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COGNIZABLE CRIME AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN KIRAN DESAI'S
"THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS"

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ABSTRACT

"The Inheritance of Loss" by Kiran Desai is one of the Booker prize winning novels which implicitly reveals the male chauvinism and subsequent abuse of women in a patriarchal society. The novel deals with domestic violence through the character of Jemubhai Patel, a judge and his exertion of ill-treatment on his wife, Nimi. Domestic violence refers to violence against women generally found in matrimonial homes. Domestic violence is recognized as the significant barrier in the path of women empowerment and also appropriates the women's rights. India has specifically legislated Domestic Violence Act in 2005 to reduce the violence against women. The law came into force on the 26th October, 2006 and it was during this time the novel published reflecting the contemporary issues such as women abuse. The paper explores the events of physical, psychological and sexual harassment of women in Indian society.

Keywords: cognizable crime, domestic violence, male chauvinism, women's rights and empowerment.

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INTRODUCTION

In ancient India, women enjoyed a significant role not only at home but in the society as a whole. Many Vedic hymns are attributed to the woman sages. The woman was the apostle of the Mattri-shakti. The kings and the priests always held and propagated that the prosperity depends upon the respect that a household shows towards the women and the kingdom would be visited by inauspicious events in case of the woman was harassed by the subject. The Turkish and Afghan invaders changed the gender equation in the subcontinent. The locals having lost the battle into subjection were coerced to hand over their women. The invaders always came single on horseback

without accompanied by their families and they sought subjection rules to be written over the body of the women in the conquered territory. To protect the honor and chastity of the women became a major societal aim for the local population. The purdah system became popular in vogue for Indian women. A series of superstition and oppressive customs were manufactured that confined the women within the four walls of their house. The status of women was reduced to the status of a maid, and merely a source of progeny. The patriarchal dominance began and the women were belittled in their status. After seventy years of Independence, plight of Indian women is pathetic in many rural areas. Almost every day we hear news

regarding domestic violence, rape, harassment etc. in educational institutions, houses, public places and work places. The women in rural areas are the chief victims.

Kiran Desai has interwoven feministic concern in the novel by revealing terrible plight of Nimi, Jemubhai Patel's wife. Despite the development of education and growing respect for women, there are emerging threats in the form of sexual harassment at their job places. The condition of women in under developed region is still gruesome. Though the act of domestic violence is in effect but the problems of marginal women are unresolved. Kiran Desai, hence, portrays gender ill-treatment through married life of Jemubhai Patel and Nimi.

Mostly child are not preferred by a family as they are considered to a financial burden to a family. According to the social norm a girl's father has to pay a sum of money forcibly demanded by boy's parents. The author stressed such social evil and linked it to its repercussions in matrimonial relationship. It was fad among the Patel community to go to England and Jemubhai's father wanted Jemu to do the same. But there wasn't enough money with them so; Jemubhai's father had made a calculation of getting dowry from girl's father as per the Indian social custom. Jemubhai received hefty dowry from his father in law to fulfill his main desire to go to England for studies. "The dowry included cash, gold, emeralds from Venezuela, rubies from Burma, uncut kundan diamonds, a watch on a watch chain, lengths of woolen cloth for her new husband to make into suits in which to travel to England, and in crisp envelope, a ticket for passage on the SS *Strathnaver* from Bombay to Liverpool." (TIL p.91) Soon after the marriage, the family was out to sell the jewels for extra money. The social custom implies that marriage is for material gain, rather than an emotional bonding which is likely to lead to failure in relationship. Nimi was terrified during her first night with Jemubhai as he attempted to pull off her sari. She wept "save me" as she felt uncomfortable and insecure. The marriage was just for utilitarian purpose in case of Jemubhai rather than an emotional need.

"Jemu would be the first boy of their community to go to an English university. The dowry bids poured in and his father began an exhilarated weighing and tallying: ugly face-a little more gold, a pale skin- a little less. A dark and ugly daughter of rich man seemed their best bet." (TIH p.89)

Thus, the social custom made of dowry leads to commoditization of women. Women are born free still they are in the chains of patriarchy. The status of women is further lowered when Bomanbhai Patel who has turned his father's business of supplying horse feed to the British military encampment at Piphit into catering to sexual needs of soldiers. The author highlighted human trafficking by a minor narration. A woman is treated as sex objects. Jemubhai's uncles urged him to "force her...insist. Don't let her behave badly." (TIL p.92) Irrespective of the tender feelings of Nimi, her in laws expect her to be happy with Jemu, the first boy from their community to go to England.

