

Multicultural Spaces in Kiran Desai's *"The Inheritance of Loss"*

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This paper provides an analysis of Kiran Desai's second novel "The Inheritance of Loss" published in 2006. I argue that the novel is best regarded as postcolonial though it is situated at the crossroads between post-colonialism, multiculturalism, migration and diaspora. Multiculturalism shares with post-colonialism an obsession with difference, ethnicity, identity and hybridity, elements which are all at the core of this writing. My analysis mainly focuses on the multicultural aspects brought to the fore by this narrative where all major characters are caught in between two worlds and cannot find an authentic sense of home in either.

Keywords: *multiculturalism, post-colonialism, class division, ethnicity, globalization*

1. Multiculturalism today

Multiculturalism is generally regarded as a theory about basic human freedom. All human beings are immersed in a culture and every culture brings to the fore a unique vision about life and society. Multiculturalism rests on the idea that the dialogue between cultures is beneficial and while admitting the fact that human beings need a stable cultural environment. It also highlights the importance of communication with other cultures. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines multiculturalism as *"the belief that it is important and good to include people or ideas from many different countries, races or religions"* (Longman Dictionaries 1995, 934) while in the Oxford Dictionary it is described as *"related to or made up of several cultural or ethnic groups."* (Waite 2012, 473) However, it should be mentioned that multiculturalism cherishes intercultural dialogue not because the latter is seen as a strategy of dealing with contemporary societies encompassing various cultures forced to share the same living space but because it sees the value of cultural diversity.

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Globalization, technological progress, waves of migration and demographic changes have transformed the world that we live in and today it could be said that most societies are essentially multicultural.

There are, however, detractors who argue that multicultural societies are just a phase and that eventually immigrants and refugees will integrate making cultural diversity a useless and inexistent non-sense. Strong states and economies need homogeneous cultures to be in control of things and too much cultural diversity would undermine this.

In my opinion there are at least several factors which point to the inaccuracy of such a prediction. Firstly, if one takes into consideration the demographic trends in the First World, it becomes clear that immigration is needed and will be needed in the future as well. Then, even if capitalism and globalization have produced a significant move towards homogenization, they have not managed to suppress a lot of ethnic and regional identities. Thirdly, religion has gained significant importance over the past decades contradicting those who predicted its demise. As a result, it could be said, that contemporary societies are increasingly and inherently multicultural and this trend stands every chance of continuing in future years.

Multiculturalism is viewed by most as a discourse oscillating between Otherness/difference and Sameness. Two broad frameworks can be distinguished when discussing attitudes towards multiculturalism. On the one hand, there are those who consider Otherness/difference as liberating and Sameness as oppressive. On the other hand, there are those for whom a celebration of Otherness/difference is inherently negative because it fosters inequality. Charles Taylor, a representative of the first category considers that the

“.... crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally dialogic character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression.” (Taylor 1992, 32)

He considers that sometimes there is too much unity in multiculturalism and that leads to important cultural differences being overlooked.

But it may be that not all immigrants want to remain Other. They may prefer to integrate. Therefore, is this politics of Otherness the kind of recognition that they are looking for and expect from the host societies? American political scientist Robert David Putnam believes that multiculturalism's inscription of cultural Otherness is a serious mistake. He has conducted experiments that emphasized the fact cultural diversity is associated with a series of negative characteristics within

the society such as: lower standard of living, decreased level of happiness, less charitable efforts, less involvement in the development of public infrastructure, etc. This is not to say that cultural diversity is not to be allowed and preserved but for the common good of society the ultimate goal should be immigrant integration. Too much emphasis placed on cultural Otherness would prevent the construction of a national identity. Representatives of this second theoretical framework advocate Sameness in terms of race, gender, religion and ethnicity as a matter of basic rights.

As it will be seen in the following lines of this paper, in literature, multiculturalism has paved the way for the production of literary texts that are unique in their diversity of themes, motifs and various modes of articulation. From a psychological point of view, multiculturalism has provided ethnic writers with trust to write about their experiences past and present and evaluate them through the immigrant perception. The climate of tolerance, acceptance and pluralism of values put forward by multiculturalism gave immigrants a voice and the possibility of self-representation. Literature can be a bridge between distinct cultures and provide an insight into the characteristics of various cultures. It also offers a hybrid space in which the writer may choose to stay the Other or be the Same.

2. "*The Inheritance of Loss*" (2006) – a postcolonial novel?

I consider that "*The Inheritance of Loss*" (2006) is best regarded as a postcolonial novel though if one is to be very explicit this novel is situated at the crossroads between post-colonialism, multiculturalism, migration and diaspora. Multiculturalism shares with post-colonialism an obsession with difference, ethnicity, identity and hybridity, elements which are all at the core of this writing.

