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### IDENTITY AND CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN KIRAN DESAI'S THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims in presenting how Kiran Desai in her Man Booker Prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* set in India, England and the USA, delves into various issues associated with identity crisis and cultural conflicts. The characters in the novel often face the problem of identity and alienation and become frustrated at the end. Even they come back to their own country, like the judge in the novel; they develop a sense of distrust and anger. They are in the state of confusion from which they will find it difficult to come out. The novel mainly focuses on the difficulties faced by immigrants who occupy a marginal space in a foreign land and culture. In the novel Desai exhorts the importance of maintaining individual, national and cultural identity, along with enjoying the benefits of cultural amalgamation. Many of the characters in the novel are displace individuals who try to re-invent their identities far away from their ancestral homes and homelands.

**Key words:** Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, Identity, Culture, Conflicts, Immigrants.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* covers countries like Britain, US, India and the past and the present, and the social, religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity. The novel, set in India, shows the master craftsmanship of Desai in portraying a wide range of characters. "A retired judge, his granddaughter, her tutor, the cook, his son and myriad supporting characters have a lively apprehension of different cultures"(Mishra 4).The story takes place in Kalimpong, a peninsular extension of India into the surrounds of Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan. It directly mentions the life and people of different states of India as well as of different nationalities.

Biju's experiences at various restaurants show the multiculturalism of a place as a result of the harmonious existence of various national cultures. At the Baby Bistro, "Above, the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian. And, when a Paki was hired, it was Mexican, India, Pakistani" (Desai 21). At Le Colonial, "On top, rich colonial, and down below, poor native. Colombian, Tunisian, Ecuadorian, Gambian" (Desai 21). The Stars and Stripes Diner is shown as a place where the American, Indian and Guatemalan flags fly together. The novel also shows how Indians get accustomed to various cultures all over the world.

Sai's life is a perfect example for unity in diversity. The contradictions, "Lochinvar and Tagore, economics and moral science, highland fling in tartan and Punjabi harvest dance in dhotis, national anthem in Bengali and an impenetrable Latin motto" (Desai 30), have been absorbed by her.

*The Inheritance of Loss* presents people who believe in different religions and exhibiting diverse food habits. Difference in language also adds to the diversity of the novel. Though the novel is written in English,

Hindi words and slangs also form part of the novel. Desai's characters read books that are multicultural and also diverse in the treatment of subject matter. The book shelves in Mon Ami contains "Salim Ali's guide to birds and all of Jane Austen" (Desai 44). Jemubhai reads Tophams Law of Property, Aristotle, Indian Criminal Procedure, the Penal Code and the Evidence Act with the same interest. Books on *How to Speak Hindustani A Brief History of Western Art and A Brief History of France* show how the Eastern and the Western elements of culture cater to the reading interest of a person.

The geography also exhibits difference. In Kalimpong "All day, the colors had been those of dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains possessed of ocean shadows and depths" (Desai 1). But the English countryside has "the beauty of carved colleges and churches pointed with gold leaf and angels.... The green river trembling with replications of the gardens that segued one into the other or the swans that sailed butter flied to their reflections" (Desai 40).

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* shows difference in various aspects of life. But, "the gray had permeated inside" (Desai 2) the novel, as it does in *Cho Oyu*, dissolving the divisions and borders. Thus, some kind of unity is achieved inspite of the diversity that abounds the novel.

Identity politics strengthens the collective identity and common experiences of people in a society. It sees the individual as embedded in a particular cultural, social, institutional or ideological context. A pride in one's culture gives people a sense of historical and social rootedness. And, in contrast, a weak or fractured sense of identity leaves people feeling isolated and confused. Multiculturalists accept that people can have multiple identities and multiple loyalties. For instance, they can have loyalty to their country of origin and also to the country of their settlement.

The oxymoron, "Boast of Quietness", the title of a poem by Borges, serves as an epigraph to Kiran Desai's novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. "My name is someone and anyone" (Epigraph *The Inheritance of Loss*), writes Borges, and Desai incorporates the poet in the novel as she explores the open road in a global context that combines America and India during the Nepalese border conflicts of 1986.

Sai Mistry, the mist and mystery that dominate the atmosphere of kanchenjunga. "Sai, sitting on the Veranda, was reading an article about giant squid in an old national geographic" (Desai 1). In her seeming isolation, Sai reaches out to the larger world through her global magazine. The giant squid, National Geographic, and the omnipresent mist transcend the isolated region, rising towards universals: "They slipped and ate, all of existence passed over by non existence ... watched their breath join the mist slowly twisting and turning" (Desai 4). Desai recreates the twists and turns of fate and history as they are deeply related to one's identity.

Sai is the daughter of a Zoroastrian father and a Hindu mother who were "free and brave, part of a modern nation in a modern world" (Desai 26). She is a product of multi-religious background. Sai is thrust from the bleak, regimented sheltered convent boarding school into the lush, misty Himalayan city of Kalimpong in North Eastern India, where a growing Nepalese insurgency is about to unravel her life even further. "Sai became aware of the enormous space she was entering" (Desai 31).

Her life at the doorstep of a grandfather she has never met is full of conflicting thoughts. As a girl who adopts and imbibes certain aspects of the English culture her identity is questioned by Gyan, her Nepali Tutor. Gyan is of the opinion that only ones own tradition and culture could shape one's personality. So, her identity is a 'fault line' for him. But, Sai says: "If I want to celebrate Christmas, I will, and if don't want to celebrate Diwali, then I don't find Nothing wrong in a bit of fun and Christmas is an Indian holiday as much as any other"(Desai 163). Gyan's attempt to join the violent separatists agitating for an independent state is an extreme measure of asserting one's identity. He is strongly convinced that only by the worldwide approval of ethnic rights could they find their individuality. The identity of Jemubhai Patal, the retired judge, is influenced by the rural Gujarati culture as well as the Cambridge-educated culture.

