



## THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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### ABSTRACT

a story of variations which leads to the cultural identities and cultural conflict present across the globe. Kiran Desai exhibits the social construction of human experiences, identities to reveal a social meaning out of it as an inter subjective process. Desai offers a notion of a constructed reality where individuals are engaged in an insecure search for peripheral characters of the novel appear to be innocent victims of alienation from self in the crisis of identity. The present paper focuses on the fate of defenseless, insecure and unmoored and frequently struggling to survive in the modern world. They search for a whole of unified self.

Keywords: Callous, Inheritance, Nostalgia, Alienation, Loneliness, Assimilation, Matrix.

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A non-descript term, identity suggests our thoughts and feelings, our psychic presence, our place of habitation and even our longings, dreams and desires. The individual identity, like the national identity, is formed through a series of random and frequently bizarre accretions. In the formation of the individual identity, several factors come into play. One is the cumulative offspring of all these diverse and divisive forces. A formative and not an innate product, one's identity is determined by three factors. Firstly, childhood impressions and aspirations play a vital role in deciding it. An individual has to break off most of his reliance on his parents, and become free enough to leave home and develop ideas and aims of his own which will give him a distinct identity. How strong the rebelliousness in each individual is, and what form it takes, is the second element in determining identity. The third element is the zeitgeist. These call on the youth to develop different qualities in different historical periods. But it is not only the spirit of the times, but also the biological trait within the character, the inner drive and motivation which

equally contribute to one's identity. Our desire for separate cultural identity is the offspring of our being alienated from the concept of unity in diversity. Crisis of identity occurs in the state in which the individual acts not in accordance with the dictates of his "core-self" or "inner conscience" but as per the promptings of the "otherself" and "outer conscience,". In this state there is total disgust and discord with the inner life and hence the alienation of the self. Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* has superbly dealt with the theme of identity crisis through the characters of her novel in a bewilderingly fascinating style of her own. She has profoundly unfolded the vicious and tragic shades of her theme (identity crisis) in a captivating fashion. The title itself foreshadows the synaesthetic commingling of positives and negatives like 'Inheritance' and 'Loss.' But at a much profounder perception than the more superficial narrative of the story, one may unequivocally rather arithmetically, say that *The Inheritance of Loss* is equal to the disinheritance of gain--a life full of a strange 'emptiness' and 'solitude' of the sense of ultimately

losing whatever one has, of the sense of alienation from society and self perceived to be arising out of doubleselves and rootlessness.

*The Inheritance of Loss* has been highly acclaimed as a representative book of Booksellers Waterstone, relating to the fine tradition of Booker winners set in India, following its predecessors *The God of Small Things* and *Midnight's Children*. The novel deals with chaos, despair, ethno-racial and historical relationships between people from different cultures and backgrounds. Love, longing and losses are dexterously handled in a humane manner articulating diasporic experiences of the novelist who is an Indian citizen but a permanent resident of America. Kiran Desai is deeply interested in India- the India of 1980s which honestly represents the mixed image. Desai observes everything through the 'lens of being Indian,' without that perspective she acknowledged that she can't write. *The Inheritance of Loss* is a novel of implacable bitterness and despair. Full of pathos and tenderness the novel presents its characters as ultimately frail human beings struggling in search of their identity. It was the feeling of being caught between two continents that infuses *The Inheritance of Loss* — a story replete with sadness over globalization and with pleasure at the surviving intimacies of Indian life. "*The Inheritance of Loss* is not only a story, it is, a perspective, an inside look into post-independence India, with its roots dug in colonialism, its branches embracing Americanism, but its leaves brown and dusty with the age-old prejudices that govern people's minds; an India where a class of people still speak only English and squirm at the mention of their mother tongues; where a mother is proud because her daughter has chosen to marry an Englishman: where a foreigner is treated suspiciously in spite of his honest efforts to lay foundations of indigenous industries; where thousands of Indians enter America as illegal immigrants-in the eyes of their families, they are the heroes, but in reality, they sleep with mice on the kitchen floors of restaurants or in squalid suburbs of big cities".(Sinha and Reynolds, Critical Study xxi).The novel is a brilliant study of Indian culture-the culture in its transitional phase. Changes are brought out by colonial neurosis, craze for the

Western values, manners, language and glamorous life style; impact of modernization, consumerism, globalization and deep-rooted reaction to indigenous values which fail to sustain life. Characters feel inferior, bounded and defeated by their Indian heritage confronted with colonialism; consequently they develop grotesque complexes which mar their mutuality and reciprocal relationship.

