. As already discussed, Jemubhai’s rejection of stinking, unaesthetic Indian food is the starting point of his rejection of everything Indian. On the ship to England, Jemu contemplates the humiliation he could face for not knowing how to dine with knife and fork. His later dexterity with the instruments, however, testifies to his faithful determination to master the European ways of living. The pickles, puris, onions and green chillies are replaced by boiled egg, bread, butter, jam and milk. Long past the exit of the colonial masters, Jemu remains faithful to their ways dining on roast meats, queen cakes and scones rather than roti or curry. Lola and Noni stocks up their pantry with Marmite, Oxo Bouillon cubes, Knorr soup packets and Ovaltine. They do eventually pay the price of dining on “tinned ham rolls in a rice and dal country” (Desai 242). Tiffin’s commentary is relevant in this context:

Post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridised, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity. Decolonisation is

process, not arrival; it invokes an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them; between European or British discourses and their post-colonial dis/mantling. (95)

Sai, Lola, Noni, Father Booty and Jemubhai inhabit the centre that is soon to be subverted. The Gorkhas, the fringe of society long denied their due, form the periphery bent on subverting the system and setting things right.

The books they read conform to their lifestyle. Lola, Noni, Sai and Father Booty keep their pretence of civilization intact with a range of English books for recreational purposes. National Geographic, Anthony Trollope, Agatha Christie and Emily Bronte, all find favour with them. Interestingly Sai had picked *Wuthering Heights* to read while her relationship with Gyan was on the rocks.

### **“Rule of Nature”**

The Gorkha insurgency gathers momentum as a rude shock to the community of anglophiles living out the good life on the hill-side. The Gorkhas, a community that was oppressed by their Bengali masters revolt on their newly found rage that has been distilled from an agonising past of oppression. They were victims of double colonisation who were denied subject status and treated as a subaltern class. The nationalist movement for the establishment of a land for Gorkhas mirrors India's struggle for nationhood. The template is the same; the oppressed against the oppressors. The oppression was part of history now; but the aftermath sparked the revolution.

Given the brutality and denial of the colonial experience, an attempt at a radical dismantling of European codes is only natural. A “demand for an entirely new or wholly recovered ‘reality’, free of all colonial taint” has perpetually been the concern of postcolonial literatures, postcolonial purity can never be wholly regained (Tiffin 95). The Gorkha insurgency plays out in microcosm the postcolonial subversive discourse that is operating on a global scale:

It suddenly became clear why he had no money and no real job had come his way, why he couldn't fly to college in America, why he was ashamed to let anyone see his home.

Now, the repeated revisiting of the past rendered the hate purer than ever. The grief was a thing of the past and what remained was rage; pure distilled fury. (160-61).

This may be described as the working out of the “rule of nature” mooted by Odessa of the restaurant Brigitte’s in New York’s financial district. It was her theory of how historical scores were settled.

Imbibing the masculine atmosphere of the insurgency, Gyan feels ashamed of the tender moments he shared with Sai. Moreover, he sees in her sanitized existence detached from the surroundings a perfect foil to the plight of the Gorkhas. She becomes the immediate object of his fury; a tangible target. He accuses her of shamelessly imitating the English and keeping alive their legacy long since they have left: “You are like slaves [...] running after the West, embarrassing yourself” (163).

The altercation between Gyan and Sai turns out to be the site where the personal and the public intersect. The metanarrative of revolution threatens the personal joys of Sai. Sai is disillusioned by Gyan’s accusations. She does think of why she was the way she was, but finds no clear answer.

### **Hyphenated Identities**

Globalization has rendered borders more porous than ever before. While forced labour was the reason for immigration in the past, the quest for a better life urges people to cross borders in the present. Diaspora in the different time-points down the lane has experienced migration differently. The dilemma of the exile manifests in the narrative caught between a de-territorialization and a re-territorialization (Nayar 189).

Harish-Harry, Gaurish-Gary and Dhansukh-Danny have names that reflect their hyphenated existence; the former part of their names representing their “original” culture and the latter, their acquired one. Desai hints at the unfinalizability of transculturation in describing an immigrant’s “very Indian-trying-to-be-American accent” (137). Desai describes them as the “haalf ‘n’ haf” crowd. These specimens of diaspora exhibit cultures produced by ongoing histories of migrations and transnational cultural flows (Clifford 7). The newer generations do not languish in some imaginary homeland informing their culture.

Assimilation and acculturation are phenomena essential to truly blend into the host country. An Indian restaurant owner’s disavowal of his Indian roots by denying to be a Gujarati is another step towards this. “It was horrible what happened to Indians abroad and nobody knew but other Indians abroad. It was a dirty little rodent secret” (138). Harish-Harry’s attempts at assimilation stop at their

names. He clung onto traces of home in the form religious practices. His daughter found nose ring to be compatible with combat boots and clothes in camouflage print from the army-navy surplus. The process of acculturation results in a clash in the family ideals. Other well-to-do subjects choose to employ their "exotic" sides to woo white partners. Desai mocks the ineptitude of the Indians exhibiting their masculinity by polishing off extremely spicy food to show off their exoticism.

### Shadow Class

The problem of spatial "ordering" that occurs when de-territorialization is not followed by re-territorialization is reflected in the plight of the illegal immigrants. Desai describes them as the "shadow class condemned to movement" (102). They are the unfortunate lot who fled a nation but have not gained one (Nayar 190). Their social identity is defined by their invisibility, constantly on the run dodging the authorities.

The question of immigration becomes a conundrum offering a share of a modern existence of worldly wealth but not quite delivering. Kiran Desai in an interview to Boyd Tonkin speaks of feeling more Indian in America. Diasporic experience intensifies nationalist feelings. The various nationals living it out in the basements of New York have a conflated sense of their national identities. Biju's tiffs with the Pakis are a result of his Indian sensibility.

