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Identity and Ethnicity in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss***Dr. Smriti Singh***School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Patna, (Bihar) India***Abstract**

Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss' is a complex novel involving around issues of race, identity and ethnicity. Desai's novel suggests that the global call for melting borders that became the political statement of the Indian nation in the last quarter of the 20th Century also created its reactionaries in the localised spaces of the land, and the contending forces generated narratives that challenged not the phenomenon of globalisation per se but the politics of exclusivity that invariably conditioned the country's vision of melting borders. It focuses mainly on the Indian society and shows how it has been influenced by western ideas and values. The paper uses Giorgio Agamben's notion of inclusion exclusion to analyse ethnic and class predicament in the novel. The paper also shows how the novel goes on to make claims on behalf of social injustice by hinting at redistribution of resources as well as recognition of differences among groups without forcing 'assimilation'. Though both the paradigms (redistribution and recognition) assume different conceptions and remedies of injustice, they show how transforming societal patterns of representation and communication can change social identity and create a borderless world in the times of globalization.

Key Words: identity, ethnicity, inclusion exclusion, social justice

Set in the 1980s, Kiran Desai in 'The Inheritance of Loss' presents the story of lives spanning three continents and several decades. Though these are normal human beings but their lives have taken a different shape over the years due to external forces like racism, colonialism, and globalization and so on. This paper looks at issues of identity which rise at every turn in the lives of the major characters and also looks at the question of recognition. How does the minority fight for its voice and identity? How does it lead to the rise of insurgency and terrorism? How far are the dominant responsible for the rise in violence in the postcolonial period? Is migration a solution to the problem of the poor? Does it help in the betterment of lives or are the migrants as

dispossessed as they were in their homeland?

The novel sets its theme right from the beginning with the short poem of Jorge Luis Borges. It is about homeland and possessing an identity of one's own. The story moves around the lives of Judge Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, his granddaughter, Sai, the Cook's son, Biju, Sai's tutor, Gyan and their neighbours. Each one has in his/her life left a place and arrived at another one. But the question one may ask is how far the new place is one's own. How far do the individuals identify with the new place as their homeland?

Identity and Recognition: Issues of Identity and recognition are touched through

the lives of the judge, Gyan and the minor characters Biju meets in America. The Judge's tryst with his identity began when he left for England. It began when he didn't throw the decorated coconut as an offering to the waves. His rejection of his family began on the ship with the rejection of the food given by his mother. The smell of the food made his cabin mate twitch his nose and from here began Jemubhai Patel's negation of his family and he labelled his mother's love as 'undignified love, Indian love, stinking, unaesthetic love' (Desai 2006). With his arrival at Liverpool to the band playing "land of Hope and Glory" Jemubhai Patel's identity crisis deepened. Wherever he went people kept a distance from him and the young ones giggled, "Phew, he stinks of curry!" (Desai 2006, 39). Jemubhai made friends with another Indian Bose but they avoided other Indian students and places frequented by them. Bose corrected Jemubhai's pronunciation and people started taking him for 'a man of dignity' (Desai 2006, 119). In England Jemubhai started to see himself as a victim of racism and colonialism and upon his return to India distanced himself from his family and perpetuated violence against his wife, "He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both" (Desai 2006, 119)

The life of Jemubhai Patel is nothing but mimicry - mimicry of the Europeans and his obsession with cleanliness sets him apart from his own people. Bhabha defines 'mimicry' as the process by which the

colonized subject is reproduced as 'almost the same, but not quite.' (1994, 86) While the Indian nationals were fighting for independence, people like Jemubhai Patel were, through English education, affected by what Ashis Nandy has called 'the second form of colonization' which 'colonizes minds in addition to bodies' (1983, ix) and alters cultural priorities. The result is what Charles Taylor calls the 'misrecognition' (Ghosh-Schellhorn 1998, 139) of one's values in the related context of multiculturalism.

