

## Quest for Identity in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

PUJA KUMARI

**Abstract.** Identity suggests our thoughts and feelings, our psychic presence, our place of habitation and even our longings, dreams and desires. It is not only the spirit of the times, but also the biological trait within the character, the inner and motivation which equally contribute to one's identity. Our desire for separate cultural identity is the offspring of our being alienated from the concept of unity in diversity. Crisis of identity occurs in the state in which the individual acts not in accordance with the dictates of his "core-self" or "inner conscience" but as per the promptings of the "other self" and "outer conscience". In this state there is a total disgust and discord with the inner life and hence the alienation of the self. The dream of globalization has become a threat to the identity of the ethnic community. All characters in the novel struggle with their cultural identity. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* strands straddle across continents mapping the contours of the ethno-racial and historical relationship between people from different cultures. It is primarily about love, longing, loss and identity crisis. It is also a story of variations which leads to the cultural identities and cultural conflict present across the globe. Kiran Desai exhibits the social construction of human experience, abilities to reveal a social meaning out of it as inter-subjective process. The novel depicts the pair of exile of post-colonialism and the blinding desire for a "better life". In New York the racial discrimination makes Jemubhai retreat into solitude making him stronger to his own identity in quest of a 'better life'. Sai, the protagonist appears at the outset of the novel. She interprets love as the "gap between desire and fulfilment". This sets the very theme of the novel, a tryst with loss at all levels. In a parallel narrative we are shown the life of Biju who belongs to the class of 'shadow-immigrants', moving from one ill-paid job to another in search of a green card. The present paper intends to focus on exploring the theme of identity crisis in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

**Keywords :** Identity; culture; immigrants; loss; shadow-immigrant.

Kiran Desai, the writer of the critically acclaimed *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, was educated in India, England and the United States and like the characters in her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* she continues to divide her time between places mixed with results. She won the Man Booker Prize for this novel in 2006. It covers different continents, mapping the contours of the ethno-racial and historical relationships between people from different cultures and backgrounds. But primarily it revolves around love, longing, loss and identity. It is especially about the loss of identity. The novel bounces between insurgency in India and the immigrating experience and these scenes will resonate with

anyone who has been compelled to compromise with their heritage, their identity. It deftly shuttles between the first and the third worlds, illuminating the pain of exile, the ambiguities of Post-colonialism and the blinding desire for a 'better life'.

The novel is vast in scope covering areas from the Himalayas to the immigrant quarters of New York where Jemubhai Patel finds accommodation with great difficulty and humiliations after "he visited twenty-two homes before he arrived at the door step of Mrs. Rice on Thornton Road". (*The Inheritance of Loss*, 38). The racial discrimination there makes him retreat into solitude that grew in weight day by day. Desai writes:

...For entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things...solitude became habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow". – All this making Jemubhai a stranger to himself, a stranger to his own identity – the same man who had left his mother crying "Don't let him go, don't let him go," the man who had thrown away the plantains so affectionately packed for him by his mother; the man who had not cried. All this is for what? It is only to lose his own identity in quest of a "better life". Desai writes "Never again would he know love for a human being that wasn't adulterated by another, contradictory emotion". (36-37)

Sai appears at the very outset of the novel. She asks "could fulfillment ever be felt as deeply as loss? And goes on to interpret love as the "gap between desire and fulfillment. This sets the theme of the novel, a tryst with loss at all levels -personal, social, political and cultural." (2) She is a teenaged Indian girl, an orphan, living with her Cambridge-educated grandfather, a retired Chief Justice named Jemubhai Patel, in the town of Kalimpong on the Indian side of the Himalayas. Sai, after four years of her stay in the convent school, for the first time in her life, has come to live with her grandfather - who in Desai's words in the opening lines of chapter seven is "more lizard than human" (38) after bidding "Good-bye" to the perversities of the convent about which Desai writes, "The system might be obsessed with purity but it excelled in defining the flavour of sin" (29). But here too, in Kalimpong, Sai's hopes are shattered. Sai is in love with her Maths tutor Gyan, the descendant of a Nepali Gurkha mercenary. Eventually Gyan recoils from her obvious privilege and falls with a group of ethnic Nepalese insurgents. In a parallel narrative, we are shown the life of Biju, the son of Sai's grandfather's Cook, who belongs to the class of 'Shadow immigrants' in New York. Biju