This is the second novel written by author Kiran Desai who is the daughter of highly acclaimed Indian writer Anita Desai. The novel was the recipient of the 2006 Man Booker Prize and it established Kiran Desai as a well-defined literary voice. Spatially, the action of the novel moves back and forth between mountainous Kalimpong, a small town located in the northern part of India near Darjeeling, and New York City in the USA. Temporally, the present of the novel –year 1986- is interspersed with episodes from the colonial past – the 1940s - and later with the 1970s to provide information that completes the description of characters.

Sai, an orphaned seventeen year old teenager, lives in a dilapidated old mansion called Cho Oyu, with her grumpy grandfather who used to be a judge. She is open minded and educated in the spirit of appreciating Western values and has come to live with her grandfather following the killing of her parents in a car

accident in Moscow, where her father was studying to become an astronaut. The judge was educated in England where he attended Cambridge University but is now retired and looks over his granddaughter in the hope that he would find redemption for the fact that he had abandoned his Indian wife and played a part in her death. The two share the mansion with the cook of the house who watches over them despite being badly treated and constantly humiliated by the judge.

Other characters include Biju, the cook's son, who went to America in search of a more prosperous life but ended up moving from one job to another in the kitchens of New York City restaurants while living in filthy basements as an illegal immigrant.

Young Gyan is Sai's Nepalese mathematics tutor whom she falls in love with. Gyan graduated from college with a degree in accounting but lives in misery together with his entire family. The pair's love affair ends in failure due to political actions which get in the way.

Lola and Noni, two old Anglophile nostalgic Indian sisters, are the judge's neighbors. They live a secluded life on their estate called Mon Ami and religiously follow BBC programs where Lola's daughter Pixie works as a reporter. A non-Indian character – Swiss priest Father Booty- runs a dairy and wants to teach Indians to make cheese.

There is a lot of political unrest in the region at the time because the Gorkha Nepalese ethnic insurgents organize an uprising demanding separation and independence from India. The novel opens when Nepalese guerillas attack Cho Oyu and humiliate everyone there taking their food, drinks and guns. At the same time, on the other side of the world, in New York, Biju is subject to humiliation as well, as we learn of the mistreatment that he has to endure simply because he is an Indian of the lower class.

The action oscillates constantly between India and the United States and the reader becomes immersed in the slow paced life of characters in India and the fast rhythm of New York City where Biju struggles to earn a living.

It ends, however, on a sad note, as the romance between Sai and Gyan, the only characters who seemed to embody optimism, is defeated by political trouble and rigid traditional thinking. Abused and confused, Biju realizes that he has not managed to escape the servant status that his father has in India. He reassesses his values and decides to put family first and return to India. Upon arriving in Calcutta he feels confident, something he had not felt in years. He pays rebels to take him home to Kalimpong and they beat him and steal his money and clothes. The confidence is once again destroyed but there is hope as in the final scene of the novel he reunites with his father. They still have love for each other even if they have lost everything else.

3. Contemporary In-betweenness

3.1. The Judge - Jemubhai Patel

The retired judge is portrayed as a bitter, angry and rigid old man. After years of working for the Indian Civil Service as a Chief Justice he has retired to the old mansion called Cho Oyu.

He was born in the early twentieth century (1919) when India was still part of the British Empire in Piphit, a town which was ironically much like the multicultural societies that are discussed so much these days.

"Broad homes had come up in the civil lines, a courthouse with a clock tower to maintain the new, quick-moving time, and on the streets thronged all manner of people: Hindu, Christian, Jain, Muslim, clerks, army boys, tribal women. In the market, shopkeepers from the cubbyhole shops in which they perched conducted business that arched between Kobe and Panama, Port-au-Prince, Shanghai, Manila, and also to tin-roofed stalls too small to enter, many days' journey away by bullock cart. Here, in the market, upon a narrow parapet that jutted from a sweet-seller's establishment, Jemubhai's father owned a modest business procuring false witnesses to appear in court. (Who would think his son, so many years later, would become a judge?)" (Desai 2006, 92)

Though nowadays he is clearly upper class, he was actually "*born to a family of the peasant caste*" (Desai 2006, 91). His family made sacrifices so that he could study in England at Cambridge University. After returning to India he secures a job with the Indian Civil Service. When studying in England the judge learnt to despise everything Indian and he embodies the old Anglophile, colonial nostalgic who denies his own identity and desperately tries to forge a new, fake one.

He tries to mimic everything English in a relentless manner which exasperates the ones around him:

"Never ever was the tea served the way it should be, but he demanded at least a cake or scones, macaroons or cheese straws. Something sweet and something salty. This was a travesty and it undid the very concept of teatime." (Desai 2006, 3)

Besides adopting English customs he also tries to look more English in his physical appearance powdering his skin to make it whiter. When returning from England he has no interest whatsoever in reuniting with his Indian wife and he sends her back to her parents, an act which shames his own family.

