

Research Innovator

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal



Vol II Issue II : April 2015

Editor-In-Chief

Prof. K.N. Shelke

www.research-innovator.com

Research Innovator

A Peer-Reviewed Refereed and Indexed International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Volume II Issue II: April – 2015

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**Portrayal of Relations and Globalization in Kiran Desai's Novel
'The Inheritance of Loss'**

Dr. Khandekar Surendra Sakharam

Asst. Professor, Department of English, Arts, Commerce & Science College, Wada. Dist- Palghar, (M.S.) India

Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to focus on 'The Portrayal of Relations in Kiran Desai's novel *'The Inheritance of Loss'* in global context. *The Inheritance of Loss* is ultimately concerned with Globalization than it is with the underlying processes that contribute to these ideas. Perhaps, the most critical contribution Desai's novel makes to conversations about globalization is its refusal to view either in the positive or 'celebratory' light often attributed to them by mainstream Western thought. On the contrary, this novel offers a challenge not only to those who view globalization as 'positive' changes evidencing the progress achieved through modernity. By writing her novel from perspective of the 'Shadow class' (which includes, for the sake of my argument, both Indians living in India and Indian immigrants living in England and America) Desai offers a way for her Western readers the effects of modernity, globalization from outside of the Western world. Her novel works to shed light not only on the ways in which the very 'benefits' of modernity for some are the cause of shame, self-loathing and solitude for others.

Key Words: Kiran Desai, The Inheritance of Loss, Globalization

In this sense, Desai's novel demonstrates, virtually from start to finish, the ways in which the West insists upon forcing its presence upon non-Western countries, while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the presence of those same 'distant others' even when they are no longer distant at all, but are in fact, the very people cooking the meals that these Westerners eat. However, it is also important to pay attention to the ways in which Western elements infiltrate the non-Western world. One of the popular 'positivist' views of globalization is that it offers non-Western nations new opportunities, new access to cheap commodities, and a chance to experience modernity. The cook and Gyan, for example, are two characters whose homes are marked by the struggle for modernity,

a struggle which is nevertheless littered with various useless things, such as pieces of a watch that never worked, but is nevertheless too valuable to throw away. (280,327) On the other hand, for middle class characters such as Lola and Noni, who proudly invest in British jam and Marks.

Yet, what ultimately results from an embracing of Western culture and commodities by such characters as Lola and Noni is not only the creating of rifts between citizens of different classes within India, but also the 'uncoupling of the natural link between, amongst other things, languages and nations, languages and national memories, languages and national literature, creating the "condition for and enacting the fractures of cultures"' (Mignola, 42). Lola and Noni are not the

only characters guilty of participation in this process, indeed, both Sai and her grandfather are virtually unable to speak the native language of Kalimpong, and conversely, read and study almost entirely in English. However, their detachments from the culture of the nation in which they live not only help to create a 'fracturing' of national culture within India, but also a 'fracturing' of the minds and identities of these characters, who find themselves constantly torn between East and West, tradition and modernity, 'Indianness' and 'Britishness.' Examples of the colonization of Jemu, Sai, Lola and Noni abound throughout the novel: Lola, for example, speaks of Trinidadian-born British writer V.S. Naipaul as "strange, struck in the past... He has not progressed colonial neurosis;" her own daughter, who works for BBC in the "completely cosmopolitan society" of England has, Lola wants it noted, no such "chip on her shoulder"(52). Sai's colonial mentality, although existing in a different form than Lola's is quite present nevertheless; she learns at an early age that "cake was better than laddoos, fork spoon knife better than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds. English was better than Hindi"(33). Upon her arrival at the judge's house, which ends Sai's education at the missionary school, the Judge decides to have Sai educated by Noni, explaining that he couldn't "send Sai to a government school you'd come out speaking with wrong accent and picking your nose" (38). Troubling as his statement is, this is one of the more minor examples of Jemu's internalizing of a colonized mentality – not only does he consistently powder his own dark skin with white make-up, but Jemu also learns to mix 'pity with shame' when thinking of his own parents' Indianness

(42). Even the cook, perhaps the most subjected to inequality and unfair treatment, is not free of the internalization of a colonized mentality: he considers his working for Jemu to be 'a severe comedown' since his father had 'served white men only' (71).

