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## **Class Struggle and Class Consciousness in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss***

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### **Abstract:**

The aim of the paper is to examine the emergent discourse of power and dominance as created by the ruling class and to observe how class discourse determines the social interactions and relations as reflected in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. In particular, the paper investigates how discrimination depends on class relations, and how literature represents this discrimination. The ruling class perpetuates its ideology and influences various institutions and cultures which in turn inform every individual's position in the society as reflected in the novel. The paper throws light on the widening gap between the haves and have-nots and explores with insight the class struggle between different strata of the society. It analyzes how every individual is aware of his social and economic statuses as being economically determined and positioned in the hierarchy of the socio-economic superstructure. It also studies the power relations among different classes/individuals/groups and how every individual becomes aware of his/her status and class as being informed by class consciousness. The rigid class system forms the basis of the paper.

**Keywords:** Class Struggle, Class Consciousness, Discrimination, Marxism, Inequality, Socio-Economic Superstructure.

### **Introduction:**

The major focus of the paper is upon the question of class in the novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to define and understand class. In its simplest form class can be defined as a "system of ranks in society" (Hornby 153). Factors which are often linked to social ranks are: access to money, usage of money, work, education, political interest, lifestyle, neighbourhood and social connections.

Marxist-Leninists hold that a person's social class is determined not by the amount of his wealth, but by the source of his income as determined by his relation to labour and to the means of production.

Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated by law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labour, and consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and their mode acquiring it. (Lenin 421)

To Marxist-Leninists, therefore, the class to which a person belongs is determined by 'objective reality', not by someone's opinion. On the basis of the above definition, Marxist-Leninists distinguish three basic classes—the *proletariat* or working class, *the bourgeoisie* and the landlord/*capitalist class* respectively. While the relationship between workers and capitalists, or between labour and capital may appear to be no more than an economic relationship of equals meeting equals in the labour market. Marx shows how it is an exploitative social relationship (425).

Today, the concept of class as given by Karl Marx has undergone a little change. Now there are three general classes: 'the upper class'-who has got the wealth and owns means of production; 'the middle class'-who are professional workers and owners of small business; and 'the lower class'-the unskilled labour, the workers who work on minimum low-paid wages just to sustain their life and are economically very poor.

This predominance of class is perhaps something which Desai prefers to foretell in the epigraph to the novel. The epigraph acts as a window to the novel. By reading the poem one immediately gets the idea that the novel is all about the helplessness of the poor and lowly.

...

They speak of humanity

My humanity is in feeling we are all voices of the same poverty.

(qtd. In Desai, *Inheritance* "Epigraph")

As reflected in these lines, the novel highlights the major issue of class differences.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, there is an obvious working of hegemony and ideology by which the subjects—especially the cook is kept under control in terms of the social position and is limited in the exercise of affairs of the upper class represented by especially the judge. For example, when the police arrive to investigate the robbery at the judge's place, the cook tries to be a part of the conversation. This annoys the judge and he shouts at the cook: "Go sit in the kitchen. *Bar bar karta rehta hai*" (Desai 11). The characters are aware of their limits in the society in the form of class consciousness and because of this ideology every class accepts its *status quo* without any question.



The very title of the novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* can be analysed in terms of Class debate. The title seems to suggest the power relation and dominance which entails prerogative to one section of the society and loss to the other. From the title itself one can get the idea as to what the novel is all about—loss in every respect as if the loss is inherited; and the loss can be analysed as the result of class consciousness and class struggle. At the beginning of the novel, Sai introduces the title theme when she wonders, “Could fulfillment ever be felt as deeply as loss?” (2).

The feeling of inferiority, indeterminacy and uncertainty because of subordinate and unprivileged class leads the characters to a quest—the quest for identity and belongingness. Jemubhai begins his quest for identity from a position of the “other” as with an endeavour to belong to the elite West but in this quest he loses himself. The Judge's encounter with the English culture/class is so humiliating and filled with such strong feelings of resentment and anger that he becomes doubly displaced when he returns home. Further, his marginalization is engendered by the class difference between himself and the elite “other.” He could not identify himself with his own people nor with the so called civilized elite class of the West. Even Biju inherits loss in his aspiration to raise his social and economic standard. He fails in inheriting anything in the West but loss, and plans to return to his homeland so that he could feel a sense of belongingness there. On his return to India Biju is robbed by his own people—his class, of every little thing he possessed.