Similarly the other characters also combat questions of national identity. Gyan is a Nepali who comes to teach Sai. The cook was expecting a Bengali tutor, not a Nepali because 'Bengalis are very intelligent' (Desai 2006, 73). Such statements show how human beings generalize among people on the basis of religion, region, nation etc. In his book 'Identity and Violence' Amartya Sen talks of "singular affiliation" (Sen 20) which he explains as 'assuming that any person prominently belongs, for all practical purposes, to one collectivity only - no more, no less.' In the novel the cook lays stress on Gyan's national identity, disregarding other affiliations. Similarly Lola and Noni have hired Budhoo, a retired army man to guard them but they didn't trust him completely. His national identity came in question all the time: "I tell you these Neps can't be trusted. And they don't just rob. They think absolutely nothing of murdering, as well." (Desai 2006, 45) Such singular affiliations work even among the migrants and can be seen in the 'Desi against Paki' (Desai 2006, 23) war in the basement of a restaurant in United States. In contrast, the character of

Saeed Saeed, a Muslim from Zanzibar shows how people have 'multiple affiliations' but choose the ones they want to give preference to, "*First I am a Muslim, then I am Zanzibari, then I will BE American.*" (Desai 2006, 127)

Different from all these is Sai. A dispossessed being, she is living at Cho Oyu with her maternal grandfather, Judge Jemubhai Patel. Without any strong sense of paternal identity and recognition, she takes life as it is. She is envious of the love that the cook has for his son, Biju as she misses her parents' love who had left her in a hostel and had gone to Russia where her father was a scientist. She falls in love with her tutor, Gyan but she finds that Gyan had broken her trust when Gorkha boys had attacked their house and taken her grandfather's rifles. She belongs to the other side of the divide and Gyan always felt uncomfortable in the presence of her grandfather. In the midst of their blossoming love, another thing was growing on the hills – insurgency with slogans like "We are stateless," "It is better to die than live as slaves." "We are constitutionally tortured. Return our land from Bengal." When Gyan became a part of the Gorkha Movement, the differences between the two increased and their love wilted away. Though education has sensitized her towards the feelings of the cook, Gyan and others but it is not appreciated by the neo-educated like Gyan who think that she is just making fun of him and his background.

Migrants

Through the story of Gyan, Father Booty and Biju, Desai touches upon the issue of

migrants. Living in Diaspora means living in either a forced or a voluntary exile and this usually leads to identity confusion. Salman Rushdie in 'Shame' writes:

"All migrants leave their past behind although some try to pack it into bundles and boxes – but on the journey something seeps out of the treasured mementoes and old photographs, until even their owners fail to recognise them, because it is the fate of migrants to be stripped of history, to stand naked among the scorn of strangers upon whom they see their rich clothing, the brocades of continuity and the eyebrows of belonging." (Rushdie 1983, 116)

Such is the case of Father Booty, a Swiss Jesuit priest who has been living in India for the last 45 years but turns out to be a foreigner whose certificate of residence has lapsed. After his camera was confiscated by the police at Kalimpong, his house too was turned upside down and it appeared that he was living illegally in India. The political situation in the north-east brought turmoil in his life and he was asked to leave the place where he had resided 'illegally' for 45 years in two weeks. Suddenly he had become a threat to 'national security', and his home and dairy were illegal. He had to sell his house to a Nepali doctor at a meagre price. (Desai 2006, 220-222) The question is does one need a passport or has to be born in a country to prove that s/he is honest person working for the well-being of the nation? If this is the case then there shouldn't be uprisings and violent demonstrations by the 'citizens' of a nation during which property worth crores is destroyed.

