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Multiculturalism: A Study of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract:

The Inheritance of Loss is replete with the issues pertaining to multiculturalism. The novel explores the issues related to multiculturalism in more detail and assesses the relevance of it in present scenario. Throwing light on the policy of immigration, familial tension and distance, family structure, and cultural, social, economic and religious dynamics of the Indian community in America, the novel brings into light multicultural agenda. The study of the novel shows that multiculturalism has been successful only to some extent in obtaining its goal while in most cases it seems to have failed. At the level of first-generation male immigrants it appears to have failed, but in the case of first generation female immigrants it seems to be successful. The novel also shows that instead of establishing social harmony, multiculturalism engenders family conflict and disharmony and remains silent about the question of unfair treatment after being integrated into the host culture.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Immigrant, Hatred, Class, Ethnicity, Alienation, Isolation, Dislocation.

Kiran Desai was born in a hill station north of New Delhi in 1937. She was born and brought up in a multicultural ambience. She is the daughter of Ashwin Desai and the eminent Indian English author, Anita Desai, who won five different awards and written fourteen novels, three of which have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize (*Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody*, and *Fasting, Feasting*). Her maternal grandmother was German but she left the country before World War second and never returned. Her grandfather was a refugee from Bangladesh. They spoke German at home and Hindi to their friends. Her paternal grandparents came from Gujarat, and her grandfather-like the judge Jemubhai Patel in the novel-was educated in England. Although Kiran has not lived in India since she was fourteen, she returns regularly to the family home in Delhi.

The term multiculturalism generally denotes an applied ideology of racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity within the demographics of a specified place, usually at the scale of an organisation such as school, business, city or nation. It is frequently used to describe the ethnic diversity that exists everywhere in the world today. It refers to a society in which several cultures exist. Culture plays a central role in multiculturalist argument. Culture refers to a shared system of meaning in terms of which people understand themselves and the world and organise their individual and collective lives. It includes views about the nature of the self, its relations to others, Man's place in the world, the meaning and the significance of human activities, relations and the human life in general, moral values and ideals, etc. It

provides a framework, an intellectual and moral compass in terms of which human beings conduct their way through life.

Gerd Baumann states that “culture is not a real thing, but an abstract and purely analytical notion.” A society’s culture is embodied in its beliefs, practices, rituals, literature, moral vocabulary, proverbs, sense of humour, body language, ways of organizing different areas of life, and jokes. In case of multicultural society, different groups of people do not share a common vision, conceptual vocabulary and organizing principles. Their structures of beliefs and practices vary, and so do their values, literature, historical memories, etc. in which their cultures are articulated. Cultural communities are generally conscious of their boundaries and know who does and does not belong to them. Their differences acquire a degree of importance in their own and other’s eyes that intracultural do not. When members of a society subscribe to different organizing principles and moral vocabularies and understand and disagree about significant areas of life, the society concerned is multicultural. No two multicultural societies are alike.

Multiculturalism does not mean the blending of cultures leading to a “composite culture.” It means cultures should be facilitated to preserve their distinctiveness and the people who belong to different cultures should be ensured equality. It can mean the availability of, and accessibility to, different cultural patterns for individuals, and communities within a given national territory, that is the right to choose one’s lifestyle. It can also mean the coexistence of different lifestyles, not always consciously chosen, within the national territory, living together separately as equal but distinct elements.

Multiculturalism encourages immigrants to assimilate into the dominant culture of settled country so that cultural diversity, racial discrimination and socio-economic inequalities could be reduced to some extent and national identity could be ensured. Therefore, it gives birth to four apparently contradictory but actually complimentary processes: homogenization, pluralisation, traditionalization and hybridization. The issues that are loosely grouped together under the heading of it including group representation and rights, the rights and status of immigrants, the openness to different cultures, the acceptance and approval of adherence to an original and authentic ancestral culture are familiar long-standing problems of political theory and practice.

In a broad sense multiculturalism focuses on the consequences of immigration and on the struggle of a range of marginalised groups or on group differences per se. The novel deals with the clash of cultures and conflict of values that create predicament for immigrants and spoil the younger generation of immigrant community, experiences of the Bangladeshi immigrants in London, sense of loss of culture, heritage, identity, racial discrimination and socio-economic injustices that have been the issues of exploration under the heading of multiculturalism. How clash of cultures and conflict of values affect the life of immigrants and create communication gap between parents and children as well as break down family have been illustrated through various characters.

