

Ethno – Racial Identities in Kiran Desai’s the Inheritance of Loss

Dr. Kamaljeet Sinha

Asst. Professor (Adhoc), Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya
Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh)
romisinha13@yahoo.co.in

Abstract: *Racial and ethnic identities are critical parts of the overall framework of individual and collective identity. For some especially visible and legally defined minority populations in the United States, racial and ethnic identity is manifested in very conscious ways. This manifestation is triggered most often by two conflicting social and cultural influences. First, deep conscious immersion into cultural traditions and values through religious, familial, neighborhood, and educational communities instills a positive sense of ethnic identity and confidence. Second, and in contrast, individuals often must filter ethnic identity through negative treatment and media messages received from others because of their race and ethnicity. These messages make it clear that people with minority status have a different ethnic make-up and one that is less than desirable within mainstream society. The present paper presents the group of the middle class society who has been overlooked when it comes to race and ethnicity. Yet, despite not receiving sufficient scholarly consideration, it is clear that this group had their ethno-racial identities constructed over the years by the whites. That is, an examination of the ethno-racial identity formation process illustrate the significance of causal influences, the positive and negative consequences of one’s own identity, and the contemporary importance of their ethno-racial identity.*

Keywords: *Ethnic, Racial, Diaspora, Cultural identity, Exile.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian gentleman, with all self-respect to him, should not enter into a compartment reserved for Europeans, any more than he should enter a carriage set apart for ladies. Although you may have acquired the habits and manners of the European, have the courage to show that you are not ashamed of being an Indian, and in all such cases, identify yourself with the race which you belong.

- M.K.Gandhi

Fiction transmutes the facts and the reality of life. It embodies a comprehensive perception of the changing futures of life and reality. As a work of art, fiction mirrors the image of a specific historical milieu and the history of the life of the period. It is apparently different from the other branches of studies such as history, biography and sociology because of its constant efforts to focus on the complex nature and infinite variety of human relationships. The relation between society and fiction is interchangeable and reciprocate. Novelists, like poets and playwrights, thoroughly imbibe the history of mankind for their fictional sphere. They tend to assume that the novel should endeavor to depict “all varieties of human experience, and not merely those suited to one particular literary perspective.” (Watt, 11).

In the post 80's, Indian English fiction became more experimental, and one saw a more innovative use of language, form and content. However, external forces now often began to dictate the choice of theme and subject. A notable aspect of the renewed interest in this writing was the spate of writing by women novelists. The shaping of the middle-class subject had been the concern of the nineteenth century male and the female writers, who develop the ideologies of "Hindu" spirituality. Kiran Desai, winner of Booker Award, for her novel, The Inheritance of Loss (2006) is:

Open to two worlds and is constructed within the national and international political and cultural systems of colonialism and neo-colonialism. To be hybrid is to understand and question as well as to represent the pressure of such historical placement. (Sangari, 144)

As a postcolonial feminist academic, while sharing the writers’ hybridity and class location; draws attention to questions of ethno – racial identity in relation to boarder national histories and destinies;

and these leads to the unsynchronized and contradictory factors of ethnicity, class and gender. Ethno – Racial consists of ideologies and practices that seek to justify, or cause, the unequal distribution of privileges, rights or goods among different racial groups. Modern variants are often based in social perceptions of biological differences between peoples. These can take the form of social actions, practices or beliefs, or political systems that consider different races to be ranked as inherently superior or inferior to each other, based on presumed shared inheritable traits, abilities, or qualities. It may also hold that members of different races should be treated differently.

The Inheritance of Loss probes deeper into human motivation and tries to depict the existential predicaments of rootlessness, as the title itself indicates; the novel is about the ‘losses’ in the characters. They become rootless, restless individual dispossessed of India and disowned by USA, though the predominant theme of the novel is displacement, alienation and search for identity in alien environs. Kiran has set the story in an opening account of late-twentieth-century political and economic culture, in which ‘remorselessly selfish and narrow interests’ suppress an awareness of ‘the actual and often productive traffic among states, societies, ethno – racial group’s identities’. Her novel captures the imperialist attitude at its height, but allows us to see that the imperialist culture was circumscribed within larger history. This reminds me of Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, where the two visions became evident: one of the imperialist enterprise and second of an unsettling non-western world associated with the ‘darkness’ of the story.

The ethno – racial identity is explored in The Inheritance of Loss through the lives of the characters: Jemubhai Patel, a retired judge educated at Cambridge, and his cook’s son Biju, who lives miserably as an illegal alien in New York, which also resulted in darkness, as they were unable to adjust themselves with the society in abroad.