"He saw the way to greater profit yet by extending his business seamlessly into another. He offered soldiers unauthorized women in an unauthorized part of town on whom they might spend their aggrandizement of manhood" (TIL p.91)

Women have inherent ability for compassionate understanding. She takes care of family, manages house cores, supports financially to her husband, produces and nurtures the progeny. In spite of multiple tasks performed by her still she is rarely been given equal status as her nemesis has. They face discrimination, exploitation and violence irrespective of any place causing emotional and psychological distress to them. Despite possessing numerous qualities, she has to undergo physical extortion and emotional harassment as in case of Nimi who mutely suffers blows from Jemubhai. In fact Jemubhai didn't have much interest in her as per the cook "He didn't like her at all. She went mad... they said she was a very mad lady" (TIL p.88) He didn't want to think of her even he ignored Sai's inquiry about her grandmother. When Jemubhai returned from England, he warmly welcomed with heap of garlands, Nimi was standing in a corner, and she came towards him with garland. Both of them

didn't look at each other. The crowd interpreted this as shyness, may be after five years he had forgotten he had a wife. But Nimi do have sharp memories and remembers their bicycle ride and her levitating heart. She rummaged in the toilet case the things Jemubhai has brought from Cambridge and found some cosmetic items and powder puff in a powder container. She picked up the judge's powder puff stuffed it inside as a childish thieving. When he checked his belongings that he brought with him, he found powder puff missing, a trivial thing to worry about for which he made everyone in his house searches for it. Finally, Jemubhai accused Nimi, "you must know something." (TIL p.168) He didn't like his wife's face, searched for his hatred. For him, "An Indian girl can never be as beautiful as an English one." When he saw few thin and tender filaments in her blouse, he shouted in a rough language, "you filth!" and pulled his dandy powder puff out like a ridiculous flower, or else a bursting ruined heart. For Jemubhai her heart doesn't matter what matters is that powder puff.

Violence against women can be of different sort, sexual abuse is one of the common in married life, women endure forced intercourse, and other form of sexual coercion as traced in the novel through following incident. Jemubhai was filled with anger and grabbed at his wife but she slipped, such running and chasing went on, inside a locked room. Jemu tried to force her for sex, "he grabbed at her again...he came at her with a look of murder...he blocked her. He clamped down on her, tussled her to the floor...in a dense frustration of lust and fury-penis uncoiling, mottled purple-black...he stuffed his way ungracefully into her." (TIL p.169) Though she was uncomfortable with a forced sexual intercourse with crudity, hatred and fury, he repeated the gutter act again and again. In all sorts of mood he continued to have same physical extortion with his wife. "This distaste and his persistence made him angrier than ever and any cruelty to her became irresistible." (TIL p.170) He grew more detached from her and never spoke to or looked in her direction publicly. Even after long gap of five years straight after his marriage, he never spare time for her, never expressed love, care and concern for Nimi. This routine loneliness has made her

accustomed to icy relationship. She received "the same blank look of a dog or monkey humping in the bazaar." (TIL p.170) Until an abrupt look at her out of blue and took his face off her as if a stranger. Nimi has to suffer the psychological torture from Jemubhai. The act of intimidation, constant belittling, isolating a person has led to her psychological abuse.

