



Debatable Dilemmas in Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss*

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ABSTRACT: *The anti-colonial struggle and unification of people under the banner of nationalism earned India's independence from the clutches of 'the Colonial' back in 1947. People of various cultures, tradition, ideas and ethnicity were unified under the banner of India. Even though the country advocates for "Unity in Diversity" "its diverse people break the very idea as they resort to colonial notions by subjugating their own fellow beings. The demand for separate states of Khalistan, Bodoland, and Gorkhaland etc...and the anti-discrimination movement lead by Dalits and other minorities are perfect examples for such struggles. The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai exposes the struggle for Gorkhaland as an example of an instance of neo-colonial subjugation in the unified India.*

KEYWORDS: Anti- Colonial Struggle, Caste System, Cultural Diversity, Neo- Colonial Subjugation, Patriarchy, Poverty.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Our nation cannot be completely made responsible for these conflicts since even the concept of 'nation' happens to be a western contribution. Robert J.C.Young observes, 'Nationalism, as Benedict Anderson has suggested, is often creation of those who have left the country' (*POSTCOLONIALISM, A Very Short Introduction*, p.63). Similarly John Mc Leord argues that 'The nation is first and foremost a Western idea, one which emerged at a certain moment in western history' (*Beginning Postcolonialism*, p.104). He also says that nationalist movements in the colonies were led by the colonized elites and they manipulated it as a tool for subjugating and ruling the lower classes. The colonized elites adopted western ideas on modernity to form their nation. So when the colonial receded, the colonial minded elites of the native communities began their neo-colonial reign. Mc Leord also comments that even though the western educated colonized elites keep arguing for the natives, they try to keep the poor desolate ordinary people away from acquiring power. He also says; 'representations of nationalists struggle tend to celebrate the inspirational activities of individual members of the elite and do not recognize the role played by less privileged individuals or groups in resisting colonial rule' (*Beginning Postcolonialism*, p.108). A similar account of marginalization is given by a Gorkha leader in the novel;

We are laborers on the tea plantations, coolies dragging heavy loads, soldiers. And are we allowed to become doctors or government workers, owners of the tea plantation? No! We are kept at the level of servants. We fought on behalf of the British for two hundred years.....When the regiments were divided at independence, some to go to England, some to stay, those of us who remained here fought in the same way for India. We are soldiers, loyal, brave. India or England, they never had caused to doubt our loyalty. In the wars with Pakistan we fought our former comrades on the other side of the boarder. How our spirit cried. But we are Gorkhas. We are soldiers. Our character has never been in doubt. And have we been rewarded??Have we been given compensation??Are we given respect??No! They spit on us (*The Inheritance of Loss*, p.158).

So the disempowered, less privileged whining people from the margins inculcate in to insurgencies and conflicts. The demand for Gorkhaland by the bifurcation of West Bengal is such a struggle. Desai in her novel is trying to explore their problems of Gyan and through the tribe he belongs to. The neo-colonial subjugation can be made responsible for such conflicts that still haunt India.

The subjugation faced by the Gorkhas is evident through the struggles of Gyan to earn a job and supports his family. Even though he earned a degree it couldn't provide him with a job. His racial resemblance with the people of Nepal made his fellow Indians disbelieve him. As any other Gorkha he was also kept away from empowerment by the colonized elites. He expresses his rage when he says to Sai (a member of the elite class) that 'it's because of people like you we never get anywhere' (*The Inheritance of Loss*, P.163). Even though

Gyan belonged to India he was considered as a Nepali by fellow Indians. The demand for Gorkhaland is a demand for establishing their identity as Indian Gorkhas. It was lead mainly under the Gorkha National Liberation Front (1980s) and the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (from 2007). In an interview with the Darjeeling Times newspaper Alok Thulung, the then president of youth wing of Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha says that; 'Due to our features, race, culture, tradition and many other characteristics being similar to those of people of Nepal, we are subject to the humiliation of being foreigners in our own land where we are as Indian any other Indian citizen. It is this label of not only being referred to as well as dealt with as 'foreigners' in our own country, we are striving for a separate statehood' (July 23, 2008, interview, darjeelingtimes.com). He also adds that;