Despite political freedom, cultural slavery is directly manifested through the characters. They are in a 'to be or not to be' position, fail to assimilate and give up original culture in totality. There remains identity crisis which most of the Indians face despite postcolonial reactions in which endeavour is to revitalize indigenous culture and its values. Set partly in India and partly in the U.S.A. *The Inheritance of Loss* explores with uncommon intimacy and insight some of the very pertinent issues of today's globalized world. It deals with the quest for individual identity and the struggle for self-determination of an ethnic group that results from despair and sense of deprivation and that uproots a settled order of life and leads to displacement, exile and loss. *The Inheritance of Loss* draws on Kiran's own experiences of leaving India. The novel is certainly not an autobiography of Kiran Desai or an autobiographical novel, but it seems to provide a fictionalised version of her own journey from East to West. Kiran was born in India where she spent the first fourteen years of her life before migrating to England and then to America for higher education. In this book she takes a literary route to revisit her past and her ancestral history in Gujarat (the place from where her father and paternal grandfather came) and Kalimpong (the home of her own aunt). This search for personal and familial roots is inextricably linked up with many larger issues of India's colonial and post-colonial history, which also includes the history of a thriving Indian diaspora and its amazing story at continuous displacement, migration and return.

The characters in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* have been drawn into a vortex of dream for money, status and security which constantly pulls them down into a dark pit where they struggle in vain to survive, consequently left with nothing but

grim reality and loneliness. This travesty of journey begins with Jemubhai Patel who leaves for U.K. to fulfill his dream of passing the I.C.S. exam. His father has a modest business of procuring a false witness to appear in the court. Being the lowest in the court he dreams of making his son a high court judge. With a grand dowry received from his father-in-law, Jemubhai leaves for Cambridge. But separation from his parents, his country and the hardship of adjustment in a foreign culture hardens him so much, that his selection as judge alienates him from his family and sadly from his 'desi' wife. The most frightening development of his false illusion about himself is total lack of concern for human relationships. It makes him blind towards his wife, his father and his nation. His anger intensifies his hatred towards the wife so much so that he hits her regularly. He is afraid that he may kill her because she was a physical reminder of his Indian origin which he hopelessly wished to deny. Finally, he abandons her to native Gujrati village where she gives birth to a daughter whom he never sees. He has no emotion for any human being but for his dog-Matt.

The text of the novel is set at Kalimpong, a beautiful mountain range at the outskirts of the Nepal border. A retired judge Jemubhai resides there supported by one of his family cook Panna Lal and pet dog Matt. The plight of the life of immigrants is projected through the life of the cook's son Biju, who has gone to America accepting the job of a cook in an English restaurant. Desai exhibits her concern how growing awareness about ethnic identity is posing a great hazard. The novel describes two parallel stories. The Indian part deals with the story of a make shift family comprising of a retired judge, his young grand-daughter Sal, his old and loyal cook and his pet dog Matt. The American section deals with the story of Biju, the son of the judge's cook who struggles to survive as an illegal immigrant worker in New York, moving from one ill-paid job to another and is compelled to experience the anxiety of being a foreigner as well as the unfairness of a world in which "one side travels to be a servant, and the other side travels to be treated like a king" (269). The two strands of the narrative are linked by the cook Panna Lal. What connects