Jemubhai didn't take Nimi with him due to her simple appearance. He provided her with a companion for her to spend time. He hated her looks because she didn't look like typical English woman. "Nimi did not accompany her husband on tour, unlike the other wives, who went along on horseback or elephantback or camelback or in palkis... Nimi was left to sit alone in Bonda... she had spent nineteen years within the confines of her father's compound and she was still unable to contemplate the idea of walking through the gate... She was uncared for, her freedom useless, her husband disregarded his duty." (TIL p.171) She just has to enjoy the view around within the residence and is left without any joy which normally a woman needs to have in her life. Her life is restricted into four walls, "She climbed up the stairs to the flat roof in the slow civility of summer disks, and watched the Jamuna flowing... Cows were on their way; bells were ringing in the temple; she could see birds testing... she could see the ruins of hunting lodge..." (TIL p.172) This confinement made her desolated. Her life is ruined. "She had fallen out of her life altogether." (TIL p.172) Even the servants were treated her badly as if she is not human. "Weeks went by and she spoke to nobody, the servants thumped their leftovers on the table for her to eat, stole the supplies without fear, allowed the house to grow filthy without guilt until the day before Jemubhai's arrival when suddenly it was brought to luster again." (TIL p.172) So, Nimi was a woman of no importance for Jemubhai and even his servants. Her presence is unbearable for Jemubhai, even her expression annoyed him and gradually replaced by blankness. She had been abandoned by Miss Enid Pott who told that Nimi does not want to learn English and lack in interest. Her sexual part is compared with a buffalo, does not want her desi appearance with trinkets, gets anger by the tinkle-

tonk of her bangles, and hates her color and style of dressing. He threw the hair oil bottle away and her long hair escaped no matter how tidily she made her bun. Once he observed her foot print on toilet seat, he was furious, he "took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl..." (TIL p.173) A miserable treatment to any human being. When Nimi had her cheek infected, he kept himself away from her, "He took her fallen beauty as a further affront and felt concerned the skin disease would infect him as well. He instructed the servants to wipe everything with Dettol to kill germs. He powered himself extra careful with his new puff, each time remembering the one that had been cushioned between his wife's obscene, clown-nosed breasts." He told her "Don't show your face outside... People might run from you screaming." (TIL p.173) The bitterness and rage was growing between them, the dread was severe beyond one's imagination as the time passed.

Violence against women is present across the world cutting across boundaries of class, culture, education, income, ethnicity and age. Internationally, one three women have been beaten, coerced into sex or abused in their lifetime by a member of her own family, usually it is perpetrated by males who are, or who have been in the position of trust and intimacy and power-husband, boyfriend, father etc. In the present novel the husband victimizes his wife and causes domestic violence. Jemubhai recalls his memories why exactly he had sent his wife home, it was due to an incident at meeting summoned by district commissioner to inform him that his promotion is blocked just, the reason is, his wife's traditional dressing for which he was warned. Instead Mr Mohan was promoted. Again, unfortunately Nimi was cause of block as a result separation.

When they reached at home, Jemubhai was in utter rage; he took his drinks and in a violent mood asked questions to Nimi.

"Are you just a country bumpkin?"

Pause

Are you a liar?

Pause

Are you playing foolish female games?

Pause

Are you trying deliberately to make me angry?

Long long pause.

Then, a venomous spat-out sentence:

Or are you just incredibly stupid

When she said nothing, he waited.

Which of the above? We are not ending this conversation until you reply.

Longer wait.

Which? Are you bloody stupid, I ask you?

Silence

... is it all of the above?" (TIL p.304)

She, with fear, uttered a sentence against him and shocked him saying "You are the one who is stupid." (TIL p.304) He for the first time hit her, although he wanted to do it before but he curbed is anger. He emptied his glass on her head, sent a jug of water swinging into the face he no longer found it beautiful, and filled her ears with leaping soda water. Then, this wasn't enough to assuage his rage, he hammered down with his fists, raising his arms to bring them down on her again and again, rhythmically, until his own hands were exhausted... he limped a bit, his leg hurting from kicking her. Stupid bitch, dirty bitch! The more he swore, the harder he found he could hit...the bruises didn't fade for weeks. Ten blue and black finger-prints clamped on her arms, a thunder-dark cloud loomed up on her side where he pushed her into the wall..." (TIL p.304-305) The anger and the ill treatment of Jemubhai were brutal and unbearable. Her silence was overwhelmed by his loud shout, and her protest spurred him to make things worse for her. One thing is for sure, Nimi won't create a soft corner in Jemubhai's heart. Everything was meaningless in her life. Hatred in Jemubhai's life now only meant for Nimi. She is no longer needed in his life; therefore he had a fancy of killing her. But he gave a deep thought about it, and found his career in jeopardy, and averted the final violent act. He couldn't stand her anymore; hence he decided to send her back. She resisted to return. It was terrible situation for her, neither could she stay in a hellish place to suffer her fate nor could return to her home to put her family in shame. He told her in a murderous way, "If I don't send you... I will kill you. And I don't want to

be blamed for such a crime, so you have to go.” (TIL p.305)