The gorkhas are a distinct race compared to the majority population of the state or West Bengal and have an entirely distinctive history, language, culture, tradition, way of life, mind-set and of course live in a different topographical region with an entirely different climate. As a result of this, there is a natural divide between the Gorkhas and the majority community in West Bengal. It is because of this natural divide that under the smallest provocation communal riots between the Gorkhas and the majority community takes place (the riots of 1970 , the riot in 2007 following Prashant Tamang becoming the Indian idol and the one as recent as on 12-06-08)(July 23 2008 , interview, darjeelingtimes.com).

Alok Thulung says that their racial resemblances with the Nepalese earn them the label of foreigners in their own country and it is for their identity that they demand for Gorkhaland. He also adds that the situation of Gorkhas have improved considerably than what they must have experienced in 1980s(probably the time in which Desai's novel is set) and they live intermingled with other people of the West Bengal state. But it is mainly due to the identity crisis and the feeling of being a foreigner that they demand for a separate statehood. The foreigner feeling that Thulung talks about is also visible in Desai's novel. The GNLF leader in the novel says;

In our 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. Every day our stones are carried from riverbed of Teesta to build their houses and cities. We are labourers working barefoot in weather , thin as sticks, as they sit fast in managers houses with their fat wives , with their fat bank accounts and their children going abroad (*The Inheritance of Loss*, p.159).

Gyan's unsuccessful job interviews and Lola's and Noni's behavior towards their servant Budhoo also hints at the discrimination towards Gorkhas. Their ethnicity and racial resemblance with Nepalese make them more subjugated and alienated than the other poverty stricken poor Indians. As said earlier Gorkhas are not the only group who are marginalized, various ethnic groups and communities across India are being subjected to subjugation. Indian society even before the colonial invasion had such class discrimination. Caste system divided Indian society to the privileged and the unprivileged. Education and empowerment were luxuries that only the wealthier classes could enjoy. Colonial invasion privileged the wealthy to acquire western education. The transformation of elites into westernized increased the gap between them and the desolate. Acquiring western education is something to be encouraged but the already divided Indian society kept away the marginalized from acquiring education for a long period. So when it comes to a separate ethnic community the gap becomes even wider. The elites always tried to maintain the gap between them and the unprivileged. In the novel we find Noni the spinster arguing for the same;

It was important to draw the lines properly between classes or it harmed everyone on both sides of the great divide. Servants got all sorts of ideas , and then when they realized the world wasn't going to give them and their children what it gave to others , they got angry and resentful' (*The Inheritance of Loss*, p.159).

People like Noni from the wealthier classes became more class conscious acquiring western culture. It should be also noted that western education has also made some reversals in the power play and the class structure of India. Earlier it was the people of superior castes who enjoyed power. But with western intervention the degree of westernization determined the power of a person. Kiran Desai makes this point clear through Jemubhai. Jemubhai was born into a family of peasants, but his western education employed him with the right even to rule people from castes that were superior to him. The authority that the colonial exerted on Jemubhai enraged him and seeking the colonial pressure he exerted the same authority over the lower classes. Jemubhai;

Relished his power over the classes that had kept his family pinned under their heels for centuries— like the stenographer, for example who was a Brahmin. There he was, crawling onto a tiny tent to the side, and there was Jemubhai reclining like a king in a bed carved out of teak, hung with mosquito netting. (*The Inheritance of Loss*, p.61).