these apparently dis-similar characters is a shared historical background and identical experience of humiliation and loss. Kiran Desai creates an elegant and thoughtful study of families, the losses each member must confront alone, and the lies each tells to make memories of the past more palatable. The leading question in the very beginning of the novel—"could fulfillment ever be felt as deeply as loss?" (2) sets the introspective and somber tone of the novel. The Kalimpong house of Jemubhai, is a symbol of retreat from strain and stress of human existence - a self created asylum of an old alienated bloke. His unusual expression of love and attention for Matt, the she-dog is essentially a camouflage to conceal his complete alienation from his original roots, environment and people, especially his abandoned wife Nimi, whom he neither loved nor despised. Unable to cope with the conflict of identities, Jemubhai was consumed by self loathing. Jemubhai's relation and treatment of his wife appears to be a combination of both class and gender issue. Jemubhai looks down upon his wife not only because she is a woman and therefore is a subject for subjugation, but also because she represents the non-transformational Indian self Jemubhai himself is and which he despises so much.

Sai, throughout the text, exposes a dynamism of character though her grandfather's stagnant character that is projected to cling on to his colonial subjecthood of which his designation is the primary token. Sai Mistry is a young girl whose education at an Indian convent school comes to an end in the mid-1980s, when she is orphaned and sent to live with her grandfather, a judge who does not want her and who offers no solace. Though Sai's romance at sixteen, with Gyan, her tutor provides her with an emotional escape from Kalimpong, it soon becomes complicated by Gyan's involvement with the Gorkha National Liberation Federation, a Nepalese independence movement which quickly becomes violent. Gyan's commitment to the insurgency offers an ironic contrast with the commitment of his family to the colonial British army in earlier times, just as the judge's hatreds, learned in England, are ironically contrasted with his British affectations in later life. Gyan, a representative of the insurgent group that invades

the household of the judge can be seen as the “disciplinary double” in the narrative that tends to destabilize the discursive practice of the colonial cultural regime. Gyan is negotiated through an apparent (though tentative) expression of “resistance” and directionless vengeance. The story of Sai, living in Kalimpong, near India’s northeast border with Nepal alternates with that of Biju, the cook’s son, an illegal immigrant trying to find work and a better life in New York. Biju working in a series of dead-end jobs, epitomizes the plight of the illegal immigrant who has no future in his own country and who endures deplorable conditions and semi-servitude working illegally in the U.S. But Biju is not willing to compromise his ethnicity with the demands of cosmopolitan modernity of America. He refuses to give up his religion or discredit the principles of his ancestors because he believed: “You had to live according to something. You had to find your dignity” (136).

Kiran Desai describes how immigrants like Biju clung to their religious faiths and cultural taboos so that they “might not fall through the filthy differences between nations” (136). It is interesting to note that India was the place that Biju, like many others, had dreamed of leaving for its backwardness and loss of opportunities. She exemplifies the bitter experiences of the immigrants. Biju spends his early days working as a waiter in New York. But he is frightened to see the lot of immigrants. He is overwhelmed by his fugitive role, nostalgic reminiscences and racial discrimination; soon he is disillusioned by the West. The painful experience of immigrants is embittered by racial discrimination. In his encounters with the working conditions and immigration laws he discovers authentic colonial experience that how Third World natives are exploited and humiliated in the West. The cook, however, was not aware of the exact nature of Biju’s work abroad. He was contented with whatever his son had achieved, little realizing his real condition there. Biju, embroiled in this typical predicament had no standing and identity of his own. Like a fugitive on the run, he had to switch from one job to another. Biju very soon realized that the people from the Third World countries were engaged in a losing battle for existence. Alienation, estrangement,

humiliation and bone-chilling frost, all contributed to the sense of utter loneliness experienced by Biju abroad. In New York, he was not immune to nostalgia. Lying in his basement bed, Biju dreams of home, of the village, of his father and of his grandmother. It is not only a romantic nostalgia but an unrest need and passionate desire with these sojourns to relocate the philosophy and vision of the homeland in the midst of alien cultural surroundings. Biju finds it difficult to accommodate in these adverse conditions in the company of rag rags coming from all the corners of the world.

