

# **Cultural Conflicts and Quest for Identity: A Post-Colonial Approach to Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss***

**A. Annie Jannet**

Research Scholar

and

**A. Rathina Prabhu**

Supervisor

Assistant Professor of English

St. John's College

Palayamkottai

The present paper aims at analyzing the issues of quest for identity and cultural conflicts in Kiran Desai's "*The Inheritance of Loss*". Her second novel "*The Inheritance of Loss*" published in 2006 and won "Man Booker Prize" and "National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award". Cultural conflicts force the immigrants into an identity crisis. Desai also portrays the cultural clash between East and West. The characters in the novel try to tackle the problem of loss of identity. The manners of Judge Jemubhai is very much British. He cannot get himself free from the Gujarati tradition. He has been caught between past and present. He has been educated in Cambridge University. He has faced cultural trauma during his days in England. He has to respect for Indian Culture and underestimates himself for being an Indian. Loss of identity is one of the major problems in the society. Dislocation of culture leads to identity crisis. The outcome of post-colonialism has been dreadful in Kalimpong. The Nepalese want independence who have chosen brutality as a tool to obtain peace want independence. Desai recounts the difficulties faced by the people who get influenced by western culture.

The Gorkhaland movement is a historic backdrop of the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. The effect of post-colonialism is a major theme throughout the novel. Most of the characters in the novel are influenced by the consequences of colonialism. Due to the effect of post-colonialism each character undergoes some sense of loss.

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. We must fight, brothers and sisters, to manage our own affair. We must unite under the banner of the GNLF, Gorkha National Liberation Front (159).

## Cultural Conflicts and Quest for Identity: A Post-Colonial Approach to Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* – April - June 2018

*The Empire Writers Back* uses the term 'post-colonial' to refer to "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 194).

Desai illustrates the pain of exile and the effects of post colonialism with the following characters: old Judge, Sai his sixteen year old orphaned granddaughter, a cook, cook's son Biju, who is wandering from one place to another. Due to pitiable living conditions he is not able to settle in one place. Desai's characters from all cultures sacrifice their life for their children. But, sometimes they behave mercilessly towards people they love. They reject the old values and traditions.

Gyan is the representative of the Nepali minority. Within the Indian Society, he tries hard to discover his own identity. Gorkhas are the majority of population in the town of Kalimpong, which is a ethnic identity of Nepalis. Gyan's family migrated to India in 1800s. Political insurgency is highlighted throughout the novel. Gyan's great grandfather has joined the Indian Army. Gyan is a young man who has become a rioter. "When he emerged from the shop, he was gathered up by a procession coming panting up Mintri Road led by young men holding their Kur Kris aloft and shouting, Jai Gorkha". (156)

During the 1980s Indian Nepalese demand a separate land for themselves. The Indian Nepalese youth has formed the Gorkha National Liberation Front. "fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority. They wanted their own country, or atleast their own state, in which to manage their own affairs". (9) These people have been treated like slaves though their forefathers have sacrificed a lot for India. The Gorkhas think that it is their right to fight for their homeland. Both British and Indian Army have used the brave Gorkha soldiers for their self-importance.

Due to the political insurgency and commotion created by the GNLF, situation in Kalimpong is highly fierce and rigid. The insurgents are totally against Bengalis and also all the strangers. According to them Bengalis are the main cause for their extreme pain and difficulty. Though they involve themselves in political insurgency they have not succeeded. They are not able to get a separate homeland for themselves. The two major characters are the inheritors of loss.

Desai narrates the affair of Gyan, a Math tutor and Sai, an Anglicized girl. Their affair has been broken due to the effect of post-colonialism. Gyan involves himself in the political activities of the Gorkha National Liberation Front Movement. The Indian Nepalese soldiers sacrificed their

## Cultural Conflicts and Quest for Identity: A Post-Colonial Approach to Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* – April - June 2018

valuable lives in alien places for an unknown cause. Even after the independence Indian Government has not done anything to the marginalized Indian Nepalese who have done their service to Indian defense service. Indian Nepalese youth is the much affected party. They are unable to get proper career and suffer a lot from dearth. Deficiency is the reason why Gyan along with other Kalimpong Nepalese youth involve in political activities and try to get a separate state to be ruled by GNLF.

Kiran Desai explains clearly how insurgency at Kalimpong has led to loss and ejection of people. In the post-colonial situation the marginalized or the oppressed become the aggressor. Due to the rebellious activities of the insurgents, people in the town suffer miserably. Revolting and plundering lead to the total confusion. Nepalese fight for their freedom and desire their land. They think that violence is the tool to solve the problems.

Jemubhai and Sai follow the westernized culture. But Gyan does not want to be influenced by westernized culture. He tells Sai that they are all like slaves to the west and imitating the whites.

I am not interested in Christmas!" he shouted. "Why do you celebrate Christmas? You're Hindus and you don't celebrate Guru Nanak's birthday or even Durga Punja or Dussehra or Tibetan New-Year"...

