



DIASPORA, IDENTITY AND UNHOMELINESS IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with Kiran Desai's Booker Prize Winner novel *The Inheritance of Loss* focusing how the western hegemony attracts the orients to its educational periphery. The study challenges the dominance of the West which has created binaries among the occidents and orients during colonial period. It also explores how Thomas Macaulay's Minutes presented in the House of Commons in 1835, and subsequent implementation by the British Government in colonized India created vacuum of heritage in many of the Indians' minds. Under the influence of the colonizers' planned educational system and selected western values in India, people like Jemubhai Popatlal Patel start thinking about their primrose flight to Britain by leaving behind their roots. For them, the western world is a kind of developed, authentic, superior, dominating and powerful centre of perfect identity formation. After his return from the hostland to homeland, Jemubhai considers Indians powerless, inferior, inauthentic and illiterate, and behaves like a mimic, hybrid but homeless diaspora. The term diaspora refers to a person who has been dispersed or scattered and carried with it the ambiguous status of migrant, envoy or refugee, either by choice, by accident or by force from roots, community or native homeland to various parts of the world. He looks everything with an eye of colonial mind-set. No doubt, he is born and brought up in Indian roots and culture who looks like a typical Indian in blood and colour but has now been converted into an eccentric English in taste and mimic in opinions for whom English values come first while living close to the foothills of the Western Himalayas in Kalimpong, not in his birthplace Piphit, where he reimagines his identity within and beyond boundaries as a hopeless diaspora. These experiences lead him to in-betweenness, uncertainties and unhomeliness between his heritage and inheritance. Thus, his journey from an orientalist to an anglicist world shapes his identity into isthmatic and dialectic which seems to be in transit. Salman Rushdie expresses that "our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools" (15). The present study reveals how diaspora reimagining their identities beyond boundaries in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*.

KEYWORDS: Hegemony, orient occident, binaries, mimic, hybrid, diaspora, identity etc.

INTRODUCTION

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is considered to be the best version of diasporic studies, identity crisis and questions of boundaries. While going through the text, it reveals how dexterous the novelist is in delineating various ways, values and ventures of human existentialism. Human existence becomes a symbols of fragmented selves from normal self, and complex from simple. All these come to arise for the sense of establishment either in assuming to be superior or to show powers to the others or downtrodden. Though they themselves are going through the processes of being and becoming, yet they pretend to be the saviour and well-wishers of the non-English non white and non western citizens. They apply their instincts, interests and intentions for their so-called welfare and well-being but behind all these, they have self-interest, self-recognition and self-reliance. These clever but hidden designs are shadowy for the orients who are not in the position of perceive and understand as they have no option but to follow the orients blindly but willingly. Edward Said opines that Orientals do not understand western prejudices, power dynamics, biased discourse and cultural domination. They are made "ideological construction of a

mythical "Orient" whose characteristics are treated as immutable traits defined in simple opposition to the characteristics of the "Occidental" world" (101). Same the case is there with the major characters in Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, Biju, Sai and Gyan who become directly or indirectly the tools of western domination. Anila Pillai argues that "the predominant traits of existentialism are alienation, quest and conflict. Aspects of alienation and conflict are epitomized in the lives of the protagonists. The retired judge, Sai, Gyan and Biju are a study in alienated and existential angst" (172).

Jemubhai Popatlal Patel while studying in Bishop Cotton School in Piphit under British colonial India, he starts reimagining his identity especially after seeing the portrait of the Queen Victoria (Desai 58) of England hung on the entrance of the school gate attracts him so much that he becomes obsessed that he should also become a powerful and famous personality in under British Government in India.

For the fulfilment of his desire, he used to study English ways of life so intensely that he despises his own culture, ways and values. For him, Englishness is a priority and an essential part of his school life. Thus, Jemubhai gets deviated willingly from his



family line, cultural aspects and social values during the British Raj in early 1940s in order to achieve name, fame, wealth and influence by becoming a Magistrate through English studies in England. On the surface level, it seems to be a very simple decision but it has deeper meaning and consequences. For the huge society, leaving from own roots and clinging to others by one or two persons do not matter, but matter when these simple and ordinary people get mimic and anglicized, and later on, behave like typical English personalities but what about their brown skin. In order to be mimicked, they pretend to look like White people but from where they show their confidence and supremacy, they don't. In some instances, they behave like those people who, no doubt, have 'brown skin,' but pretends like 'white mind.' But here too they don't have. In such circumstances, they neither belong to nor long, but become something else which is beyond their reach, boundaries and limits. In short, they unhome their home and home their unhome. This sense of unhomeliness turns out to be a misfit diaspora who adjusts neither in homeland nor in hostland. This situation arises due to his priorities both within and beyond boundaries. The way his mind is captivated, captured and encircled around Macaulay's defective education system is more important than anything else. How this system did explore English lovers and converted them into anglicised agents during colonial period. Susheel Kumar exposes the tendency of the Western world in his thesis how they falsify,