A significant part of the action in the novel takes place outside India. The Cook's young son Biju and his fellow Indians weave the other thread of the plot relating to New York, USA. Biju, the son of the judge's cook, Panna Lal, moves to America in quest of bright future, but all his dreams are shattered when he comes face to face with the realities of life there. He belongs to a "shadow class" (102) of illegal immigrants. He has to struggle to survive and preserve his cultural identity. He has no permanent job. Abandoned and alienated, he shifts from one job to another floating aimlessly along life's path like driftwood in lack of green card as it is evident from his letters: "But although Biju's letters traced a string of jobs, they said more or less the same thing each time except for the name of the establishment he was working" (17). Through the working of Biju in different restaurants and cafes we realize the plight of an immigrant. It is Biju through which different aspects of immigrant life is demonstrated. He works in various restaurants and cafes for which he is paid low wages. In the sequence of changing job, he works in Freddy's Wok restaurant for a while. His job is to deliver fast foods on bicycle. He has not sufficient clothes to protect his body from cold in winter. His inability to cover his body with proper clothes cultivates the feeling of grief and he starts weeping. His poor condition and sadness in winter has been described in heart-touching manner in the following way: "Biju put a padding of newspapers down his shirt-leftover copies from kind Mr. Iype the newsagent-and sometimes he took the scallion pancakes and inserted them below the paper . . . But even this did not seem to help, and once, on his bicycle, he began to weep from the cold, and the weeping unpicked a deeper vein of grief-such a terrible groan issued from between the whimpers that he was shocked his sadness was so profound."(51) He has no place to live in. He has to sleep among rats, screeching subway trains and undocumented immigrants: "Biju joined a shifting population of men camping out near the fuse box, behind the boiler, in the cubby holes, and in odd-shaped corners that once were pantries, maid's rooms, and laundry rooms, and storage rooms at the bottom of what had been a single-family home . . . The men shared a yellow toilet; the sink was a tin laundry trough. There was one fuse box for the whole building, and if anyone turned on too many appliances or lights, PHUT, the entire electricity went, and the residents screamed to nobody, since there was nobody, of course, to hear them" (51-52). The above descriptions show deplorable and miserable condition of Biju and how he is suffering and struggling to survive in an alien country. He is a representative of teeming millions who suffer due to continuation of western hegemony in the present discourse of postcolonial politics and economics.

Biju is a victim of anti-immigration policy which is a product of racist mentality of the West. Anti-immigration is a variety of racism which began to exist during the flood of immigration from the third world to the first world. Biju is aware of and has witnessed disadvantages of not having a green card as follow: "He watched the legalized foreigners with envy as they shopped at discount baggage stores for the miraculous, expandable third-world suitcase, accordion-pleated, filled with pockets and zippers to unhook further crannies, the whole structure unfolding into a giant space that could fit in enough to set up an entire life in another country" (99). As we know that an immigrant has no rights in lack of green card to register complain against exploitation before the authorities and to stay in America or come back to homeland legally: "The green card the green card. The. . . Without it he couldn't

leave. To leave he wanted a green card. This was the absurdity. How he desired the triumphant after The Green Card Return Home, thirsted for it-to be able to buy a ticket with the air of someone who could return if he wished, or not, if he did not wish.”(99) Therefore, most of the time he makes round of the immigration authorities and much of his savings are spent in futile attempts to procure a green card that could make his presence in America legal and he could return to India. In lack of green card, an immigrant can neither stay in the country nor leave the country legally. Marginalized position and discrimination on the ground of not having a green card has been illustrated through a programme on the television: “A taxi driver appeared on the screen: watching bootleg copies of American movies he had been inspired to come to America, but how to move into the mainstream? He was illegal, his taxi was illegal, the yellow paint was illegal, his whole family was here, and all the men in his village were here, perfectly infiltrated and working within the cab system of the city. But how to get their papers? Would any viewer out their wish to marry him? Even a disabled or mentally retarded green card holder would be fine.” (100) Having a green card provides privilege over those who do not have a green card. To have and not have a green card, in a way, symbolises the relationship between the dominant and the dominated. Biju’s not holding a green card indicates the anti-immigration policy of the west. It is not an easy task for an immigrant to get into mainstream of the host country. They are often subject to discrimination and disadvantage. This discrimination and disadvantage lead to creation of alienation and isolation among immigrants to which Biju is a victim.