The self-righteous, are not always what they appear to be and often are filled with the judgmental attitudes and darkness, deep within their soul, are unable to love and express them to another person. And Jemubhai Patel is the epitome of that type of person. He lives in a crumbling isolated house at the foot of Mount. Kunchenjunga, with his cook and his orphaned seventeen-year-old granddaughter, and a dog Mutt, whose company Jemubhai prefers to that of human beings. The tranquility of his existence is contrasted with the life of cook’s son, Biju working in a grimy Manhattan restaurant and with his granddaughters’ affair with the Nepali tutor Gyan involved in an insurgency that irrevocably alters Jemubhai’s life. Briskly paced and sumptuously written the novel ponders question of nationhood, modernity and class, in ways both moving and revelatory.

The portrayal of Jemubhai’s character is very clear in these words of Desai, “more lizard than human. Dog more human than dog” (32). The retired judge, who as a young student travels from India to Cambridge to study law, on the strength of his admittance alone, being the first boy in the district to go to an English university and assured of a powerful career on his return, he acquires both a large debt from local moneylenders and a fourteen-year-old bride. His father-in-law arranges for members of a military band to serenade his departure at the Bombay docks. Right from the day, for him all the opportunity has passed by. The hopes of his family rested on him and he succeeded in leaving India for further education in England. When he moved in the ship, right from that moment he started facing the racial problem.

The future judge, then called only Jemubhai-or Jemu- had been serenaded at his departure by two retired members of a military band hired by his father-in-law. They stood on the platform between benches labeled “Indians Only” and “Europeans only. (36)

His arrival in England is met with less pomp – he struggles to find a room to-let, and when he does find one mile away from the university, his landlady is unwelcoming and insists on calling him “James”. Jemu spends his entire time at Cambridge locked in his room, studying fourteen hours a day, eating his landlady’s inadequate food and not making any friends. His color, his language all made him the embodiment of ‘other’ in England and he began to question his identity and his connection to India while there:

Jemubhai’s mind begun to wrap; he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, find his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely manage to lift his lips in 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 any of himself peep out of his clothes for fear of giving him offence. He began to wash

obsessively, concerned he would be accused of smelling, and each morning he scrubbed off the thick milky scent of sleep, the barnyard smell that wreathed him when he woke and impregnated the fabric of pyjamas. (40)

He passes his exams, makes it into the Indian Civil Service, and returns to India to serve Majesty as a magistrate. Having experienced awful dislocation in England, he now finds he can't make a place for himself in India; he is too English. He is sent back to India equipped with a snake-bite kit, a twelve-bore shotgun and a tennis racket. Despite a glorious reception, Jemu finds his wife grotesque and his people alien. He even rejects his daughter, his family, their ways and becomes more English than the English – trying (and failing) to hunt animals with his gun, eating toast for breakfast and crumpets for tea, and pouring all his love into his relationship with his dog. The judge is one of the 'ridiculous Indians' as the novel puts it who couldn't rid themselves of what they had broken their soul to learn and whose Anglophile can only turn to self hatred. These Indians are also an unwanted anachronism in postcolonial India, where long suppressed peoples have begun to awaken their views, to express their anger and despair.

Jemu's plight, doomed as he is to be always alien in his own country, is mirrored by that of a modern immigrant – Biju, the son of Jemu's cook, who is sent to America to find his fortune. Here, Desai's novel seems lit by a moral intelligence at once fierce and tender. But no scene is more harrowing than the one in which Biju joins a crowd of Indians scrambling to reach the visa counter at the United States Embassy:-

Biggest pusher, first place; how self-contented and smiling he was; he dusted himself off, presenting himself with the exquisite manners of a cat. I'm civilized, sir, ready for the USA. I'm civilized man. Biju noticed that his eyes, so alive to the foreigners, looked back at his own countrymen and women, immediately glazed over, and went dead. (183)

Biju arrives on a two-week ticket and stays for years, becoming part of the underclass of illegals in New York who make cheap labour for unscrupulous restaurateurs. He changed his jobs again and again and tried hard to adjust himself with the different cultures and fields of artistic activities. Actually I should rather say that the characters like Biju keep their roots in the homeland intact but want to flourish in the foreign land in spite of accompanying stresses and distresses. They are like translated literary texts which sometimes are able to retain originality, but more often they do not create blend of the original and foreign. We can further understand the character by the following quotation of Rabindranath Tagore's:

Not merely the subject races, but you who live under the delusion that you are free, are everyday sacrificing your freedom and humanity to the fetish of nationalism, living in the dense poisonous atmosphere of worldwide suspicion and greed and panic. (Bhatnagar, 56)

While working in the Gandhi Café, one of the restaurants he found that he possessed an awe of white people, who arguably had done India a great harm, and a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a harmful thing to India. Even the co-workers had the habit of hatred towards Indians, from their talks he was learning what the world thought of Indians:

In Tanzania, if they could, they would throw them out like they did in Uganda.

