

## THE THEME OF ALIENATION IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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Received: 17 Nov 2018

Accepted: 24 Nov 2018

Published: 26 Nov 2018

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### ABSTRACT

*The theme of alienation has been recurrent in the Indian English fiction. It has become a major concern for post-modern writers and Kiran Desai, daughter of Anita Desai is no exception. She has explored this contemporary issue in her second novel The Inheritance of Loss for which she took eight long years to complete. The various themes which are intertwined in the novel The Inheritance of Loss are globalisation, multiculturalism, insurgency, poverty, isolation and issues related to Loss of identity. The author Kiran Desai exposes powerfully the ill-effects of globalisation and liberalisation which profess to create wealth and improve the quality of life; but in reality widen the gulf between the rich and the poor. She powerfully delineates how the sense of 'loss' has started with Jemubhai Patel, the Judge who vainly attempts to become an Anglicised person and gets alienated in the process in the colonial period. This article explores the theme of alienation in Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss.*

**KEYWORDS:** Alienation, Immigrant, Globalisation, Multiculturalism, Isolation and Loss of Identity

### INTRODUCTION

This novel is about the rigid class systems that exist in India and abroad among Indians and the struggles that the people face within these classes after colonialism. The novel presents us with a three-way narrative split, relating the stories of the sixteen-year-old Sai, her bitter grandfather and Biju, their cook's son, who tries to make his way as an illegal migrant worker in New York.

The theme of alienation is a pivotal concept in post-modern Literature. It has been in use in theological, philosophical, sociological and psychological writings. Alienation is a state of man's incompatibility with his milieu. It refers to the polarisation between man and nature and the disintegration of man's dream of bliss. It also reflects a state of man's detachment from himself, with a prevailing sense of loneliness or a feeling of exclusion that accompanies any behaviour in which the person is compelled to self-destruction. The individuals are forced to manipulate people and situations in accordance with the social demands, while feeling incapable of controlling their actions.

Alienation is an old phenomenon but it has assumed alarming proportions in the present age. Several factors have brought about this state of awareness. The feeling of alienation is inherent in man as he is prone to almost all the physical and psychological attacks of society and its controllers. The negative effects of alienation lead man either to commit suicide or to consider himself not more than an automation deprived of any personal ranking or individuality.

In the present day, writers like Anita Desai, Bharthi Mukherjee, Kiran Desai and Arundhati Roy write about the theme of alienation in their novels. Kiran Desai in her novels is constantly concerned with alienation of the protagonists from themselves, from society and from others. She depicts the dilemma of modern man. She is not a social realist in the conventional sense of the term. She is more interested in portraying the responses of a sensitive mind to the world around her/him.

Alienation is a condition in the rich social relationships reflected by a low degree of integration or common values and a high degree of distance or isolation between individuals or between an individual and a group of people in a community or work environment. The term alienation itself comes from the Latin *alienus* which meant 'of another place or person', which in turn came from *alius*, meaning 'other' or 'another'. The term alienation has been used in varied meanings over ages. In the ancient times it was used in the metaphysical sense of achieving a higher sense of contemplation.

Alienation is estrangement from other people, society or work... a blocking or dissociation of a person's feelings, causing the individual to become less effective. The focus here is on the person's problems in adjusting to society. However, some philosophers believe that alienation is inevitably produced by a shallow and depersonalised society. It results in people feeling meaninglessness and purposelessness in their lives. The contemporary man fails to perceive his purpose of life and constantly searches for his place in the world. Globalisations have improved the quality of life in India but of course only to a minority of people. Besides this, the gulf between the rich and the poor has also deepened. This created an atmosphere where all relations including the familial relations have become commercial. It has created a society where ethics and human values are sacrificed for the sake of success.

Kiran Desai has been greatly influenced by her mother Anita Desai. As an immigrant, she experience alienation, isolation, depression, cultural shock, oppression, etc. and these traits are reflected in all her novels.

The various themes which are intertwined in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* are globalisation, multiculturalism, insurgency, poverty, isolation and issues related to loss of identity. Though in the twentieth century the world has become 'Global Village' due to the rapid advancement in Information Technology, the distance between the hearts and minds has increased. This is reflected in the relations between Jemubhai and his granddaughter Sai and other inhabitants of Kalimpong. The worst side of this can be seen in the longing of the Cook and his son Biju to meet, at least to talk to each other. The novel is also a social criticism focusing on the poverty and misery of North-East India and its religious-socio-political conflicts, presented through subtle humour and irony. The object poverty of Gyan and other Gorkhas bring to limelight the discrimination faced by the ethnic minorities in the country.