Indian population was a communion of contrasting thoughts, beliefs and ideologies and maintaining a tune of harmony is what runs the country. This harmony is broken now and then by various neo-colonial methods of playing superior. As the postcolonial critics argue for a world of equal voices, Indian society should also accept and fight for the argument. Their colonized minds and thriving to earn their lost significant, but they sadly end up imagining them at least superior to the fellow identity seekers. The question of superiority that has been injected into the minds of natives is what makes they play 'the neo-colonial'. These neo-colonial ruling

strategies are what force the marginalized to create bloodsheds. This can be only avoided by erasing the question of superiority from the world and for this we should resort to Frantz Fanon's strategy of 'decolonizing the native minds'. Desai in her beautifully carved world invites our attention to all these issues and persuades us to contemplate over and read the world around in a different perspective.

Her novel is not a one sided attack. She also invites our attention to India's internal issues as well. It is a fact that a vast majority of Indians oscillate between modernity and superstitions. Western education and rational thought couldn't win over their superstitious beliefs. Desai questions such cultural weirdness through her novel. We listen to Sai saying that, 'worst are those who think the poor should starve because it's their own misdeeds in past lives that are causing problems for them' (*The Inheritance of Loss*, p.200). To gain equality with other people we should first eradicate our 'Victorian' model superstitions from the society. It cannot be obtained by blindly westernizing us. Jemubhi can be taken as an example here because even though he tried to run away and melt in the western culture and condemned his culture, we find him resorting to superstitions. Education should be acquired to enlighten the confused minds rather than using it as a weapon for superiority. This is a fact that our society forgets from time to time. Even though we argue that we do embrace rational thought our reactions to certain situations declare our minds to be not that rational. When it comes to inter-caste marriage our society rip of their western attire and suddenly begin to talk about class superiority. In the novel we find Sai's parents eloping and getting married without the consent of their families. Even the judge considers it as a disgrace and abandons his daughter. In certain Indian villages the condition is even more fatal than the experience of Sai's mother. Indian patriarchy and still prevailing caste system accepts honour killing their children than to see them getting married outside the caste. The caste system is dividing our nation and hindering our nation from prosperity. Considering the need to maintain a harmony in the society, the supreme court of India commented that 'inter-caste marriages are in "national interest" as a unifying factor in a nation where caste system is a "curse"' (Krishnadas Rajagopal, Inter-caste marriages in national interest: SC, April 10 2011, archive.indianexpress.com). He also adds that the maximum the family can do on such issues is to break all the ties with their children. Their rage should not end up in bloodsheds. It doesn't mean that you should break all your traditional ties or morality that you believe in, but to respect Individual freedom and thought.

Apart from these cultural issues poverty is an issue that eats our country. It is not because of its lakh of resources but of a corrupt resource management system. Robert J.C. Young observes;

People starve to death in India today not because there is no food, But because they have no entitlement to the food that is there. Today, more people in India suffer chronic malnutrition than in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, and more than half of all children in India are underweight. This occurs when in fact today India produces all the food it needs, and the government stockpile of rice and wheat compromises a quarter of the entire world food stocks. However, largely because of corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency, India's Public Distribution System, which controls these vast stores, appears to be completely powerless to help those, for example in Rajasthan and Orissa, who are starving to death, In order to get rid of its stocks, which cost half its annual budget to maintain, India has taken to selling its rice at a loss on the international market. While its own people starve to death, Indian rice exports amount to a third of the total rice exports to the world. (*POST COLONIALISM, A Very Short Introduction*, p.135).

What young points out is hard reality in India. In the novel, we witness the elites feeding themselves with imported food products from across the world whereas the rest of the valley strives hard to win their bread. A reflection of Young's observation is also seen in the novel through the experience of Biju;

Looking at a dead insect in the sack of basmati that had come all the way from Dehra Dun, he almost wept in sorrow and marvel at its journey, which was tenderness for his own journey. In India almost nobody would be able to afford this rice, and you had to travel around the world to be able to eat such things where they were cheap enough that you could gobble them down without being rich; and when you got home to the place where they grew, you couldn't afford them anymore. (*The Inheritance of Loss*, p.191).