*The Inheritance of Loss* justifies that Kiran Desai’s approach to the matrix of immigrant experiences is rational and practical than being sentimental. Assimilation and acceptance of diversity is essential but the ideal for making spaces in other cultures is a complex phenomenon and its manifold paradigms can’t be estimated within the sympathetic socio-cultural dynamics. Therefore there is always a crisis of identity. People from every corner of the globe rush to America to pursue their dreams of a better and comfortable living. Kiran Desai depicts how a section of Indians demean themselves for a chance to escape to America. They falsify documents and behave like beggars to get a tourist visa. They are prepared to risk death and suffer all sorts of humiliation to gain an access to the new El Dorado, the land of plenty and wish fulfillment. But what they really achieve from the painful migration is the loss of human dignity and freedom. It is this darkness at the bottom of prosperity and development in the age of globalization that Kiran Desai illuminates in her novel. Kiran Desai’s vision of immigrants’ experience has a comprehensive canvas including the socio-cultural perspective, socio-economic arguments and the awareness of the matrix of home and homelessness. The distortion of oppression is rooted in the psyche of immigrants in which there are little possibilities of escape from politics of dominance and subversion. The romantic quest marked by nostalgia, glorification of native tradition, lingering shadow of lost relationship and an urge for native food, language and habits, are not the ultimate periphery of the immigrant experience reconstructed in the text of *The Inheritance of Loss*.

There is also a reassessment of the East in the context of West and expansion of the horizon of Western thought that can accommodate the best of the Orient without a reciprocal interaction of the two currents of human thought, the comprehensive, humanistic and pluralistic vision of the world remains a utopia. The upliftment of humanity at large beyond the national cultural codes, can ensure a more stable and progressive community pacing fast in search of global society.

By the end of the novel each appears to lose something valuable in their own personal lives. Jemubhai loses his dog, the only object of his attachment to this material world; Sai loses her love and probably an unperturbed trust in life; Gyan loses the cause for his resistance; Biju loses all that he saved in his life in "exile" and his father, his imagined space. This mundane macrocosm in *The Inheritance of Loss* is marked by "partial representation" of individual identity, split personalities, modified motivation, authorized "otherness," personal confusion and indeterminacy devoid of enthusiasm, a sense of individual identity in terms of completeness, security and specified agenda of life, where mockery and mimicry prevails as the order of life and existence. It appears to be the reason why Jemubhai- the representative anglicized Indian bureaucrat- betrays his long cherished 'Western', 'rational' and 'civilized' persona at the loss of his pedigreed dog Matt, towards the end of the novel. The unexpected incident of a personal loss compels him to seek refuge in a self-imposed exile in the house that provides a microcosm of an idealized anglicized world in likeness with the colonial system. His characteristic vulnerability as part of his real person is exposed in a circumstance which is sudden sure and on which, he doesn't have any control. The macrocosm of this novel is a mimic space in which the "self" deprived of autonomy and true representation awaits for a meaningful individual as well as collective identity to make sense of his/her fragmented subjugated self. A strange sense of absurdity characterizes this waiting, symbolizing a barren and callous universe where paranoia prevails without healing and hope. Though individuals appear to be in search of their lost inheritance and

identity, they are forbidden by an apprehension about their own constructed self for "... the problems of the road are tedious" (315).