The truth, history and philosophy and befool the people of the colonies. So, in order to acquire land, labour, liberty, language and legacy in the East through the processes of exploration, expropriation, appropriation and exploitation the West only prefer their civilization, religion and commerce to explore God, gold and glory during their colonization.²⁵⁴

People like Jemubhai Papatlal Patel comes under their plan who firstly criticize their own values, education and culture, then abandon them in the hope of primrosy future in hegemonic western world and become second hand denizens in their hostlands. Jemubhai during his early days of school education comes under the influence of this defective but partial British education system. He rejects age old Indian Knowledge System and adopts, adapts and adept the western and orients. For him, western education system is hegemonic and after learning all the technicalities in England, he too will develop the capacity to rise above the Indians, rule over the locals and run down them whenever he wants to. This deviation or distraction is dangerous and horrible not only for himself but for the entire society or to whomever he meets. Jemubhai has now taken complete shape of what Thomas Macaulay dreamt of during Indian colonization who wants to erect "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, opinions, in morals and in intellect... through our English school"⁽⁴⁹⁾

After completing his studies in England, Jemubhai refused to live in his parental village, Piphit but decides to live in the palatial house made by "a rich Scotsman" (Desai¹²) in the foothills of the Western Himalayas in Kalimpong all alone to create the impression of "being foreigner" (Desai²⁸) studied in

Cambridge University. He has changed his name into James Peter Peterson or Jemubhai Papatlal Patel or the Judge or James indicating his multiple but fractured identity. All his ways, manners and whims reflect aspects of westernization. He eats, thinks, feels, acts and behaves like a mimic English person who seems to be far away from British people and his own home but his identity lies only in transit, neither here nor there but nowhere. He

GREW stranger to himself than he was to those around him found his own skin odd colored, his own accent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely managed to lift his lips in a smile, and if he ever did, he held his hand over his mouth, because he couldn't bear anyone to see his gums, his teeth. They seemed too private. In fact he could barely let himself peep out of his clothes for fear of giving offence.... To the end of his life, he would never be seen without socks and shoes and would prefer shadow to light, faded days to sunny, for he was suspicious that sunlight may reveal him, in his hideousness, all too clearly. (40)

All these things develop complexities, eccentricities and idiosyncrasies in his hybrid and hypothetic identity. No doubt, he becomes a judge under British Raj yet he misjudges everything and everyone. He leaves his parental village; his own daughter rejects him and gets married to Mr. Mistry at her own; his granddaughter Sai is unable to understand him, Panna Lal hates him, Biju dislikes him who wants to be richer than him. His relations with his parents are not healthy and wealthy. What to speak of his relations with his wife Bela exposes him through and through. He marries her not that he loves her, but only for the sake of dowry so that he could go to England. He often beats her whose name is changed from Bela to Nimi only under the impression of westernization and modernization. He criticises her time and again saying that "an Indian girl could never be as beautiful as an English one" (Desai⁶⁸). He hates her presence so much that he provides nothing to her but physical punishment, domestic violence and psychological torture. Subsequently, he "bought a ticket, returned her to Gujarat" (Desai³⁰⁵). His father, Bomanbhai's regret clarifies that "it was a mistake to send you away. You have become a stranger to us" (Desai³⁰⁶).

After the decolonization, no doubt, the focus of the contemporary literature shifts to the postcolonial diaspora and identity through rediscovery, commitment and action, yet the colonial domination has already dismantled the original periphery of the orients. After his return, Jemubhai Papatlal Patel remains no longer a committed Indian, but turns out to be a hybrid identity. John McLeod observes that "hybrid identities are never total and complete in themselves" (254). Jemu considers himself to be a privileged, hegemonic and special among the orients. But reality lies elsewhere. His hybridity develops in ambivalence and in-betweenness what Homi K. Bhabha's "third space of enunciation" (37). He becomes a prisoner of his own making world. Shallow as well as superficial life has created a kind of abysmal in his psyche which keeps on growing bigger and bigger day by day. Thus, his life of being an anglophile becomes a useless chaser to become like the ones he used to adore once. The people live



around him either hate him or make fun of his strange attitude, etiquettes and actions. Helen Tiffin observes and shows an appropriate mirror to the West as:

Pre-colonial cultural purity can never be fully recovered. Post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridised, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity. Decolonisation is process, not arrival; it invokes an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them; between European or British discourses and their post-colonial dis/mantling. Since it is not possible to create or recreate national or regional formations wholly independent of their historical implication in the European colonial enterprise, it has been the project of post-colonial writing to interrogate European discourses and discursive strategies from a privileged position within (and between) two worlds; to investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained its codes in the colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world. (95)