Biju also works in the Queen of Tarts bakery for a short time where he comes into contact with the other fellow across the world. Through the views of them he perceives the general feeling of hatred towards Indians as it is described: “From other kitchens, he was learning what the world thought of the 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 us there? No.”(77) The above passage shows that instead of establishing harmony among people of different cultures it creates general feeling of hatred towards other’s culture. It is difference in terms of culture, race, religion and ethnicity which provokes feelings of hatred towards others.

We also come across racial discrimination through the desire of the owner’s wife of the Pinocchio’s Italian Restaurant. She does not like Biju as a worker in the restaurant because he does not belong to the same race or religion. She says, “He smells, said the owner’s wife. I think I’m allergic to his hair oil. She had hoped for men from the poorer parts of Europe-Bulgarians perhaps, or Czechoslovakians. At least they might have something in common with them like religion and skin color, grandfathers who ate cured sausages and looked like them, too, but they were not coming in numbers great enough or they weren’t coming desperate enough, she was not sure. . . .”(48) Prejudice against migrated Indians abroad is reflected through the talk of various people in a multicultural setting. In the same manner, Biju’s hatred of others is also illustrated: “This habit of hate had accompanied Biju, and he found that he possessed an awe of white people, who arguably had done India great harm,

and a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India.”(77) Biju tries desperately to stay as much as possible within his cultural moorings of an Indian birth. It is the result of multicultural living that on the one hand, he hates Muslims in general, on the other hand, he adores Saeed and has the feeling of admiration as follow: “. . . Saeed saeed, who would become the man he admired most in the United States of America. . . . Therefore he liked Saeed, but hated the general lot of Muslims?”(53-76) America has different rules for the same thing for the people of different country. Indians are not allowed to apply for immigration lottery, on the contrary, other than Indians are allowed as it is described: “Saeed applied for the immigration lottery each year, but Indians were not allowed to apply. Bulgarians, Irish, Malagasys-on and on the list went, but no, no Indians. There were just too many jostling to get out, to pull everyone else down, to climb on one another’s backs and run. The line would be stopped up for years; the quota was full, overfull, spilling over” (81).

Man has lost peace of life in the pursuit of a better future. He is not content with whatever he has. He has lost in the razzle and dazzle of modernity. He wants something more that could make his life luxurious and glamorous. He is not able to realize the cost of modernity unless he encounters the situation. Biju has fascination for America. When he first arrives in America, he seems happy and satisfied as it is apparent from his letter written to his father: “Respected Pitaji, no need to worry. Everything is fine. The manager has offered me a full time waiter position. Uniform and food will be given by them. Angrezi khana only, no Indian food, and the owner is not from India. He is from America itself.”(14) But his fascination is hammered after meeting with the existing situation. He has come to America in order to make a pile of money and secure a respectable place. But he is not satisfied with the life he is leading in America. His life has become stagnant. Instead of being better, it is getting worse day by day as it is described: “Year by year, his life wasn’t amounting to anything at all; in a space that should have included family, friends, he was the only one displacing the air” (268). It gives birth to the feeling of homesickness. He feels cut off from root. He regrets bitterly coming to America and contemplates returning home as follows: “Shouldn’t he return to a life where he might slice his own importance, to where he might relinquish this overrated control over his destiny and perhaps subtracted from its determination altogether? He might even experience that greatest luxury of not noticing himself at all.” (268) He also reveals mundane and futile existence of an immigrant in his reflection on the consequences of continuing life in America as he contemplates: “And if he continued on here? What would happen? Would he, like Harish-Harry, manufacture a fake version of himself and using what he had created as clues, understanding himself backward? Life was not about life for him anymore, and death-what would even that mean to him? It would have nothing to do with death.”(268)