In *The Inheritance of Loss* through the character of Biju, she expresses her own feelings and emotions. Biju acts as the mouth piece of Kiran Desai. Biju feels alienated in New York, where he switches from one job to another and from one hotel to another. As an immigrant in New York, he has no one there to help him. So he feels isolated in the glamorous city of New York. He longs to come back to his motherland. The novel has autobiographical overtones and the novel can be viewed as having themes of belonging, estrangement, exile and home coming.

In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, a retired judge Jemubhai Patel feels alienated, depressed and isolated in England. Sai is a westernised Indian brought up by English nuns and feels estranged in India. Her mastery of the English language and little knowledge of Hindi make her a stranger in her own country. She develops a feeling of rootlessness in Kalimpong as she is caught between two extremely different cultures, the Indian and the western. Finally, she leaves the

Judge's house in search of a home that would really make her happy. Biju belongs to the shadow class of illegal immigrants in New York. He tries to eke out an existence without being caught in an alien culture which is not kind to him. Thus, the judge Sai and Biju suffer from rootlessness, alienation and quest for identity.

In New York, Biju finds himself cast in a strange world, a world where sympathy, fellow feeling and peaceful co-existence does not seem to exist. He spends his time changing jobs, enduring deplorable conditions and trying to dodge the immigration authorities of the United States. As he is an illegal immigrant, he is forced to work for very low wages and experience extreme servitude to his employers.

Even though Biju is desperate for a green card, at the core of his heart, he is crying for India and its soothing familiarity. America has created a profound chasm in him. When Biju makes telephone calls to his father in India, his imagination vividly recreates the atmosphere of Kalimpong where his father resides. He can, "feel the pulse of the forest, smell the humid air, the green-black lushness; he could imagine all its different textures, the plumage of banana, the stark spear of the cactus, the delicate gestures of ferns..." (230).

Sai is main female character in this novel. She is studied in a convent school where English was the medium of teaching and consequently she learnt English and English Culture. After coming to live with her father, she meets Gyan, the Nepali tutor. Their different attitudes towards the western culture threaten their relationship. Sai eats with a fork and Gyan uses his hands as he is not aware of the western ways of eating. Later when he has a dinner with the judge, his discomfiture with the fork and knife is shown again. But, interestingly, when he dines at the judge's house later on, he feels embarrassed for the way he uses the fork and the knife. He suffers from an inferiority complex but later on he refuses to adopt the western culture and retreats to his own culture.

Gyan joins 'Gorkha National Liberation Front', he admits to "the compelling pull of history and found his pulse leaping to something that felt entirely authentic" (160), and recovers a sense of recognition by mocking at the judge's mimicry of the western lifestyle but such attempts are nothing than illusions as Ashcroft maintains "within the syncretic reality of a post-colonial society it is difficult to return to an idealized pure pre-colonial cultural condition" (Ashcroft 108). The fact that today the whole world is toward a 'Global Village' makes cross-cultural exchanges and influences inevitable. Educated in a convent school, is influenced by western culture and impressed by her grandfather's use of better English than other people but the idea that the Indian culture is inferior is intolerable to her.

Kiran Desai was a Diasporic writer. Her characters are immigrant aliens. They feel alienated in the foreign countries. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Sai is an orphan and she lives in the house of her grandfather. Judge Jemubhai Patel feels that his lonely lives are affected by the arrival of Sai. Then he identifies the characteristic traits in the new comers.

The technique of flashback is used by the novelist to serve her individual purpose. Kiran Desai efficiently handles the flashback technique through the characters of Jemubhai Patel and Biju and brings out the impact of the past on the present secluded life.

## CONCLUSIONS

Kiran Desai successfully describes the Alienation and the encounter of east and the west with the help of two characters. Both, the Judge and Biju have been immigrated to west in the hope of their better life. The Judge after a career in the Indian Civil Services that followed his education in Cambridge in the 1930s settles in Kalimpong. His own feeling of hatred for his skin colour, family, community and traditions makes him an insignificant character. Another is Biju, the cook's son, struggles as an illegal immigrant in America and the only character in the book who is unwanted in the country he lives in. In the whole journey for success, this exploited, poor, homeless character struggles for his identity which makes him able to save himself from being an inconsequential character. Thus, the feeling of being marginalised compels them to come back to India. Kiran Desai weaves a story full of juxtaposition that is both heart breaking and full of hope.

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