Gyan's journey as a diaspora away from his homeland into the settled land for better economic opportunities to raise his class standard proves to be a failure. Gyan's journey to seek his identity provides the antithesis, i.e. he undertakes the venture not through submission and subjugation but violent resistance through insurgency, a revisited form of subjugation to a new order by inversion of gaze. He seeks identity of the group—his ethnic group along with his personal identity but inherits only loss.

Class consciousness is also an important factor in the novel that pushes the plot forward. Class consciousness has been defined by Karl Marx as a social condition in which members of a social class are aware of their social class as it relates to class struggle (Marx and Engels, *Communist* 47). According to Marx, to stop exploitation of workers, the working class must first develop class consciousness—a subjective awareness held by the members of a class regarding their common vested interests and the need for collected political action to bring about social change. Marx used this term “class consciousness” in relation to the working class (47-48).

A social class has common interests with the members of it, and has knowledge of its social standing. Class consciousness is more than simply being awake. It means acknowledging one's position in a particular social class according to one's economic status. In his book *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P Thompson proposes that, “Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of

their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different (and usually opposed) to theirs" (9). Furthermore, he describes class consciousness as "the way these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, and institutional forms" (10).

Classes make their consciousness as they [classes] make history even if they cannot quite make history of their own choice. "A class cannot exist without a consciousness of some kind. If it does, then it is not, or not yet, a class; that is it is not even an 'it,' a historical entity of any kind . . . to say that a whole class has a false or true consciousness is historically without meaning" (Gray 10). Class consciousness is applicable more in the working class or the proletariat than to the capitalist, that is, the bourgeois. It is often called the working-class consciousness. Raymond Williams believes that "class consciousness is, in essence, both the practical consciousness of class and the experiential understanding of the social relationships in which a group is embedded" (44).

A fictional account of the Gorkha insurgency of the mid-1980's in the north-east makes the background of the novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. The Gorkha people rise in strong reaction and revolt against the government which they see as the capitalist. They feel betrayed by the government, and therefore demand separate nation-state, exclusively independent for them known as Gorkhaland. It is their class consciousness in Marxists sense that makes them aware of their own rights. "We must fight, brothers, to manage our own affairs . . . We will run our own affairs in our own language" (159). They argue that they are 'stateless' and demand their share of the state or nation. Their demand of a separate nation-state is the result of their rising consciousness about their political as well as economic marginalization:

In our own country, the country we fight for, we are treated like slaves....We are laborers working barefoot in all weather, thin as sticks, as they sit fat in managers' houses with their fat wives, with their fat bank accounts and their fat children going abroad . . .We must unite under the banner of the GNLF, Gorkha National Liberation Front. We will defend our own homeland . . . *Jai Gorkha*. (159)

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx and Engels, *Communist* 35). Marx said that every society is formed of the class struggle between bourgeois and proletariat and that all class struggle will be resolved in 'communism' which can be achieved only after a period of a dictatorship of the proletariat (Marx and Engels, *Works* 231).

*The Inheritance of Loss* depicts the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots in the Global North. The socio-economic condition of the proletariat class (Gorkha men) forces them to wage violence against the capitalist systems. In this struggle they suffer huge loss of life and property but in the last are saved from the so called upper class of the capitalists. They step into action keeping Marxist agenda of attaining freedom by waging protest against the capitalists. The hierarchy of socio-economic structure is responsible for their sufferings.



The working of political ideology woven into the texture of the social life that is questioned in the novel by Kiran Desai requires deep and intimate understanding to the decipher significance of the surface reality of the political credo manifest in communism. Marxist thought gave rise to the emergence of trade unions and working-class political parties in late nineteenth century Europe. GNLF in *The Inheritance of Loss* is one such party influenced by Marxist ideology. Subsequently, growth of trade unionism, consciousness of workers as a class, and mass movements of workers and peasants are due to the spread of communist ideology in the world. The twentieth century saw the rise of communist ideology as a political power and force which dominated the countries for the liberation of a great number of people from economic and social oppression. *The Inheritance of Loss* can best be understood through the lens of Marxism, since communism, class struggle and class conflicts are the basis of the novel. Desai in her novel shows that there is significant difference between the standard of living and the access to money of both the classes.