He allows his orphaned granddaughter Sai to live with him and tries to provide an education for her out of a sense of guilt that he probably feels for badly mistreating

his wife. This is his only redeeming quality as the reader is thrilled to discover that family ties are still strong and they can be found even in emotionally damaged people who would not otherwise be capable of showing any compassion or sympathy towards other human beings.

In other respects, he is just one of those ridiculous characters who strive to be something that they are not. In England the judge first realizes how powerful racial divisions and imperial hierarchies really are.

“But shadows, after all, create their own unease, and despite his attempts to hide, he merely emphasized something that unsettled others. For entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things, and elderly ladies, even the hapless—blue-haired, spotted, faces like collapsing pumpkins—moved over when he sat next to them in the bus, so he knew that whatever they had, they were secure in their conviction that it wasn’t even remotely as bad as what he had. The young and beautiful were no kinder; girls held their noses and giggled, “Phew, he stinks of curry!” (Desai 2006, 38)

Through him Desai highlights how the legacy of colonialism still endures in some Indians. The judge is just one of the characters in this novel who live in two worlds. Physically he is in India but mentally he is still part of England even if the latter has never accepted him. Hence, he ends up in self-hatred and the impossibility of forging an authentic identity.

3.2. Biju

Biju is the cook’s son who lives in the US illegally. He received a visa to go to the US but he remained long after this was over. Actually, the scene in which he is granted the visa illustrates the humiliation that potential immigrants to the US are subject to. And this is just the beginning.

“Biju, like half the room, didn’t understand, but he saw from the ones who did, who were running, pleased to be given a head start, what they should do. Stink and spit and scream and charge; they jumped toward the window, tried to splat themselves against it hard enough that they would just stick and not scrape off; young men mowing through, tossing aside toothless grannies, trampling babies underfoot. This was no place for manners and this is how the line was formed: wolf-faced single men first, men with families second, women on their own and Biju, and last, the decrepit. 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 U.S., I'm civilized, mam. Biju noticed that his eyes, so alive to the foreigners, looked back at his own countrymen and women, immediately glazed over, and went dead." (Desai 2006, 182)

Biju goes to the US to escape the curse of the being born into a lower class. He expects that the Western world has moved past class divisions and he will be treated differently. Sadly, he soon finds out that the West has its own type of imprisonment – the economic one. Because of his status as an illegal immigrant, he is abused and taken advantage of and learns that even if apparently he is free to do what he wants he is but a slave in America. By working in dirty kitchens and living in basements, he gets to know the underground world of the US and gains thus a more objective point of view about the Indian and American culture. He is a loving son who strives not to disappoint his father. In trying to do that he feeds the cook's dream that his son is very successful in America and one day he will be saved from this position of virtual slave in India.

Vijh Surekha says that with Biju, Kiran Desai tries to show

"what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant, and also explores in-depth, what happens when a Western element is brought into a country that is not of the West but which retains effects leftover from the British colonial days in India, and experiences a cultural colonialism happening again, 'with India's new relationship with the States. She wanted to discover, 'What happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one. How does the imbalance between these two worlds change a person's thinking and feeling? How do these changes manifest themselves in a personal sphere, a political sphere, over time?'" (Vijh 2008, n.p.)

Social class is brought to the fore with the depiction of this immigrant experience. This is an issue heavily overlooked by both postcolonial and multicultural perspectives. As illustrated with the case of the three Indian university students to whom Biju delivers Chinese food, the upper class are the ones who mainly take advantage of multiculturalism and newly acquired independence from the metropolis while the lower classes continue to be exploited in a ruthless manner. Big, powerful nations exert control over smaller ones. The lives of most lower classes individuals are pre-determined by these external circumstances that they cannot transcend. Prior to arriving in the US Biju had no idea that there were so many Indians all over the world – a global Indian diaspora that he suddenly feels more connected with than the Indians at home.

But paradoxically, right after getting a grip on his cultural identity as an Indian immigrant he finds he relates extremely well to a Muslim Indian from

Zanzibar, Saeed Saeed. And he is confused again because he had been told that he was supposed to hate Muslims.

Biju's plight certainly challenges the contemporary tendency in literary and cultural studies to celebrate migration as a positive and enriching phenomenon and draws attention to the real beneficiaries of it – the upper class. As Elisabeth Jackson puts it there is a tendency to celebrate:

“the ability of elite migrants to move between locales and ignore the quite different experience of working class or subaltern migration. Despite the narratives of globalization that emphasize the opening of international borders, the recent history of labour migration has actually seen a hardening of national borders, the raising of physical boundaries and a growing reliance upon illegalized migrants as sources of cheap labour” (Jackson 2016, n.p.)