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nothing to do with death.”(268) He also expresses his anger at his father for sending to America: “Biju could not help but feel a flash of anger at his father for sending him alone to this country” (85) He also realizes the trauma of leading a life of forced broken existence in a foreign country. An immigrant does not live the life as a whole. He always finds himself between the two. It is essentially a novel of loss and grief, of broken lives and relationships. Biju has known the pain to be far away from his homeland and near and dear as he says: “This way of leaving your family for work had condemned them over several generations to have their hearts always in other places, their minds thinking about people elsewhere; they could never be in a single existence at one time. How wonderful it was going to be to have things otherwise.” (311) He has also known the cost which one has to pay for being an immigrant and highlights very poignant picture of it: “If he continued his life in New York, he might never see his pitaji again. It happened all the time; ten years passed, fifteen, the telegram arrived, or the phone call, the parent was gone and the child was too late. Or they returned and found they’d missed the entire last quarter of a lifetime, their parents like photograph negatives. And there were worse tragedies. After the initial excitement was over, it often became obvious that the love was gone; for affection was only a habit after all, and people, they forgot, or they became accustomed to its absence. They returned and found just the facade; it had been eaten from inside, like Cho Oyu being gouged by termites from within.” (223) The pain of being far away is also revealed through a telephonic pathetic conversation between Biju and his father: “WHEN ARE YOU COMING? I DON’T KNOW. I WILL TRY. . . . Biju wanted to weep. CAN’T YOU GET LEAVE? . . . He could not go home to see his father. WHEN WILL YOU GET LEAVE? I DON’T KNOW. . . . The call was over, and the emptiness Biju hoped to dispel was reinforced.” (231-232) He does not feel emotionally attached to host country due to adverse situation. The lack of proper job, unfair and unexpected treatment even at the hands of one’s own people engenders the feelings of alienation and dislocation. His feeling of nostalgia can be seen in the following lines: “He walked to the far end where the harmless man often slept in a dense chamber of green that seemed to grow not so much from soil as from a fertile city crud. A homeless chicken also lived in the park. Every now Biju saw it scratching in a homey manner in the dirt and felt a pang for a village life. He walked to where the green rat ran out into a tail of pilings and where man like himself often sat on the rocks and looked out on to adult stretch of New Jersey.” (81) He realises the underlying truth of being an immigrant and the act of immigration and sketches the lifestyle of Americans: “. . . that immigration, so often presented as a heroic act, could just as easily be the opposite; that it was cowardice that led many to America; fear marked the journey, not bravery; a cockroach desire to scuttle to where you never saw poverty, not really, never had to suffer a tug to your conscience; where you never heard the demands of servants, beggars, bankrupt relatives, and where your generosity would never be openly claimed; where by merely looking after your own wife-child-dog-yard you could feel virtuous. Experience the relief of being an unknown transplant to the locals and hide the perspective granted by journey” (299). The above mentioned lines also show the fragmented structure of western society and self-centeredness of its people. A pride in one’s culture gives people a sense of historical and social rootedness. And, in contrast, a fractured sense of identity leaves people feeling isolated and confused. Multiculturalists accept that people can have multiple identities and multiple loyalties. For

instance, they can have loyalty to their country of origin and also to the country of their settlement. Biju views the things as futile for which people of the third world has passion and shows the superiority of his own things over the American: “What is the point? All that space lying there useless, waste of water, waste of electricity, waste of heating, air-conditioning, not very intelligent is it? And you have to drive half an hour to the market. They call this the first world?? Ekdum bekar ! . . . The sausage is bad, the bun is bad; the ketchup is bad, even the mustard is bad. And this is an American institution! You can get a better sausage in Calcutta.” (300) Biju’s observation about above mentioned lines is the result of his cultural indoctrination. He has not been accustomed to the things to which he refer or the things to which he refer have been far away from his approach. Therefore, he does not see values in them. The life he has spent in India does not permit him to see value in the luxurious way of Americans. Therefore, he does not find meaning or utility in the splendid lifestyle of Americans. He often finds solace in his own structure of life that he has lived in his home country as he says, “ On Diwali the holy man lit lamps and put them in the branches of the peepul tree and sent them down the river on rafts with marigolds-how beautiful the sight of those lights bobbing in that young dark. . . . How peaceful our village is. How good the roti tastes there! It is because the atta is ground by hand, not by machine . . . and because it is made on a choolah, better than anything cooked on a gas or a kerosene stove. . . . Fresh roti, fresh butter, fresh milk still warm from the buffalo. . . .” (103) Biju’s preference for his own way of life over Americans is the result of cultural diversity that gives rise to the feelings of disappointment, alienation, isolation, dislocation, homesickness, and so on. He is unable or determined not to adapt himself to the dominant culture on account of his cultural and social rootedness. His inability or determination leads to the feeling of detachment from the host nation and strong sense of homesickness.