spends much of his time dodging the authorities, moving from one ill-paid job to another on an elusive search for a green card. He leads a miserable life in foreign. Desai writes, "Above the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican, Indian, Pakistani." (21) That the other side of the world is not all green and beautiful is manifested in Desai's depiction of the pain of exile amongst the "Shadow Class" represented by the Cook's son Biju. His experiences in New York showcase the falsity of the empire's claim of providing equality and dignity to all human beings irrespective of their caste, creed and colour.

The characters in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* have been drawn into a vortex of dream for money, status and security which constantly pulls them down into a dark pit where they struggle in vain to survive, consequently left with nothing but grim reality and loneliness. This travesty of journey begins with Jemubhai Patel who leaves for U.K to fulfil his dream of passing the I.C.S. Exams. His father has a modest business of procuring a false witness to appear in the court. Being the lowest in the court he dreams of making his son a High Court judge. But separation from his parents, his country and the hardship of adjustment in a foreign culture hardens him so much, that his selection as judge alienates him from his family and sadly from his 'Desi' wife. The most frightening development of his false illusion about himself is total lack of concern for human relationships. It makes him blind towards his wife, his father and his nation. His anger intensifies his hatred towards the wife so much so that he hits her regularly. He is afraid that he may kill her because she was a physical reminder of his Indian origin which he hopelessly wished to deny.

The novel is set in Kalimpong, a beautiful mountain range at the outskirts of the Nepal border. A retired judge Jemubhai supported by one of his family cook Panna Lal and pet dog Mutt resides there. The plight of the life of immigrants is projected through the life of Cook's son Biju, who has gone to America accepting the job of a cook in an English restaurant. The novel describes two parallel stories. The Indian part deals with the story of a make shift family comprising of retired judge, his young grand-daughter Sai, his old and loyal cook and his pet dog Matt. The American section deals with the story of Biju, the son of the judge's Cook who struggles to survive as an illegal immigrant worker in New York, moving from one ill – paid job to another and is compelled to experience the anxiety of being a foreigner as well as the unfairness of a the world in which "one side travels to be a servant and the other side travels to be treated like a king" (269) Sai, throughout the text, exposes a dynamism of character. She is a young girl whose education at Indian convent school comes to an end in the mid-1980s, when she is orphaned and sent to live with her grandfather, a judge who does not want her and who offers no solace.

Kiran Desai's second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* tackles the lingering effects of colonialism on two kinds of South Asian people -those who attempt to leave India and those who remain. Jemubhai Popatlal, a retired Cambridge-educated judge, lives in Kalimpong, at the foot of the Himalayas, with his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, and his Cook. The makeshift family's neighbours include a coterie of Anglophiles who might be savvy readers of V.S. Naipaul but who are, perhaps less aware of how fragile their own social standing is—at least until a surge of unrest disturbs the region. Jemubhai, with his hunting rifle and English biscuits, becomes an obvious target. Besides threatening their lives, the revolution also affects the fledgling romance between 16 year old Sai and her Nepalese tutor, Gyan. The Cook's son, Biju, meanwhile lives miserably as an illegal alien in New York. All of these characters struggle with their cultural identity and the forces of modernization while trying to maintain their emotional connection with one another. In this alternatively comical and contemplative novel, when a Nepalese insurgency in the mountains threatens Sai's new-sprung romance with her handsome Nepali tutor and causes their lives to descend into chaos, they, too, are forced to confront their colliding interests the nations fights itself. The cook witnesses the hierarchy being overturned and discarded. The judge must revisit his past, his own journey and role in grasping world of conflicting betrayal. Desai deftly shuttles between first and third worlds, illuminating the pain of exile, the ambiguities of post-colonialism and the blinding desire for a 'better life', when one person's wealth means another's poverty.