And she goes on to cite Gikandi who states that “*postcolonial elites are by virtue of their class, position or education, the major beneficiaries of the project of decolonization*” (Gikandi 2010, 29)

Disillusioned by the American experience and tired of being treated like a second class citizen, Biju decides to return to India. Though he is robbed of his money and loses everything, the reunion with his father is very rewarding from an emotional point of view and seems to be one of the few hopeful stances in the novel.

Just like the judge, Biju, too, is an uprooted character who lives in two worlds and finds home and comfort in neither. But at least in his case Desai offers hope.

3.3. Sai

Sai is the orphaned seventeen-year-old who lives with her grandfather, the judge, in the small mountainous town of Kalimpong. She is an upper class Indian who was educated at a convent school where she learnt English and gained an appreciation of Western values. She is independent in her thinking and has an open mind. She is the only character in the novel who does not display any class related prejudice and does not look down on anyone on account of their social class.

However, she feels terribly lonely living with her grandfather and forms a bond with the cook whom she always treats as if he were her equal. As the novel progresses she reaches awareness of the poverty around her and of the privileged life that she has. Occasionally she feels guilty for that and finds consolation in the world of books. She does not approve of Indian traditions and sees the Western way of living as superior to the Indian one. Ultimately this turns her into a misfit as being a Westernized Indian is both complicated and risky.

Sai discovers the enduring power of the Indian class system when she falls in love with her Mathematics tutor, Nepalese Gyan. In addition to belonging to a

different ethnicity, Gyan is also part of the lower classes. This does not stop her from falling in love and seeking a relationship with him. But she learns the hard way that their love does not stand any chance of success. Gyan becomes involved with the Nepalese insurgents who fight for independence from India and drifts away from her. During their final confrontation Sai is surprised to find how he has allowed himself to be influenced by mainstream Indian beliefs regarding social class and ethnicity. He blocks out his feelings and considers that it is his duty to hate Sai both because she is an Indian and because she belongs to the exploitative upper classes. In doing this he fails to see her as an individual, a human being and labels her according to artificial constructs handed down from one generation to the next.

With this failed relationship Desai draws attention to the destructive potential of social divisions and absurd traditions. Jay, cited by Elizabeth Jackson notices that

"Sai and Gyan's innocence as lovers becomes progressively undermined by the political divisions spawning the insurgency, for it turns out that Gyan's family is impoverished and of Nepali descent, so that Sai's upper class Westernized habits and status come to represent just the forms of domination the insurgency insists have been oppressing families like Gyan's for centuries... Gyan's increasing hostility to Sai suggest the extent to which he is willing to unthinkingly tie her to a colonial history she does not feel connected to." (Jay, 2010, 128)

For free thinker Sai this is more than she can bear and she understands that she can no longer be part of a society that labels people according to their social class, ethnicity, religion and other artificial divisions. She decides that she has to find a way to leave Kalimpong.

4. Conclusions

Kiran Desai belongs to a generation of writers who illustrate contemporary realities best. She was born in India, lived there until the age of fourteen and then continued her life in England and the US. She has, therefore, lived in the global village and her novel is both postcolonial and multicultural. Some argue that it may be regarded as diasporic, multiethnic, cosmopolitan, etc. The point is that the fiction produced by this kind of writers does not fit into clear-cut categories but it is situated at the crossroads displaying a little bit of each.

In an interview with Vijn Surekha, Desai says that she feels *"incredibly lucky to see both sides"* (Vijn 2008, n.p.) and explains that she considers herself blessed to have had the opportunity to experience different cultures adding that *"I feel as comfortable anywhere as I feel uncomfortable anywhere."* (Vijn 2008, n.p.)

Indeed, there is something bleak about this novel which is in fact a harrowing exploration of contemporary international problems caused by globalization and waves of migration. As the author herself puts it:

“Would I buy this sweater? Where is it made? It’s by some poor in China and someone horrible is making money out of it. Am I going to eat this bit of fruit picked by whom? It infects every single thing. But I stand by the books ethical sense, and it’s a book that certainly says the opposite of many things that flags stand for.” (Vijh 2008, n.p.)

Every major character in this narrative is torn between two worlds and does not manage to find an authentic home and identity in either. It is the downside of the globalized contemporary world that is brought to the fore in this narrative. The answers provided here are not very explicit but the reader is forced to think about and interpret Desai’s words.

Desai’s novel argues that multiculturalism and globalization do not change for the better the lives of the lower classes because these remain the losers feeding themselves on a vain promise. All the people affected by colonialism, globalization, exacerbated traditional values, nationalism and multiculturalism suffer a loss that does not seem to go away and is handed down from generation to generation.

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