Jemubhai's cruelty reached at its peak when he heard good news regarding her wife's delivering a baby, wasn't happy at all, instead anger flew out of his heart. He didn't have any feeling of joy of entering into parenthood. This could be because she gave birth to a girl child. Nimi, after long troublesome days, had a peace and relief from that torture. When, Nimi's uncle wrote to Jemubhai informing him that he could take her with him, the resting period is over, but Jemubhai replied in a disinterested manner, expressing that she is no longer required. Jemu sent money with a letter. "It will not be suitable ... my work is such. No schools. Constant travel..." (TIL p.306)

Nimi's plight grew from bad to worse when her uncle refused her to stay with him, there is no support left for her where she can reside peacefully. Her uncle obliged her to return to her husband, according to him, "You are your husband's responsibility... go back. Your father gave a dowry, when you married- you got your share and it is not for daughters to come claiming anything thereafter. If you have made your husband angry, go ask for forgiveness." (TIL p.306) After undergoing such pain, harassment and physical abuse, these words would be thorns to her heart. The worst thing is her family didn't felt any empathy for her, except her sister with whom lived rest of her life. When Jemubhai's father pleaded him to bring Nimi back, at that moment Jemubhai replied "she is unsuitable to be my wife." (TIL p.306) The marriage itself was not with right purpose, and Nimi was the victim of the tragic married life. Thus, the reoccurrence of abuse in their relationship had reduced it to the act of battering.

Later on Jemubhai wondered if he had killed his wife for the sake of false ideals. He had made her life hell. She had lost all charm of living a lovely life, as woman expect from her husband. On the contrary, he had "stolen her dignity, shamed his family, shamed hers, and turned her into the embodiment of their humiliation." (TIL p.308) Even her family didn't accept her. She had become useless women, whose life is in left in turmoil.

Further, Jemubhai's disregard is evident when "He had condemned the girl to convent boarding schools, relieved when she reached a new height of uselessness and absurdity by eloping with a man who had grown up in an orphanage." (TIL p.308) Although he had money, reputation and he is alive, he never hesitated to send his daughter to boarding school, didn't gave attention to her which might have forced her to elope. Even his relatives didn't expect to pay any attention to her again.

Finally, the author raises a question "He hadn't liked his wife, but that was no excuse, was it?" Marriage is not only a physical bonding, but also a psychological and emotional affair between the two, which is violated by Jemubhai. The author has put into light the dowry system, one of the social evils for which women are detested, condemned and humiliated. Men like Jemubhai marry woman for utilitarian purpose, once the purpose is served, she ignored and victimized due to various reasons. In the novel, Jemubhai behaves brutally just because he didn't like his wife. But the issue is can someone be treated such a way?

Jemubhai had shown lots of concern for mere an animal for which he ran here and there, cried and behaved childishly. He never expressed such feeling for his wife and daughter.

In the matter of Lola, she is humiliated by Pradhan and his followers. Lola visited Pradhan, the head of the Kalimpong wing of GNLf expressing grievance against illegal huts built by his followers but instead of helping her he like a king of the kingdom, authoritatively dismissed her plea. "I am the raja of Kalimpong. A raja must have many queens. I have four...dear aunty, would you like to be the fifth? And you know, you won't be bearing me any sons at your age so will expect a big dowry. And you're not much to look at, nothing up...nothing down" (TIL p.244). The followers of the Pradhan laughed at her calling her fool. She heard laughter of young women from the kitchen added salt in her injurious heart. It was a long hard walk down her home after utter embarrassment.

A woman who came to the judge Jemubhai's house, pleading for help thinking that Jemubhai is a part of law and justice, he would provide justice to her, but it is denied. She was

asked to get out of the gate or the police will be called.

Conclusion

To sum up, women are still taken for granted, mistreated, abused and unjustly treated. The novel, along with many other issues, highlights the critical condition of women through some minor characters and poses a serious question about safety and status of women in a male chauvinistic society.

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