Class consciousness is somewhat the inner feeling of class identity which can also be described in case of the cook. His lower social class and his view of himself as a “low” person influence him to accept disgrace and unjust treatment by the judge and also by the policemen who suspected him as the informer to the GNLF men and a part of their gang. Returning to the investigation of the robbery at Cho Oyu, Desai makes it clear that he is treated with prejudice and suffers humiliation by the so called upper class people. The policemen treat him with no respect:

Unfortunately the policemen seemed perturbed and questioned him harshly while also making their scorn for him clear. As a servant, he was far beneath them . . . The police collected their umbrellas and went tramping across to the cook’s hut, extra careful, extra suspicious. Everyone knew it was the servants when it came to robbery . . .” (Desai 12)

In this scene, the cook becomes the victim of prejudice, orthodoxical and stereotypical views due to his social class and profession.

Class consciousness is suggested in the very first chapter of the novel by the cook’s reaction to the GNLF men when they break into the judge’s house:

The cook was hiding under the dining table and they dragged him out. “*Ai aaa, ai aaa,*” he joined his palms together, begging them, “please, I’m a poor man, please.” He held up his arms and cringed as if from an expected below . . . “Please living only to see my son. Please! Please don’t kill me please *I’m a poor man spare me.*” (5-6)

The cook belongs to the lower rank in the hierarchy of the socio-economic structure. He is conscious of his class (gentry) in the society as a worker and therefore, pleads to GNLF men time and again to leave him as he is a poor man.

Since the cook is a helper, a poor worker in judge's house he is exploited and suppressed a lot. "It was his (judge's) habit to be a master and the cook's to be a servant" (209). The judge treats the cook as a slave who is destined to put up with the travesties of the judge. He treats the cook as if he were a machine to serve him [the judge] food and help him out in the household chores. He is also an attendant to entertain and look after his dog. However, it is important to be conscious that class can also be a concrete inner emotion in terms of class identity and class consciousness. But the judge's position can be seen through Marx's idea of "false consciousness." According to Karl Marx, false consciousness is a belief that the upper class is superior and has the right to exploit and rule the proletariat. It gives a false picture of the nature and relationship between social classes (Marx and Engels, *Communist* 47-48). The judge has got this false consciousness and therefore, exploits the cook.

The height of false consciousness and class difference between the rich and the poor and the humiliation of the poor by the rich can be seen in the ending chapters of the novel. When the judge's dog disappears, he blames the cook for disappearance. To him the dog is next to him, he loves him more than anyone else. The judge threatens to kill the cook if he does not find the dog:

"If you don't find her RIGHT NOW," he said, shrilly, to the cook, "I'LL KILL YOU. That's it. I've had enough. It's your fault . . . FIND HER. It's your fault. Mutt was in your care! I will *KILL YOU*. Wait and see. You didn't do your duty. You didn't watch over her. It was your duty and you let her be stolen. How dare you? How *dare* you??" (Desai 312-13)

He is aware of his position as a proletariat and therefore accepts the allegations allied on him by his master.

This description by Desai is about deeper psychological feelings about being conscious of one's social status than the punishment connected to the missing dog. The judge is no longer able to control his feelings of abhorrence and anger for the cook. Due to his privileged social position, the judge feels he has the right to punish the cook in the cruel way he does.

Sai and Gyan and their relationship can also be analysed in the light of class-issues debate. Sai falls in love with a lower class boy Gyan but their relationship could not work because of the class differences between them as Sai belongs to the capitalist class and Gyan to the proletariat.

In the novel, Lola and Noni deliberately create misunderstandings between the cook and Sai just because the cook is of a class lower than theirs. Noni says to Sai "It was important to



draw the lines properly between classes or it harmed everyone on both sides of the great divide . . . Sai would have long ago fallen to the level of the servant class herself' (67). They also treat their maid Kesang the same as the judge treats the cook. Their higher class consciousness imbibes in them a strong hatred feeling for the lower class.

### **Conclusion:**

As Marxists view art and literature as the reflection of society, Desai's novel also reflects the vice of class system. Almost all the characters in the novel fall prey to atrocities and cruelties perpetrated by the hierarchical social structure of class system. Also the difference between the upper and working classes is presented by the novelist on the basis of a kind of consciousness—'class consciousness' which in turn leads to class struggle between them.

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