In Madagascar, if they could, they would throw them out.

In Nigeria, if they could, they would throw them out.

In Fiji, if they could, they would throw them out.

In China, they hate them.

In Hong-Kong.

In Germany.

In Italy.

In Japan.

In Guam.

In Singapore.

Burma.

South Africa.

They don't like them.

In Guadeloupe - they love them there?

No. (77)

He identifies himself with the homeless chicken, which also lived in the park. Every now and then Biju saw it scratching in a homely manner in the dirt and felt a pang for village life. Here, Kiran Desai has tried to portray the feeling of Biju, how alone he was in the alien land but still he wants himself to be attached with his homeland, he had cursed his father for sending him alone to this country. It was a very terrible plight when Biju's knee was wounded and even his master was not ready to help him in any way. In this moment of physical pain, his own feelings were strained clear.

Without us living like pigs, said Biju, what business would you have? This is how you make your money, paying us nothing because you know we can't do anything, making us work day and night because we are illegal. Why don't you sponsor us for our green cards? (188)

Even his co-worker Achootan, a dishwasher, in the same hotel where he worked; suffers the ill-treatment done to Indians by White in different lands, and this is what Miss Desai has tried to portray:

These white people! Said Achootan, Shit! But at least this country is better than England. At least they have some hypocrisy here. They believe they are good people and you get some relief. There they shout at you openly on the street, 'Go back to where you came from.' He had spent eight years in Canterbury, and he had responded by shouting a line Biju was to hear many times over, for he repeated it several times a week: "Your father came to get my bread back. (135)

Biju's sights are set on the unobtainable golden ticket – the green card – but unless he can overcome his shyness and persuade an American girl to marry him or get his boss to sponsor him, his chances of getting it are zero.

Desai writes movingly of the condition of the modern immigrant: the unbearable working and sleeping conditions, men packed into tiny rooms like rats, the new arrivals coming in their hordes, bearing letters and seeking help from the old hands; everybody seeking, only very few succeeding. One of Biju's friends, a glamorous African Muslim, Saeed, manages to scabble to the top of the pile and find a Vermont hippy to marry him. However he is beset by arrivals from Zanzibar, where his mother has given them his address in New York. He calls them "the tribes" and claims they are stalking him.

The Herculean effort of trying to get a green card eventually wears Biju down, the exhaustion of trying and getting nowhere finally sends him home. His homecoming has a harlequin echo; he was ruthlessly robbed and dejected. Biju casts a forlorn figure as the novel ends. The novel ends on a note of reconciliation, when Biju returns from America and reaches Cho-Oyu, he hugs his father.

Thus, Kiran Desai launches into a full blown account of these distraught lives, baffled by the winds of change. Her depiction of their lives, their longing and their insecurities makes each one come alive just as they are human, confused, loving, hating and longing for their identities; lives of the peoples are put under the microscope and then brought out almost like a jewel for the world to see.

2. CONCLUSION

Overall we can say that, racial and ethnic identities are the main cause for loss; and is the reason for the uneasy relations with the cultural environment of the nation to which they have migrated and an implicit plea for better terms of accommodation. Racial and ethnic identities are critical parts of the overall framework of individual and collective identity. I think this problem will never come to an end, as 'Man is an unsatisfied soul', or we can say that man moves to other place for two reasons; either for the sake of personal gains like career advancement and material prosperity; or they are really in need; and thus migration will result in:

Rejection of tradition,

Aesthetic self-consciousness,

Non-representational,

Discontinuity and a heightened sense of the irrational. (Berry, p.776)

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Dr. Kamaljeet Sinha is currently working as Assistant Professor (Adhoc) of English at Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh). She took her Masters and M.Phil Degree in English Literature from the Guru Ghasidas University. She has also completed her Phd and is the member of ELTAI. Her areas of interest are Racial Studies and feminism.