"Do what you will, "he shrugged, "it's nothing to me - It only shows to the whole world that you are a FOOL. (163)

Sai's lack of Indian identity creates aversion in Gyan when he goes to canteen.

Gyan wants his country to be free from the influence of colonialism. He has been influenced by nationalism. So he scolds Sai for being influenced by the western culture and for having lost her own culture.

Desai also presents an exact image of the harmful effects of insurgency. People at Kalimpong have been assaulted by the insurgents both physically and mentally. Besides, they have been attacked by the police at the time of insurgency. GNLF protests against the lethargic attitude of government towards Gorkha's problems and arranges women rally to march to the police station. They set the documents on fire during the insurgency the consequences of post colonialism have been severed in Kalimpong. Desai has illustrated and made the readers to feel the efforts taken by the GNLF to abolish the effects of colonialism. In order to get an identity for them, they have been struggling.

## Cultural Conflicts and Quest for Identity: A Post-Colonial Approach to Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* – April - June 2018

Desai has vividly pictured the Indian class and caste system after the influence of colonialism, through the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. Judge, Jemubhai Patel has born in a middle class family and went to England in 1939. He returns as an ICS officer serving in British and hates his family and community for not being British. He settles in an old mansion which has been built in the colonial era. Desai creates tapestry of characters, they live with questions of identity, exile and estrangement at home as well as in foreign lands. "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". (131)

Jemubhai has become doubly displaced when he returns home. The 'in-between' space is found, when the colonizers and colonized are mingled. In the 'in-between' space, variations of different cultures find a common ground.

Sai has studied in a westernized convent and lives with her grandfather. So she is strongly influenced by western culture. She does not get love from her grandfather and also she cannot maintain good relationship with the cook. Clash of different cultures are experienced by her. Cook sends his son Biju to work in New York. Hoping to get a better life in America, he leaves India. Though USA is a land of opportunities, he is paid less and lives under fear and miserable conditions. Due to the lack of green card, he lives as an illegal immigrant and jumps from one job to another. Finally, under loss of hope and home sickness, he returns to his homeland. The westernized culture is superior to theirs' is the mindset of the colonized people.

Identity crisis is the consequences of colonialism. People can understand the other culture when various cultures are mingled with each other. But their identity will be lost by them. People understand the feelings of others and their culture. In this novel, there are few characters who under estimate their own culture.

As per Indian culture and tradition, grandfather is expected to be attached to the grandchildren. But the arrival of Sai creates a chaotic situation in the life of Judge. Jemubhai has studied in Cambridge University. During his days in England, he has faced cultural conflict. Which lead him to under estimate himself and his own culture. Being an Indian, he has no respect of Indian culture and heritage. As a result, he is not cheered by the arrival of his granddaughter who is an orphan. Sai expects only love from the other characters of the novel. When Sai and Gyan are deep in love, Gyan hates her for imitating the western culture. He calls her as a 'copycat'. "Don't you know these people you copy like a copycat, THEY DON'T WANT YOU!!!". (164)

## Cultural Conflicts and Quest for Identity: A Post-Colonial Approach to Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* – April - June 2018

Gyan wants to follow the Indian culture whereas Sai has followed the western culture. As a convent student she has adopted to follow the western manners. So Gyan shouts, "You are like slaves, that's what you are, running after west, embarrassing yourself. It's because of people like you we never get anywhere". (163) As an Indian Sai has lost her identity here and he tries to make it clear to her. These are the effects of colonialism.

As an illegal immigrant Biju tries to sustain himself in the foreign land, tries to accept the lowest job. He has less expectation and even hides his identity from his father. He has struggled to find his own identity in the alien land because he has lost his identity in New York. He is not able to make friends. He is doubly alienated from the people of New York. Even he is 'othered' by the people of his own country. This leads him to the sense of loss and hatred.

Desai describes the miserable situation of Biju in the alien land. She brings out the fact that Indian culture is underestimated in most countries especially in New York. She has portrayed the sufferings of the Indian immigrants, ignorance of the family members and how they find difficult to get a green card in USA. Desai draws everyone's attention who are influenced and affected by the western culture and also gives solution through the characters of her novel. Her thoughts are expressed by the characters of the novel. As an observer of human behavior, she has fulfilled the liability of writing about the current issues. People search their identity outside their country. But they forget to consider the value of their identity in their own country.

Thus, *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with the political, social problems and the psychological problems which is faced by the Indian immigrants in both America and England. This novel paints the picture of 'in-between' which it means living between East and West. It also shows how Indians get unaccustomed to various cultures all over the world.

### Works Cited

Ashcroft, Bill. Griffiths, Gareth. Tiffin, Helen. et. "Post-Colonialism in the twenty first century".

*The Empire Writers Back*, USA and Canada. Routledge, 2002. Print

Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*, Viking, India: 2006. Print

<http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream.pdf>

\*\*\*\*\*