The solitude and isolation that Jemu experiences as a result of his psychological colonization is another indication of the ways in which globalization is usually far less 'positive' than its proponents would make it seem. The notions of increased communication and interconnectedness which are often cited as major benefits of a globalized world hardly seem to exit within *The Inheritance of Loss*; indeed it is not only the judge who is isolated from those around him, but the majority of the characters in the novel as a whole. The home in which the judge, Sai and the cook live together, for example, is considered by the boys who invade it to be a place of 'intense solitude' (7). Although all three have shared the same space for many years, Sai and judge barely speak, while Sai and the cook speak to one another in a 'shallow mix' of English and Hindi where 'the brokenness made it easier never to go deep, never to enter into anything that required an intricate vocabulary' (21). The cook and the judge fare even worse despite having lived with another "for more years than they had with else, practically in the same room, closer to each other than to any other human being." There is 'nothing zero, no understanding" (344). This lack of communication between three people all sharing the same small space not only speaks to the ways in which the erosion of language and cultures as a result of modernity decreases connectedness rather than increasing it, it also speaks to the

ways in which the forms of technology and communication which proponents of globalization conceive of as forming 'connectedness' often have no impact upon many human beings whatsoever.

Aside from the way in which Biju feels that he becomes 'the only one displacing the air' in a space which should have 'included family, friends,' his lack of access to communication and information in New York is another excellent example of the ways in which the benefits of globalization are strictly limited to a select few (293). In a critique of the ways in which globalization, modernity and technology alter communication and information, Jameson writes that "rather than the return of startling reports from remote places," information in the global era beings to "slip insensibly in the direction of advertisements and publicity, of postmodern marketing, and finally of the export of TV programs" (56). Jameson's argument is an important one, one which we do see reflected in Desai's novel through Lola and Noni's obsession with their satellite television programmes, which cause them to have virtually no idea of what is going on in the immediate world around them. However, Jameson seems to write his critique from an exclusively Western perspective here, failing to consider not only how who come from the 'remote places' he speaks of getting their information about the rest of the world, but also how those who come from the 'remote places' to America or other 'modern countries' are not able to access these forms of technology, communication or information at all. Indeed when Biju returns to Kalimpong at the end of the novel, the man at the bus station is surprised at Biju's ignorance about the

political situation there – "How could he not know? Where had he come from? From America, no newspaper, no phone ..." (340).

The way in which Biju and his co-workers imagine the capabilities of technology indicate their extremely limited familiarity with the same forms of communication most Americans have taken completely for granted for the past several decades. However, even more problematic is the fact that their fear of the immigration hotline leaves many of them in the limbo of illegal status. For Biju and other illegal immigrants in New York, the inability to effectively communicate with those in the immigration department only helps to further the continuation of a 'shadow' existence. Far from experiencing America as a land of economic opportunity, the lives of Biju and those around him serve as grim challenges to any claims that globalization offers an increased chance for 'equality' between the rich and the poor. However, while Biju's experiences do much to suggest to Western readers the ways in which America are experienced entirely differently by non-Western people who migrate to the West, the fact is that Biju writes completely exaggerated success stories within his letters home to his father in order not to disappoint him is another major problem to which Desai points. Because of the ways in which notions of the American dream get exported to distant places.

Yet, it is perhaps the sorrow of the journeys and travels of immigrants which Desai most beautifully, and most painfully, depicts within her novel. Offering a sharp contradiction to the notion of movement as a form of liberation, freedom or luxury, Desai describes people like Biju and Jemu

as 'condemned to movement' (112). The idea of movement as somehow damning or punishing plays a vital role in displaying the underside of globalization, particularly since many Western people consider movement not just the freedom afforded them by cars and public transport, but also the luxury afforded them quick, cheap travel overseas on planes or cruise ships – as something that is taken for granted, an obvious benefit of modernity and globalization. Desai uses this idea of movement not only to display the differences between those who move freely or leisurely and those who are forced to move, but also to give a sense of how movement, for immigrants, contributes to their erasure from everyday life. Biju's grief is far from the only sense of sadness readers are asked to sympathize with when learning of the tribulations that immigrants and immigrant-hopefuls undergo. Those who arrive outside of the Queen of Tarts bakery in New York looking for Saeed appear "looking weary as if they'd been travelling several lifetimes;" (105).