Biju lives life just like the other illegal immigrants from the south and east of the world. His originary identity apart, he now identifies himself with global diaspora of illegal immigrants that consists of natives from all over the third world. His conditioning from home makes him averse to blacks and Pakis. As discussed earlier, Biju is in awe of the whites while he despises others who have done him no wrong. All his prejudices are rendered baseless and he identifies himself with shadow class. He develops a warm relationship with Saeed Saeed only to realise that they were condemned to movement and could not afford the luxury of friendship.

In his desperate struggle to survive, Biju works in restaurants searing beef although he can never put it out of his mind that what he was doing amounted to sacrilege. However, he finally decides to hold on to his rituals and beliefs taking the cue from Saeed Saeed:

Biju thought of Saeed Saeed who still refused to eat a pig, "They dirty, man, they messy. *First* I am Muslim, then I am Zanzibari, *then* I will BE American." Once he'd shown Biju his new purchase of a model of a

mosque with a quartz clock set into the bottom that was programmed, at the five correct hours, to start agitating: "*Allah hu Akbar, la ilhaha illallah, wal lah hu akbar. [...]*" Through the crackle of the tape from the top of the minaret came ancient sand-weathered words [...] (142)

The world after colonialism is supposed to be veering towards cosmopolitanism. With liberalisation and globalisation, the interaction between nations have increased manifold. But, just as the material effects of colonialism is more overt than the consequences on the perceptual framework of subjects, the globalised world exhibits its trophies of economic success while blurring the reality of social inequality that crops up in its wake.

*The Inheritance of Loss* depicts New York as a socially layered society where migrants fit in partially and provincially (Concilio 2010), the underlying inequality is never evened out. Desai voices the idea of neo-colonialism when she makes Bose say that "Goras- get away with everything...now they can just do their dirty work from far away" (206).

Even in this 'dramatically shrunken global village', majority wish to stay put rather than migrate:

Of those who do migrate, most are never fully accepted in their new locations, many cling to their old nationalities either out of an ineradicable emotional affiliation or because a new nationality turns out to be hardly the easiest thing to acquire, and many end up as refugees, as people without papers, identity, and community. (Trivedi xxiii)

Biju realises painfully that "it WAS so hard and YET there were so many here. It was terribly, terribly hard. Millions risked death, were humiliated, hated, lost their families—YET there were so many here" (Desai 196).

All experiences of migration is marked by loss which enlists desire. Biju coveted anything that hinted Indianness. He took to Saeed Saeed instantly when he revealed his Indian link, his grandmother and his knowledge of Hindi movie songs. Biju was so overwhelmed by the popularity of Bollywood dance among his friends from Kazakhstan and Malaysia that he almost fainted. He was touched by the sight of a dead insect in a sack of basmati rice. For a moment he reflects on the paradoxical situation of the native who cannot afford the rice back home while it was freely available here. He thinks tenderly of the insect that has journeyed from home. He aches for home; but his reverie is disrupted by the memory of his father's words

advising him not to return until he has amassed wealth. This sums up the predicament of the illegal migrant.

### **Dichotomies Intact**

Kiran Desai's carefully structured novel *The Inheritance of Loss* captures the reign of dichotomies in postcolonial existence. The overt actions in the novel are the aftermath of contact between East and West. Jemubhai's experience in England in the colonial times informs his character and relationships in the future. Biju's experiences and those of whom he meets demarcate the limits of dichotomies: rural/urban, mountain/metropolis and pure/impure.

The New World Order is symbolized by the restaurants in New York in the novel. The highly sanitized setting of the fine dining restaurants is juxtaposed with the impure convergence of races in deplorable conditions in the kitchen below. The East/ West, pure/impure dichotomies are invoked. Baby Bistro with the French diner above and the Mexican, Indian and Paki workers below symbolize the hierarchy of the new world; the Third world working strenuously to keep up the sterilised lifestyle of the First World. The immigrants are the lowest layer on which the western consumer society is based, noted and prosper.

Even the Indian restaurant he works for, keeps its employees underground keeping intact the upstairs/downstairs, high/low and patrons/workers dichotomy. The invisibility offered by this arrangement works as an analogy of the illegal immigrant status. They are missing from sight and from records.

### **Conclusion**

Colonialism is now considered to be a thing of the past and some believe that it is high time we put it behind us. There may be no random settlement and governance or explicit political takeovers. Direct activities smacking of imperialism may not be easy to execute. Neo-colonialism has taken its place. Postcolonial theorists in Western Universities are now busy churning out carefully thought out theories to explain the new world order in the postcolonial era.

Nationalism should have been a transitory phase in colonial history serving to mobilise and organize the aspirations of the oppressed (Gandhi 122). The postcolonial era should have turned out to be a postnational era. The intellectuals in the high seats of learning envisage a globalised world inhabited by cosmopolitan

citizens. A study of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* proves such utopic dreams to be far-fetched.

Kiran Desai's novel renews tired notions of Postcoloniality (Concilio 2010). The novel flits from one point on the globe to another and the narrative in all places is authentic. The after-effects of colonialism and the effects of globalization are explored through a fresh perspective. The simultaneous acceleration of globalization and nationalization is mirrored in the problem of illegal migration and Gorkha insurgency respectively. The events in the novel lay bare the shaky foundations of an equitable cosmopolitan globalized world. The human aspect of globalisation jars the leaping figures of material gains. Kiran Desai's novel demonstrates amazing insight of the globalised world veering towards postnationalism and refutes the possibility of eradicating nationalist affiliations entirely for the establishment of a homogenous cosmopolitan world order.

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