Jemubhai, the judge is one of those Indians who could not rid themselves of what had bruised their heart and whose Anglophilia can only turn to self-hatred. These Indians are also an anachronism in post-colonial India where long-suppressed people have begun to awaken to their dereliction, to express their anger and despair. For some of Desai's characters, including Lola, who is one of the judge's neighbours in Kalimpong, this comes as a distinct shock. There is no mistaking the literary influences on Desai's exploration of post colonial chaos and despair and of course loss of identity. Early in the novel she sets two Anglophilic Indian women to discussing *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul's powerfully bleak novel about traditional Africa's encounter with the modern world. Globalization and the capitalist market forces have brought forth a new wave of imperialism with their rising powers in the contemporary world.

*The Inheritance of Loss* justifies that Kiran Desai's approach to the matrix of immigrant experiences is rational and practical than being sentimental. Assimilation and acceptance of diversity are essential but the idea for making spaces in other cultures is a complex phenomenon and its manifold paradigms can't be estimated within the sympathetic socio-cultural dynamics. Therefore there is always a crisis of Identity. But what they really achieve from the painful migration

is the loss of human dignity and freedom. It is this darkness at the bottom of prosperity and development in the age of globalization that Kiran Desai illuminates in her novel.

Kiran Desai's vision of immigrants experience has a comprehensive canvas including the socio-cultural perspective, socio-economic arguments and the awareness of the matrix of home and homelessness. The distortion of oppression is rooted in the psyche of immigrants in which there are little possibilities of escape from politics of dominance and subversion. The romantic quest marked by nostalgia, glorification of native tradition, lingering shadow of lost relationship and an urge for native food, language and habits, are not the ultimate periphery of the immigrant experience reconstructed in the text of *The Inheritance of Loss*.

By the end of the novel each appears to lose something valuable in their own personal lives-Jemubhai loses his dog, the only object of his attachment to his material world ; Sai loses her love and probably an unperturbed trust in life; Gyan loses the cause of his resistance; Biju loses all that he had saved in his life in 'exile' and his father, his imagined space. This mundane macrocosm in *The Inheritance of Loss* is marked by 'partial representation' of individual identity, split personalities, modified motivation, authorized 'otherness', personal confusion and indeterminacy devoid of enthusiasm, a sense of individual identity in terms of completeness, security and specified agenda of life, where mockery and mimicry prevail as the order of life and existence. It appears to be the reason why Jemubhai-the representative anglicized Indian bureaucrat betrays his long cherished 'Western', 'rational' and 'civilized' persona at the loss of his pedigreed dog Mutt, towards the end of the novel. The unexpected incident of personal loss compels him to seek refuge in a self-imposed exile in the house that provides a microcosm of an idealized anglicized world in likeness with the colonial system. The macrocosm of this novel is mimic space in which the 'self' deprived of autonomy and true representation awaits for a meaningful individual as well as collective identity to make sense of his fragmented subjugated self. A strange sense of absurdity characterizes this waiting, symbolizing a barren and callous universe where paranoia prevails without healing and hope. Though individuals appear to be in search of their lost inheritance and identity, they are forbidden by an apprehension about their own constructed self for "... the problems of the road are tedious". (315)

Evidently there we feel inclined to believe that the crisis of identity in the novel appears at different levels. At first, in the case of Jemubhai, the process is painful and he never acquires either the right ascent of the polish of a young sophistication. Secondly, Sai is not able to make sense out of anything. All her concepts about herself are destroyed She realized how all lives were essentially connected and affected one another. She appeared as a puppet in the hands of destiny. Thirdly, identity crisis also arises on account of maladjustment of social matrix between the traditions of the country of origin and the country of adoption.