These inequalities in economics, culture, quality of life, and ability to maintain relationships with one's family and one's people are perhaps the best examples of the fact that globalization is not a 'new' world system that embraces positive ideals such as multiculturalism, progress and modernity, but is, rather a newer version of the same form of world domination upon which imperialism and colonialism were founded. Often, theorists of globalization attempt to posit it as precisely the opposite of what Desai's novel presents as a world system which is somehow different from the ways in which dominant nations of the 'past' exploited weaker nations.

As Pankaj Mishra notes in her review of the novel, the fact that Saeed has little choice but to eagerly accept this job, despite all of the horrible history behind the corporation's success, indicates a kind of humiliation that people in the West are scarcely aware of but which is a humiliation that is nevertheless experienced by most of the world's population. Mishra adds that Desai's novel makes is to insist that the shift from 'colonization' to 'postcolonialism' to 'globalization' is hardly indicative of a sort of global progress, rather, it is merely the recasting in a new vocabulary of "old ideas and prejudices that have not vanished" (37). Yet, even amidst its despair, sorrow, grief and pain, *The Inheritance of Loss* is still, in many ways, a novel of humour, irony and joy, subtly but effectively ridiculing globalization and its consequences, not just as pernicious and horrible and oppressive, but also as laughable, absurd and incomprehensible. Images and descriptions which make a mockery of modernity abound throughout the novel, Lola imagining 'tikka masala whizzing by buses, bicycles, Rolls-Royces as the equivalent of a scene from *To the Monor Born*.

For, if there is anything Desai's novel demonstrates by the time it concludes, it is that, although the influences of globalization often seem inevitable or unavoidable in our current moment, there are ways to challenges and counter-act globalization's principles, ideologies and its consequences. As the novel comes to a close moments of realization begin to occur which suggest, in small ways alternatives to the 'global lifestyle' and its many horrifying effects. The cook for one knows that "memory isn't everything.

There was that simple happiness of looking after someone and having someone look after you” (95).

The Inheritance of Loss ultimately attempts to subtly suggest to readers that fulfilment, all too often sought through material happiness, can indeed still be found through emotional experiences and human interaction. Increasingly, the novel begins to focus on ‘simpler pleasure’ the image of “two figures leaping at each other in the morning dawn, or Sai’s realization that “music alcohol, and friendship together could create a grand civilization” (244). Moments such as these remind us of what we all too often forget through the rush and hustle of ‘modern’ living, the disconnected communication provided by technology, and the privileging of commodities and meaningless concepts over human interaction, emotion and engagement. None of these things, *The Inheritance of Loss* ultimately insists, have become permanently lost with the rise of the modernity – rather, they represent the shimmering of honest humanity, much of which has been lost in the global world, but which might, nevertheless be found again, if only with some effort and willingness to pay closer attention to the beauty of the world in which we live.

All too often, theorists of globalization conceive of it as inscribed with a preordained logic which presumes a singular historical trajectory or end condition, it becomes viewed as the “last of stages of global transformation” (33). Yet it is precisely this very notion of globalization as an ‘unchangeable’ force or an ‘end’ of the progress of civilization that makes it appear so unchallengeable to so many. What Desai reminds us continually

throughout *The Inheritance of Loss*, however, is that none of us is larger than the natural world in which we live- as she notes, the mist charging down like a dragon is engaged in the process of “dissolving, undoing, making ridiculous the drawing of borders” (10). Desai’s insistence on historical systems of domination such as colonization and globalization as constructed by human-kind, and as mere moments within an interrelated history, serves as a crucial reminder that none of these global transformations are natural or inevitable; as such, it follows that none of them are unchangeable. The question Desai’s novel poses to Western readers is whether or not they are ready to participate in bringing about the necessary change. Regardless of whether the Western world wishes to acknowledge it, novels like *The Inheritance of Loss* shed light on the fact that the ‘shadow class’ cannot remain in the shadows forever – eventually, those reaping the benefits of globalization will have to face the destruction and violence that globalization, imperialism and colonization impose and have imposed upon other people and other nations. It seems advisable that West comes face to face with these ‘shadows’ sooner rather than later, for shadows are always, in some sense reflections of the self. The destruction the West has caused and continues to cause others will, if unacknowledged, eventually come full circle; the potential then, to save humanity as a whole, rather than to destroy it completely, seems a wonderful and hopeful idea that Desai’s novel beautifully, subtly and powerfully suggests all these things.

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