Gyan is a Nepali whose family had migrated to India in the 1800s and they have a history to tell beginning with Gyan's great-grandfather who joined the Indian army. Gyan, on the other hand, wanted to leave everything behind and fly away to the land of opportunity – America or Britain or Australia. He wanted to 'free himself from family demands and built-up debt of centuries' (Desai 2006, 157). His is the story of young men who are drawn into insurgency and rebellion. Gyan is an Indian citizen but he and his family are barely on the margins of the middle class. They are treated like minority in the area where they are actually numerically in the majority. When Sai visited his house, she found that it 'didn't match his talk, his English, his looks, his looks, his clothes or his schooling.' (Desai 2006, 256) She realized why he had always been silent on the subject of his home and family. He assumed that silence would lend him dignity. Young men like Gyan whose family sacrificed a lot for their education are ripe candidates for insurgency movements as they don't get jobs to better the lives of the members of their family. One day Gyan came across the procession of men on Mintri Road shouting 'Jai Gorkha' (Desai 2006, 156) which showed him the sense of injustice which the Gorkhas felt. The leaders addressing the procession brought to notice how not even one of the tea gardens was owned by a Nepali, even though they were eighty percent of the population, their children couldn't learn their language in school. Articulating the problem of the Gorkhas, one of the men said:

"In our own country, the country we fight for, we are treated like slaves. Every day the lorries leave bearing away our forests, sold by foreigners to fill the pockets of foreigners. Everyday our stones are carried from the riverbed of the Teesta to build their houses and cities. We are labourers working barefoot in all weather, thin as sticks, as they sit fat in managers' houses with their fat wives, with their fat bank accounts and their fat children going abroad." (Desai 2006, 159).

Though Gyan is an Indian and father Booty has spent most of his life in India, the act of the government agency makes them outsiders signified by the use of words like migrant, refugee etc. The refugee, the political prisoner, the disappeared, the victim of torture, the dispossessed – all have been excluded, to different degrees, from the fraternity of the social sphere, appeal to the safety net of the nation-state and recourse to international law. They have been outlawed, so to speak, placed beyond recourse to law and yet still in a precarious relationship to law itself. (Downey 2009, 111) The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has developed a theory of marginalisation that goes beyond the binary distinctions to be had in dichotomies such as inside/outside, centre/margins, inclusion/ exclusion. In albeit abbreviated terms Agamben is interested in lives lived on the margins of social, political, juridical and biological representation, not for their exceptional qualities but for their exemplary status: the manner in which they are both representative of modernity and an

admonitory warning to the ontological basis of the modern political subject. (Downey 2009, 110)

Agamben through his discussions outlines the manner in which the Roman citizen is reduced to 'bare life' by sovereign decree and deprived of basic rights such as representation before the law. Desai clearly shows how the people in the North – East had to raise their voice for their development and when it went unheard organizations like GNLF became a plank for protest but its members were castigated by the nation – state.

Growth of Insurgency

The lives of Lola and Noni show how the rich, to an extent, are responsible for the growth of insurgency in a particular area. The sisters stand for the middle class the world over and they have a very narrow view when it concerns people of the lower class. To them "it was important to draw the lines properly between classes or it harmed everyone on both sides of the great divide." (Desai 2006, 67) The occupation of Mon Ami, the residence of the sisters, by the poor Gorkha families opens the eyes of Lola and Noni to the differences between them and the Gorkhas and Sherpas. They with their rich lifestyle had been at the centre, ignoring the marginalized and the result of all this was the beginning of insurgency –

"It *did* matter, buying tinned ham roll in rice and dal country; it *did* matter to live in a big house and sit beside a heater in the evening....; it *did* matter to fly to London and return with chocolates filled with kirsch; it *did* matter that others could not. They had

pretended it didn't, or had nothing to do with them ... They, amid extreme poverty, were baldly richer, and the statistics of difference were being broadcast over loudspeakers, written loudly across the walls." (Desai 2006, 242)

Through the words of leaders of GNLF, people like Gyan came to the realization "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." (Desai 2006, 160) To an extent it can be said that negating other affiliations and looking at people singularly leads to the growth of insurgency as in the case of the birth of GNLF. Neglect is reason enough for resentment but "a sense of encroachment, degradation and humiliation can be even easier to mobilize for rebellion and revolt." (Sen 2006, 144) Poverty and a sense of injustice over a period of time leads to the eruption of violence and people like Gyan felt ashamed of their cultural background and felt anger at the exploitation of their resources. Not only this but the hatred that takes birth makes one ignore all other things except their own self and Gyan, we find, became critical of Sai for celebrating Christmas and says, "You are like slaves, that's what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself. It's because of people like you we never get anywhere." (Desai 2006, 163)