The identity and self image belong to concrete situation of the history and to those preoccupation and manifestations which have relevance in a given concrete situation. The struggle of Biju develops rightly from this local to global question of migration and conflict of survival and ambition in the global aspect of fulfilling the dreams. According to A.C.Sinha the educated third and fourth generation Indians of Nepalese origin vividly remember the suffering of their forefathers and they are 'politically aware'. They "compete with the local aspirants for the scarce white-collar jobs, which invariably goes to the indigenous communities. Thus, they are unconsciously made aware that they do not belong to local dominant communities, for whom there is a constitutional guarantee in jobs and welfare schemes." (Sinha, 119) Arriving back in India in the climatic scenes of the novel, Biju is immediately engulfed by the local eruptions of rage and frustration from which he had been physically remote in New York. Desai suggests that for him and others, withdrawal or escapes are no longer possible. In the second last page of the novel Sai concludes:

Never again could she think there was but one narrative and this narrative belonged only to herself that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it. (*The Inheritance of Loss*, 323)

*The Inheritance of Loss* has a wider canvas, bringing the whole world together, globalization and multicultural plethora which has created insecurity, crisis of identity and rootlessness. No one can escape from the psycho-modernity where capital supremacy has become an eye opener to control the moves and mines of people. It is in relation to 'others' - to the society and the environment in which one lives- that one's own identity is formed. Moving from the inner to the global self poses the question of conflicts. Each character is a living identity, constantly examining her within the given contexts. Each one represents a different 'Society' though most of the time they belong to the same one. This 'inner society' has different meaning for the judge, Sai, Cook, his son Biju and even Gyan, each one is living with an inner self against the outer image of the societal conflicts. According to the rules of plurality like a mirror corridor it multiplies. The conflict generates in the novel when the characters don't use the same level of knowledge for others, which they use for themselves. Biju becomes as much a victim of this collective attitude as Sai. Hence within the framework of a civilization, the dilemma of being presents deeper conflict. Sai and Gyan belong to two entirely different cultures, and even after they are in love, their love suffers the conflict of cultures. The personal and collective consciousness of the culture clashes and from here the question arises as to what is a local identity which ultimately becomes a global identity. Each character in *The Inheritance of Loss* has set up a category of identity in the world, each one of them portrays his or her singularity by presenting itself into the contrast of otherness. Both identity and otherness have the process of development. Here with Kiran Desai they get the meaning within the contexts of race and ethnicity.

Desai hopes for the return of normalcy once again when “slowly, painstakingly, like ants, men would make their paths and civilization and their wars once again, only to have it wash away again...” (323) This is the message of hope as well as warning by Desai in this age of globalization. Then, the novel ends with the return of Biju, and with his return, returns life in the veins of the Cook in which blood had been running without oxygen :

At the gate, peeping through the black lace wrought iron, between the mossy cannonballs, was the figure in a nightgown. “Pitaji”? Said the figure, all ruffles and colors. Kanchenjunga appeared above the parting clouds, as it did only very early in the morning during this season. “Biju”? whispered the Cook- “Biju” he yelled, demented-Sai looked out and saw two figures leaping at each other as the gate swung open. (324)

The Cook’s hope for the return of his son, whose letters he had treasured as gems, comes true and once again:

The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it. (324)

Analyzing the conflict in one’s own way creates an identity. In complex situations, where the level of personal and collective consciousness meet and the quality of the answer provides to the dilemma, the conflict becomes the executor of identities. The title itself is a journey to understand the loss after conflict. The loneliness does not come as a shock rather it is revelation of the same fact which each character knows but is afraid to bring it to the light. Kiran Desai’s realistic portrayal of life demonstrates a deep concern for the human condition. The crisis of identity in diasporic society narrates it in terms of self and place. So, what Desai actually does is that she presents through her intertwined narrative, the inner mindscape of her every character which is a darker territory. In her novel every space collides with each other where every space is competing with others. It illumines the reader regarding the problem of local which becomes global and places the reader in front of the unresolved question of identity, both individual and national.

**Puja Kumari**

Research Scholar, Dept. of English  
Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya

**Works Cited**

Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2006.

Sinha, A.C. Marwari. *Collaborators and Nepali Subalterns: Two Integrative Social Forces in North-East India* (eds.) Rsyiemalieh, A Duttu & S. Baruah. New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2006.