Jemu's relations with his daughter are also not at healthy terms who once ran away from her home and got married to Mr. Mistry, member of Indian Air Force at her own choice. He controls his orphan granddaughter, Sai in his house. For this, he hires, Gyan her private Mathematics tutor who teaches her at home, so that she may not be mixed with her fellow students just as Heathcliff controls Junior Cathy in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Sai gets confused which education system she should follow whether the British traditions, customs and education she has already received at St. Augustine's Convent School in Dehradun from Nuns or the teachings she is now receiving at home from Gyan, a Nepalese diasporic identity and a staunch follower of GNLF. But she could not follow anyone as Gyan has separate issues, different circumstances and cultural priorities. She also gets entangled between Indian knowledge system and Macaulay's education system. She learns nothing but falls in love her teacher, Gyan. Thus, she spoils Teacher-Pupil tradition in Indian Knowledge System. She utterly fails in her brief span of love affair with Gyan. Gyan rejects her for having much involvement in the western culture and negation of her root culture who behaves like slaves of the West and "running after the West" (Desai 163). Conflict arises when Sai comes to know Gyan's activities in Gorkha National Liberation Front movement and his responsibilities in violence and theft of guns in Cho Oyu, she becomes angry and quarrelsome with Gyan. Gyan sees Sai as contradictory but imperialistic figure not fit for his culture. Thus, he calls her Anglophilia and rejects her. Later on, Gyan tells it to his friends:

She who could speak no language but English and pidgin Hindi, she who could not converse with anyone outside her tiny social stratum, She who could not eat with her hands; could not squat down on the ground on her haunches to wait for a bus; who had never been to a temple but for architectural interest; never chewed a paan and had not tried most sweets in the mithai shop... she

who thought it vulgar to put oil in your hair and used paper to clean her bottom; felt happier with so-called English vegetables, snap peas, French beans, spring onions, and feared feared-loki, tinda, kathal, kaddu, patrel, and the local saag in the market. (Desai 183)

Sai also receives ambivalence and in-betweenness in her relationship with her grandfather's neighbours like Noni, Lola, Father Booty and Uncle Potty who belong to the upper-class and follow English traditions like celebrating Christmas, reading English literature and listening to the BBC, and her preference to talk with typical Indian, Panna Lal, grandfather's Cook to whom she treats as her father. Her talking to him indicates that she values Indianness who wants to know more about India. Jemubhai often criticises her for spending much of her time with cook, a man as he disdains India poor Indian culture and has made her almost a foreigner to traditional Indian values and ways in his house. She has learnt "the foreign culture and prefers cake to ladoos, eats with fork spoons than hands, speaks English than Hindi" (Desai 30) on Indian soil. With the result of which she is forced to confront a conflict between Westernized ideals and Indian heritage making her isolated and complex identity who now requires independence, self-discovery and self-reliance hoping to leave her grandfather's strict, stern and restrictive house. She does not want to lose her innocence and inheritance. But she becomes "estranged Indian even living in India" (210).

On the other hand, Gyan's main aim lies only in the formation of the separate state of Gorakhaland, not in teaching Sai like students. He needs shelter, space and place so that he can move on to his tactics and struggle in order to achieve his sole target. That's why he does not reveal the truth to Sai that he is the active member of GNLF. Thus, he conceal the truth and reality from her and keep indulging himself in his plans simultaneously.

As far as Biju is concerned, he is Panna Lal's only son, a working servant under the anglicised and anglophied Jemubhai Popatlal Patel in Cho Oyu. Biju watches each and every activity of his father's master intently as well as jealously. He sees how Jemubhai eats, drinks, sleeps, behaves and especially makes-up himself as a civilized British, but is not in reality. He feels jealous of his walking and talking in eccentric, mimic and indifferent like ways of British culture and styles. His pompousness in the name and fame of British returnee seems artificially foolishness but a nonsense. He wants to get rid his father of his continuous torture, illegitimate slangs and so-called high profile status. His money-mindedness, fakery and showiness drive Biju towards migrating beyond boundaries, not in Britain but in America, bigger than Jemu's hostland where he will earn money more than him and, finally will save his father from his ill-words and ill-treatment. No doubt, the inspiration of migrating to America comes from James Peterson, yet this inspiration gets bigger and stronger than him during the course of time. Panna Lal strongly admires that his son has the capability that he can handle all the situations in America and will earn money more than his eccentric master. He believes that "America is the best country in the world. All these people who went to England are now feeling sorry" (Desai 85). For Biju