He has forgotten that Christians like Hindus and Muslims are also Indians. His actions and criticism of Sai for not knowing Hindi shows 'resistance to westernization'. (Sen 2006, 84) It can be said that the characters of the Judge and Gyan articulate 'the dialectics

of the colonized mind' (Sen 2006, 85) which includes either a slavish imitation or admiration for the West or a disaffection, hostility towards western attitudes. How is one to achieve a decolonization of the mind? To this end, Sen writes, "Decolonization of the mind demands a firm departure from the temptation of solitary identities and priorities." (2006, 99) Development and positive change can come not in isolation but in an atmosphere of cultural interchange.

The birth of GNLF was due to the treatment meted to Indian Nepalese. They were treated as minority in their own area and exploited as labour. GNLF demanded recognition and status for them. For this purpose many young men came into its fold but things took a violent turn:

"The incidents of horror grew, through the changing of the seasons..... Roads were closed, there was curfew every night, and Kalimpong was trapped in its own madness....."

If you were a Nepali reluctant to join in, it was bad. The Metal-Box watchman had been beaten, forced to repeat "*Jai Gorkha*" and dragged to Mahakala Temple to swear an oath of loyalty to the cause.

If you weren't Nepali it was worse.

If you were Bengali, people who had known you your whole life wouldn't acknowledge you in the street." (Desai 2006, 279)

The narrator mentions of incidents where circuit houses are burnt and houses of relatives of politicians are destroyed. A

movement which sprung to create recognition for one group has turned into a movement which has divided others on the basis of state and region. It seems that 'belongingness' is not country specific but region specific. The violence that has grown with the movement is not only due to the injustices suffered by Gorkhas but also due to ignorance. Some may say that it was a policy of the dominant to keep them ignorant so that they may be exploited. Ignorance also results in insult as can be seen in the treatment meted out to the Judge at the beginning of the novel. (Desai 2006, 5-8). To an extent it can be said that people like the Judge are responsible for such behaviour. They belong to the upper strata of society in terms of Education as well as money but when it comes to treating their fellowmen, they show disgust and disdain. This is clearly seen in the manner the Judge treats Gyan when he stays back at Cho Oyu in the stormy weather. (Desai 2006, 110) And later we find Gyan critical of the mannerisms of Sai and her grandfather. Such differences also contribute to the growth of rebellion in people. How can such problems of insurgency be solved? One of the ways would be 'an equitable sharing of the benefits of globalization'. (Sen 2006, 145) This can be done through a process of integration and 'social opportunities of education and participation in civil society.' (Sen 2006, 150) Acceptance of a multicultural outlook and cultural diversity will lead to a positive contribution in the life of the common man.

Agamben mentions that basic universal human rights of Taliban individuals while captured in Afghanistan

and sent to Guantanamo Bay in 2001 were negated by US laws. In reaction to the removal of their basic human rights, detainees of Guantánamo Bay prison went on hunger strikes. Within a state of exception, when a detainee is placed outside of the law, he is according to Agamben, reduced to 'bare life' in the eyes of the judicial powers. Here, one can see why such measures as hunger strikes can occur in such places as prisons. (<http://www.generation-online.org/p/pagamben.htm>) Within the framework of a system that has deprived the individual of power, and their individual basic human freedoms, the hunger strike can be seen as a weapon or form of resistance. The resistance by the Gorkhas can be compared to an extent with the Guantanamo Bay. For the Gorkhas too it was an issue of existence and identity in a country which calls them its citizens but treats them as outsiders.