Running parallel to Sai's story is the story of the cook's son Biju who lives as an illegal immigrant in New York. Biju is an individual as well as a type. He is a representative of all those people who are displaced in the diaspora. A person's identity is formed by his relation to the society. But, Desai presents a situation where one's society keeps on changing day by day. "you lived intensely with others, only to have them disappear

overnight, since the shadow class was condemned to movement. The men left for other jobs, towns, got deported, returned home, changed names” (Desai 102). The absence of an address, which is a common problem to all these people, shows how constant wanderings negate a chance of fixed identity. Desai also presents how people’s identity gets affected in a multicultural society.

According to Will Kymlicka the recognition of minority rights is a major concern for the practitioners of multiculturalism. The culture of ethnic minorities should be accepted as a part of the main stream culture of the majority people and they also should be given due representation in administrative measures. “Generally, multiculturalism is assumed to speak not only for the interests of immigrant cultural minorities but also for the aboriginal people who are minorities in modern states” (Kukathas 258). The *Inheritance of Loss* sets its characters against the political struggle of the Himalayan region. Sai’s twenty year old Nepali tutor Gyan is portrayed as the champion of ethnic rights. He is an activist of the Gorkha National Liberation Front which is fighting for the independence of the Nepali Gorkhas. Conscious awareness of their own rights made them demand recognition of their identity. “...There was a report of new dissatisfaction in the hills, gathering insurgency, men and guns. Their struggle for freedom has its roots in suppression just like Indian Independence movement. It was the Indian- Nepalese this time, fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority” (Desai 9).

Gyan, like the other youth of GNLF, is proud of his own heritage. Desai is of the opinion that even nature favours a multicultural condition, for, she describes “the mist charging down like a dragon, dissolving, undoing, making ridiculous the drawing of borders”(Desai 9). The instance of Nepali insurgency gives Kiran Desai an opportunity to criticize terrorist violence in the name of ethnic identity.

The novel also analyses the problems of national minorities. Migration is a sword with sharp blades on both sides. The feeling of loss when one leaves one’s ‘matrubhumi’ is just as intensive and dreadful as having to leave a foreign home, due to deportation, when one does not have the green card. Everyone copes with such situations differently. Some don’t have coping solutions and it becomes a traumatic experience for the rest of one’s life. Thus, Desai strongly argues for equal opportunity to people though they are an ethnic or national minority in a particular place.

The love affair between Sai and Gyan is a conscious creation of the author to promote intercultural dialogue between the Neps and the Bengis. Similar is the case of Biju and Saeed who are in the U. S, meeting and mingling with people from different nationalities. By the representation of difference in terms of social and ethnic status even between her two main protagonists, Desai calls for intercultural interaction which include interaction with foreign cultures, consciousness of one’s own culture, stress tolerance, tolerance of ambiguity, and bucketfuls of empathy.

Post colonialism which deals with the aftermath of colonialism is yet another theme of multiculturalism. “Post colonial literature can be identified by its discussion of cultural identity. It may be about the change that has taken place as a result of the colonial rule” (Gilroy 660). Post colonial novels tend to analyze and explore the attempts to restore the original culture, conformity to the culture presented by the settlers or the creation of a new culture which combines both.

Desai’s novel is an elliptical tale looping backward and forward through the twentieth century India, New York, Cambridge, the legacy of British imperialism and the age-old distrust of ‘other’. By portraying the continued influence of the British culture in the lives of Indians, the novelist shows how different cultures can interact and complement each other in a nation or a society

Almost all of Desai’s characters have been stunted by their encounters with the West. “The migration of people from the previously colonized nations can be seen as an important aspect of postcolonialism”( Noyes 356). Earlier, the West had conquered the East. But, in modern times, the East is going to the West and thus the meeting of the opposites takes place.

Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* spans nations, cultures, religions, and races. Desai illustrates her themes without making moral judgements about her characters. Her writing is liquid and beautiful with delightful turns of phrase. “Dealing with all levels of society, and many different cultures, Desai shows life’s

humour and brutality and its delicate emotions and passionate commitments in a novel that is both beautiful and wise”(Rao 9).

The paper has examined the Indians’ consent to the British and the American imperial hegemonies in relation to the changing Indian patterns of migration before and after decolonization. Starting with an analysis of the idealized representations of the two Western countries, the paper has subsequently discussed their subversion as illustrated by the experiences of the immigrant Indian characters.

Thus, the British value that mostly appeals to the colonized Indians is the ideal of high status conferred by one’s association with the imperial power. In independent India, local allegiances to Britain characterize an elite group that nurtures nostalgia for the British grandeur, royal refinement, high-quality goods and cultural products. The Indian adherence to America is presented as a contemporary phenomenon that illustrates the US global supremacy and the decline of the British prestige after the collapse of its Empire. The American values that attract waves of Indian migration are prosperity, economic accumulation, freedom, all associated with the idea of status improvement. Nevertheless, the immigrants’ experiences in the two countries reveal the common gaps in their hegemonic discourses: racism, exclusion and arrogance. Moreover, America’s negative portrayal stresses an extreme version of capitalism that destroys human connections. In all cases, migration to the West illustrates the construction of local consent triggered by the desirable values spread by the British and the American hegemonies. At the same time, the Indian changing patterns of migration illustrate the rivalry between the two Western powers, despite their overlapping discourses.

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