and Panna Lal, America is the land of fulfilling dream just as American brothers like Peter to Simeon in Neill Eugene's play *Desire under the Elms* where Peter proposes Simeon to leave the Cabot farm as early as possible because they see no future there, "if we ploughed in California, there would be lumps of gold in the furrow we would make by our ploughs.... Let us drove off into the West" (1.1. 79). One thing is clear that Panna Lal has become crazy about his decision. For him, no matter where his son will live, in which conditions, he will make arrangements and what he will do during the time. He even does not know that he will be arrested for being illegal migrant. In America, Biju has been seen wandering from one place to another in search of shelter, job and security. The tag of illegal migrant bears the impression that he is under threat and can any time be imprisoned. What to speak of Americans, even the diaspora and fellow country men do not help him in finding job, safety and security. He has to live under the shabby basements and polluted kitchens of New York. He is "ill-equipped" (Desai 24) "living like a pig" (Desai 188). He often hears words from his bosses like "know how easily I can replace you?... Get out of my face!" (Desai 188), "he smells" etc. (Desai 48). In one of the occasions, Mr. Iype, the news agent speaks off handedly by asking "You are from Darjeeling side, no? Nepal making trouble... very troublesome people... They should kick the bastards back to Nepal.... This country is different" (Desai 228). In one of the occasions, he is badly beaten by the American boys on issues of race and culture. He criticises his father "for sending him alone to this country" (Desai 81) as nobody is his own there. He misses *roti, choolah, atta, pitaji* and rejects *angrezikhana*. Moreover, Green Card is mere dream whereas he will die "illegal in America" (Desai 100). He sees the truth that migrants have to face inconveniences and uncertainties in abroad. He realizes what James Clifford remarks about diaspora "who usually remain in subordinate positions by established social structures" (534). Now Biju promises himself, "he would forget the insight, begin anew" (286). Moreover, his senses of alienation, marginalization, rootlessness, and unhomeliness make him patriotic where he decides: "His country called him again. He smelled his fate" (Desai 138). Thus, in the early days of life an ambitious Biju becomes ambiguous migrant in later years whose identity seems to be reborn and revived. His sense of unhomeliness becomes contradictory what Jacques Derrida remarks in *Dissemination* that "it is neither desire nor pleasure but between the two. Neither future nor present, but between the two" (212). His dream of earning money more than Jemubhai is broken into pieces who wants to start afresh and anew in his homeland, not in hostland. But Biju is not fortunate like Ben in Arthur Miller's play *The Death of a Salesman* where he "walked in the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty one and by God, I was rich" (33). Ben's going to the jungle in America and coming out of as a rich man is made possible only by establishing supremacy where 'might is right' and jungle laws are flourished. In Biju's perspective, reality lies in the fact that he reaches his home in Kalimpong from America empty handed and without clothes. Because he is other, subaltern, orient and primitive eastern. Thus, from becoming to being, Biju has to go through

specific places, discourses and positioning. In Stuart Hall's opinion, diasporic identities, "are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (236).

To conclude, Paul Gilroy's remarks are worth mentioning that migrants have, "plural status of diaspora as diaspora-dispersion and diaspora- identification coexisting in opposition" (211). Both Jemubhai Papatlal Patel and Biju pose questions that migration, displacement, mimicry, alienation, hybridity, in-betweenness and othering bring feelings of more losses than enrichments among diasporic identities. No doubt, Jemubhai earns degree and works as a Judge but does not maintain social status, gain affection from family, respect from fellow beings and love from his wife. By the end, he can be seen weeping over the loss of his dog miserably. Otherwise, he becomes helpless and hopeless colonial diaspora. On the other hand, Biju fulfills his father's dream by the way of migrating to America for money, but returns disappointed and empty handed during postcolonial era. Avtar Brah argues that:

The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are potentially the sites of hopes and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure. (193)

In Jemubhai and Biju's cases, traumas of separation and dislocation do not fulfil their potentialities, hopes and emotions, but they need reassurance, resemblance and reconfiguration. As far as Sai is concerned, she is taught British philosophy, culture and literature and deliberately keeps her arm's length from native roots, values, culture and Indian Knowledge System. She becomes a symbol of diaspora without migrating to the foreign land. Her Indianness converts into Englishness whereas her Englishness does not satisfy her quest for sure identity which is still in transit. On the other hand, Gyan, a desperate diaspora in India who desires for a separate Gorakhaland by hook and crook, watches how his dream is being spoilt through violence, theft and gun points and remains a nostalgic, marginalized and alienated identity in ambivalent and dialectical situations. Thus, Jemubhai reimages his sure identity through earning degree in England and bulldozing status in India; Biju yearns to earn money in America, but becomes a bagger like denizen; Gyan protests for separate Gorakhaland from India, but becomes helpless and hopeless angry young man and Sai through the teachings of Nuns at Augustine Convent School to the strictness at Cho Oyu in Kalimpong becomes an internal diaspora who visits through western hegemonic texts. It is suggestive to sum up what Robin Cohen remarks that, "Diasporas are in a continuous state of formation and reformation... different ways, opened up new opportunities for diasporas to emerge, re-emerge, survive and thrive" (141).



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