The story of Gyan shows how migrants, even after centuries of residence, in a country are still ignorant and treated as second-class citizens. On the other hand, the cook's son, Biju is an illegal immigrant in the United States. He works in different restaurants in New York. His father is waiting for him to earn money and return so that he can live comfortably in his old age. Biju is not much different from the early immigrants from India who have opened restaurants and are leading a successful life as he too wants to make money. Biju's interactions with Americans and non-Americans reveal the confusions he has about people's identity and nature. Saeed is a Muslim but not a Pakistani, so it is fine to be friends with him. The stories back home

about black people further increased his dilemma. But the feeling of hatred for the Blacks created in him "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 2006, 77).

Multiculturalism and Globalization

While presenting the story of immigrants like Biju, Desai touches upon the phenomenon of Multiculturalism and Globalization. Defined in a number of ways, Globalization, in the economic context, means the removal of barriers between national borders in the flow of goods, capital, services and labour, though barrier in the path of labour does remain in the form of visas and other governmental acts. Biju, Saeed Saeed and other people have migrated to America in the search of jobs and better life style. We find restaurants like 'Baby Bistro', 'Le Colonial' etc. which have the American flag on the top but Indian, Guatemalan flag (in form of the workers) below. (Desai 2006, 20-21) But these workers are illegal immigrants. They don't have the requisite work authorization and need the green card. For this reason, some like Saeed marry American citizens, planning to divorce them after getting the green card and later marrying someone from their own community/background. (Desai 2006, 318)

Biju is influenced by the priority Saeed Saeed gives to his religious identity and refuses to work in restaurants where meat of cow is used. He finally got a job at Gandhi Café run by three brothers – Harish-Harry,

Gaurish-Garry and Dhansukh-Danny in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. The way they have transformed their names shows attempts by them to be recognised by names familiar to American tongue. The two names show the cultural confusion present in migrant Indians, 'the half 'n' haf' crowd, the Indian students coming in with American friends.....' (Desai 2006, 148) Though globalization has brought in modernization at places like the airport but here too difference between the first world and the third world remains prominent. Even now traces of colonialism are evident in the treatment meted out to people from the third world countries. The first stop for Biju's return flight was Heathrow and:

"they crawled out at that far end that hadn't been renovated for the new days of globalization but lingered back in the old age of colonization.

All the third world flights docked here, families waiting days for their connections, squatting on the floor in big bacterial clumps, and it was a long trek to where the European-North American travelers came and went, making those brisk no-nonsense flights with extra leg - room and private TV, whizzing over for a single meeting..." (Desai 2006, 285)

The policy of difference is clear when Biju lands at New Delhi and passengers report that their baggage has been misplaced:

"They are giving compensation to non-resident Indians and foreigners, not to Indian nationals.....", "Foreigners need money for

hotel/toothbrush--" and the official said:

"It IS Air France policy, madam," he repeated. As if throwing out the words *Paris* or *Europe* would immediately intimidate, assure non-corruption, and silence opposition." (Desai 2006, 298)

This clearly shows that even today most of the independent nations of the world still suffer from a mental colonization. The green cards and passports of NRIs are to an extent instruments which aid such colonization.

Biju returned to India for the sake of his father. But the treatment meted out to him by the GNLF men made him question the act of returning despite warning from the travel agent, and also Harish-Harry who had advised him to take rest and come back to work. In his own country he is treated savagely; he loses his clothes and the hard earned money. Biju's arrival home and his meeting with his father shows that nothing but the love of the family is important in one's life and even nature supports it: "The five peaks of the Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent." (Desai 2006, 324) The treatment meted out to Biju can be compared to the treatment meted by the state to its citizens when it suspends rule of law and turns on its own citizens and, through intimidation, banishment and the penalty of death. (Downey 2009, 111)

Conclusion

Culture, community and family are dispersive of globalization and any attempt to uproot one's self from family ties of the

homeland will be futile. In *'The Inheritance of Loss'* Kiran Desai has tried to capture her own knowledge about what it means to travel between East and West, and to examine the lives of migrants who are forced to hypocrisy, angst of being nabbed,

and have biographies that have gaps, and whose lives lack trust and faith as we find in the case of Sai and Gyan.

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