The novel is fraught with racial and ethnic diversity and hatred which has been one of the main concerns of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism examines the issue of race based discrimination and hatred in detail. Lola’s general feeling of hatred towards others than Bengali is noticeable throughout the novel. It is the ethnic difference that causes Lola to hold the feeling of hatred towards Nepalis. She never considers them as an essential part of the region in which they are living. A reading of the novel shows that Lola does not trust her servant Budhoo, an ex-army man with an experience of fighting against the insurgents in Assam. He hails from Nepal. She despises her servant in particular and all the Neps in general as she tells Sai that “Budhoo? But he’s Nepali. Who can trust him now?” (43) Her feeling of contempt for Budhoo and all Neps in general is not because she generally dislikes them but on account of ethnic diversity and class distinction. On account of preconceived notion of Gurkhas she ill-treats the GNLF activists as well as the policemen. She presumes Gorkhas to be not good people as she tells her sister Noni that “these people are not good people. Gorkhas are mercenaries, that’s what they are. Pay them and they are loyal to whatever. There’s no principle involved, Noni. And what is this with the GOrkha? It was always GURkha. AND then there are not even many Gurkhas here-some of course, and some newly retired ones coming in from Hong Kong, but otherwise they are only sherpas, coolies-these people are just louts, and that’s the truth, Noni, you know it, we all know it.” (247)

Lola's presumption and generalization that "Gurkhas are not good people" is a kind of racism that takes place on the ground of their ethnic diversity and class distinction.

Multiculturalism encourages people of different cultures to assimilate into the host culture voluntarily. While yet it has no solution to the situation that is faced by thousands of people like Jemubhai Patel in Desai's *Inheritance of Loss*. He suffers at two levels. On the one hand, he is not accepted as equal to Americans even after being integrated into its culture; on the other, his adopted culture does not allow him to return back to his own culture. A reading of the *Inheritance of Loss* shows that Jemubhai Patel, who has adjusted himself to the American way of life, is a victim of multicultural agenda. He does find himself attached neither to American culture nor his own culture. He is despised by the people of both cultures as Desai describes succinctly: "He envied the English. 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" (119).

Another negative aspect of multiculturalism is that it produces familial conflict as it is evidence in the relationship between Harish Harry and his daughter. Harish Harry, the owner of Gandhi cafe in America, belongs to the first generation immigrant community, has come to America in search for respect and money. He has a daughter. She is adopting American way of life as Harish Harry says, "The girl was becoming American. Nose ring she found compatible with combat boots and clothes in camouflage print from the army-navy surplus." (148) Harish Harry's wife says, "All this nonsense, what is this, give her two tight slaps that's what. . . ." (149) But Harish Harry does not slap her and only says, "You go girl!" (149) The response of her daughter is shocking to Harry. She says, "I did not ask to be born. You had me for your own selfish reasons, wanted a servant, did not you? But in this country, Dad, nobody's going to wipe your ass for free" (148). To hear the answer, Harry finds himself helpless as he says to Biju: "What can I do? Here we are" (149). Modernity has weakened the familial ties and has given birth to generational gap. The parents have no control over their children. The children are being misguided by the glamour of others' culture. They have lost the power of thinking trapping in the modernity. The feeling of disrespect to parents emanates from the attachment to modernity.

To conclude, we can say that *The Inheritance Loss* is replete with the issues pertaining to multiculturalism. The novel explores the issues related to multiculturalism in more detail and assesses the relevance of it in present scenario. The study of the novel shows that multiculturalism has been successful only to some extent in obtaining its goal while in most cases it seems to have failed. The novel also shows that instead of establishing social harmony, multiculturalism engenders familial conflict and disharmony, and remains silent about the question of unfair treatment after being integrated into the host culture. Unfortunately, the line between cultures is not always easily blurred. Some customs and traditions transcend separate cultures especially in today's globalized world, but prejudices and hatred based on race and class are often hard to eliminate.

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