The experience of Biju is similar to that of a majority of Indians who try to run away from their own country in fear of poverty. Mc Lhan's idea of a "global village" aimed at providing equal opportunities and options for everyone across the world. But it is sadly had turned up as a method of a modern colonialisation, where the wealthy could grab and gamble the resources they want from across the world. Indian products become hardly affordable by its people and they run behind imported goods. From across the world, companies sell items banned in India, no matter how much toxin they contain. Indian market consumes Vicks (a slow poison), Coca Cola and Pepsi (drinks confirmed to have 21 varieties of toxins), Kinder Joy 9 a toffee banned in Europe) and Lays (confirmed to have plastic ingredients) simply because they are western products. The advantage is ultimately to the first world's economic growth and one way or other our country remains subjugated to them. In a race to compete and equate with the west our country is leaving behind its unfulfilled basic needs and attaining those needs should be our primary concern.

The colonized elites with their western education viewed their fellow natives in a western perspective. They criticized their own country imagining themselves as someone belonging to the west. They forget their

responsibility to educate and uplift their fellow natives and instead they follow the colonial footsteps in criticizing them. For instance in the novel;

Women walked by with firewood on their heads, too poor for blouses under their saris. "Shame shame, I know your name," said the nun, feeling jolly. Then she felt less jolly. It was early in the morning and the railway tracks were lined with rows of bare bottoms. Close up, they could see dozens of people defecating unto the tracks, raising their bottoms water from a can. "Dirty people," she said, "poverty is no excuse, no it isn't, no don't try to tell me that. Why must they do such things here?"

"Because of the drop," said an earnest bespectacled scholar seated next to her, "the ground drops to the railway track, so it is a good place."

The nun didn't answer. (*The Inheritance of Loss*, p.30)

The rural people couldn't afford private toilets and they resorted to do that on railway tracks where they train bogies deposited the ground drops. The uneducated folk innocently imitate the technical responsibility to make them aware of the needs for proper sanitation. For over decades our government is trying hard to create proper sanitation facilities in the rural India. But such strategies would remain unfruitful if the educated stay away from empowering the unprivileged flaw of our railways. We can still witness people imitating the railways if we happen to travel in a train.

Bridging the gap between different classes is the only solution to resolve the quandaries of mother India. The classes not only refer to the wealthier and the poorer but also to the people of different traditions, religions, cultures and ideas. After the receding of the colonizer the privileged elites tried to keep the gap between people wider as possible so that they could suppress and squeeze the lower strata as the colonizers did on them. These neo-colonial strategies of suppressions resulted in increasing the class consciousness amongst the people. Further it resulted in various revolts and bloodsheds across the country.

II. CONCLUSION

Desai has been successful in portraying this class hierarchy through the Gorkha insurgency and the behavior of the elites towards the marginalized. She also draws our attention on how Indians resort to superstitions irrespective of their education and rational thought. She also points out that inter-caste relations are not a well-accepted idea in the Indian society. She also contrasts on the resources available to people leaving in India and US. She depicts the poverty stricken India and shows how easily Indian food is available in the first world. The novel points out on how globalization can be manipulated as a tool for subjugating the third world. Indian poverty is not something that has been completely gifted by the colonial; instead it is something that is created by the defective administration in India. We cannot blame anyone but our corrupt society. It is our responsibility to eradicate poverty from our society. It should be also noted that we should not haste to equate with the west until we create an equation amongst all people of India. Like any other third world country we also fail to provide even the basic needs to the marginalized. Providing an equal space for everyone is the first step of the postcolonial leap and we should also trigger our country to achieve the same.

So drawing an equation between the natives and the west would require a mental restructuring of the whole humanity. Postcolonial works aims at changing the different perspectives of people and tuning them to oppose subjugation of all means in the society. Accepting other traditions and cultures is the first step to attain equality. Desai argues to celebrate cultural hybridity and hence we may conclude that her novel '*The Inheritance of Loss*' is a work that addresses the issues of natives and argues for a global equality as in any postcolonial work.

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