Evidently there we feel inclined to believe that the crisis of identity in the novel appears at different levels. Firstly in the case of Jemubhai, the process is painful and he never acquires either the right accent or the polish of a young sophistication. There is a domain of self hate, where he is at odds with himself. He banishes his innocent wife to her home. Sai's arrival is also an unhappy accomplishment for him but he reconciles himself to her presence for though he had never properly admitted the fact to himself, he knew he had to make amends for his behaviour in the past and this was a chance to balance the scales at least somewhat. Thus he persuades himself that since he had been remiss as a father, he was finally doing his duty as a grandfather. Inevitably Sai's presence forces him to revisit his past. Her questions trigger off memories, which all these years he has tried to keep at bay. Secondly, in the case of Sai, who crosses over from the confines of the convent to the world outside. Her parents had been killed in an accident. The orphaned Sai is sent from Dehradun to Kalimpong. The two worlds are completely different from each other as are the people who inhabit them. She sat quiet awaiting her fate. The season changed and along with it changed Sai's state of mind as she fell in love with her tutor Gyan. But their love affair suffered a jolt as Gyan in an argumentative mood picked up a row with Sai. The hatred was palpable. In spite of Sai being a temptress, rage and irritation was on the rise. The resentment and disparity in their status incited Gyan to betray Sai. The cumulative effect of all this on Sai's psyche was terrible. Sai is not able to make sense out of anything. All her concepts about herself are destroyed. She realized how all lives were essentially connected and affected one another. She appeared as a puppet in the hands of destiny. Thirdly, identity crisis also arises on account of maladjustment of social matrix between the tradition of the country of origin and the country of adoption. The identity and self image belong to concrete situations of the history and to those preoccupations and manifestations which have a relevance in a given

concrete situations. Cultural expressions translate across genre and group boundaries, resulting into global existence of qualities or conditions that resist such translations and implication for identity formation. The struggle of Biju develops rightly from this local to global question of migration and conflict of survival and ambition in the global aspect of fulfilling the dreams.

*The Inheritance of Loss* has a wider canvas, bringing the whole world together, globalization and multicultural plethora which has created insecurity, crisis of identity and rootlessness. No one can escape from the psycho-modernity where capital supremacy has become an eye opener to control the moves and minds of people. Moving towards the question of the human sense of identity, it is soon realized that one lives in the world of others. It is in relation to 'others'- to the society and the environment in which one lives- that one's own identity is formed. Moving from the inner to the Global self poses the question of conflicts. Each character is a living identity, constantly examining himself/herself within the given contexts. Each one represents a different "society" though most of the time they belong to the same one. This 'inner society' has different meaning for the Judge, Sai, Cook, his son Biju and even to Gyan. Each one is living with an inner self against the outer image of the societal conflicts. According to the rules of plurality, like a mirror corridor it multiplies. The conflict generates in the novel when the characters don't use the same level of knowledge for others, which they use for themselves. A displaced judge has a different outlook for Sai. Inevitably similar situations lead to hatred instead of sympathy. A self within self refuses to live in isolation and the cook's son, Biju becomes as much a victim of this collective attitude as Sai. Hence within the framework of a civilization, the dilemma of being presents deeper conflict. Sai and Gyan belong to two entirely different cultures, and even after they are in love, their love suffers the conflict of cultures. The personal and collective consciousness of the culture clashes and from here the question arises as to what is a local identity which ultimately becomes a global identity. Each character in *The Inheritance of Loss* has set up a category of identity in the world. Each

one of them portrays their singularity by presenting itself into the contrast of otherness. Both identity and otherness have been the process of development. Here with Kiran Desai they get the meaning within the contexts of race and ethnicity.

Analysing the conflict in one's own way creates an identity. In complex situations, where the level of personal and collective consciousness meet and the quality of the answer provides to the dilemma, the conflict becomes the executor of identities. The title itself is a journey to understand the loss after conflict. The loneliness does not come as a shock rather it is a revelation of the same fact which each character knows but is afraid to bring it to the light. In the process to understand peace each one seems to be studying conflict. This paradoxical interrelationship is so relevant that ultimately individuals lose their identity in groups and vice versa. Kiran Desai's realistic portrayal of life, demonstrates a deep concern for the human condition.

Desai observes the crisis of identity in diasporic society and narrates it in terms of self and place. So, what Desai actually does is that she presents, through her intertwined narrative, the inner mindscape of her every character which is a darker territory. In her novel every space collides with each other where every space is competing with others. It illumines the reader regarding the problem of local which becomes global and places the reader in front of the unresolved question of identity, both individual and national.

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