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The Location and Struggles of the Third World Women: Postcolonial Feminist explorations in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

The multicultural societies of today has been challenged, prejudice and intolerance, especially in connection with differences in race and ethnicity, have been demanding and becoming problematic. Due to variations in culture and religious background, gender roles have been proven difficult in relation to western ideas and other cultures. Finally, the question of class has been of significance---not only in respect of professional skills and social status in the country of origin, but also regarding how immigrants settle and integrate into a new country. In her novel

The Inheritance of Loss, Desai gives vivid descriptions of multicultural societies from the whole world. The problem of alienation is a recurrent theme in many of the post-colonial Indian English writers. In this paper the researcher's prime focus is to evaluate in this novel by Kiran Desai, the problem of cultural identity which is illuminating the pain of exile, the ambiguities of post-colonialism and the binding desire for a better life. The researcher's main objective in this paper is to explore the similarities and differences between the theme of homelessness and gender discriminations. The themes of homesickness, rootlessness, patriarchy, oppression will be seen through the lens of migration and multiculturalism in a postcolonial setting, which is prevailing in this novel. In particular, the researcher is interested in investigating why some people are discriminated against, and how literature represents this discrimination. The researcher's emphasis will also be on the tense relationship between the East and the West and how the connection between the colonizer and the colonized has influenced this situation. The crux of this novel lies in its exploration of the ambivalence that rules the national discourse about globalisation. In Desai's novel, the various characters are trapped by the ambivalence that surrounds global, local and postcolonial politics because the promise of opportunity is invariably conditioned by issues of class and ethnicity.

Key Words: multiculturalism, immigration, patriarchy, translocation, homelessness

The conjuncture between 'postcolonialism' and 'feminism' is indeed an emerging scenario in the contemporary critical practice. Chandra Talpade Mohanty observes the function of Western imperialism itself and the feminist willy-nilly enacting the problematic role of the 'feminist-as-imperialist'. In her paradigmatic essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial

Discourses" she locates in the recent Western feminist scholarship a play of discursive colonisation linking it to imperialism and its production of the 'Third World Women' as a "singular monolithic subject, an always already constituted group, one that has been labelled as powerless, exploited, sexually harassed and so on" (Mohanty, 26). The 'Third World Women' as a monolithic analytic category, according to Mohanty, denies any historical specificity to the location of women as subordinate, powerful, marginal, central, or particular social and power networks. This reductive approach on the part of the liberal Western feminism leads not only to much binary opposition but also to a self-representation of the European middleclass women superior, educated and modern as against the projected view of the Third World Women as ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic and victimized. Thus in comparison to the superiority of the Western feminists, the Third World Women rise above the debilitating generality of their "object" status. This Western feminist approach thus manifests humanism as "a Western ideological and political project that involves the necessary recuperation of the 'East' and 'Woman' as others" (Ibid., 42). Thus from a postcolonial point view gender, class, caste and race gets interlinked. To quote Mohanty at some length in this context:

> Ideologies of womanhood have much to do with class and race
>
> As they have to do with sex.... It is the intersections of the
>
> Various systematic networks of class, race, heterosexuality,
>
> And nation, that position us as 'women'. (Ibid., 55)

Herein lies a fundamental challenge for feminist analysis once it takes seriously the location and struggles of the Third World Women, and this challenge has implications for the rewriting of all

hegemonic history, not just the history of people of colour. These issues of intersection of gender, race and so on is pursued at length because it is here that critics like Sara Suleri made their sharp attack on what they implied to be a dangerous coalition between postcolonialism and feminism. Suleri demands historicity for the postcolonial and hence its disjunction from feminism, critics like Mohanty, Trinh and hooks demand historicity on the part of feminism and hence its inevitable intersection with postcolonialism as no one becomes a woman purely because she is female. The woman as subject in any literary discourse is written primarily in the masculine form and interpreted in patriarchal terms.

Bhabani Bhattacharya in *Women in My Stories* candidly confesses that "the women of India have more depth, more richness than men. The transition from the old to the new and the crisis of value adaptation, strike deeper into the lives of women than the men-folk" (Bhattacharya, July 1975: 2). In spite of such confession by a noted Indian writer, traditionally, the works of Indian women writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. While the women writers are found capable of writing from within the private sphere, the works by the male writers belong to grand public sphere. While identifying the 'women question' as central issue, Partha Chatterjee finds that the attempt to modernise the condition of Indian women was soon replaced by "a glorification of traditional patriarchal assumptions under the impact of nationalist discourse" (Chatterjee, 240). The experience of being caught between two cultures has remained a prominent theme in the writings by Indian women. While in the nineteenth century, Indian writers attempted to write about the woman's life in his/ her patriarchal voice in order to appropriate the representation of woman with the dominant patriarchal discourse of the West, and under the impact of nationalist discourses there was a deliberate shift from the westernized concept of woman to a more traditional one.

According to Partha Chatterjee, "such nationalist construction of woman...nonetheless remains trapped within its framework of false essentialisms" (Ibid., 261). Towards the last decade of the twentieth century, however, a gradual change started creeping in, unobtrusively trying to produce a blend of Indian tradition and Western modernity in the conditioning of women. With the emergence of several Indian English women writers the representation of women and fiction-making also underwent a substantial change. Indian women novelists started exploring the problem of East-West confrontation while analysing the response of women and children towards migration, displacement and cultural encounter. In their searching for their own identity in their writing, novelists like Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and second generation immigrants like Kiran Desai, incorporated a psychological journey to selfhood, towards a critical understanding of feminine aesthetics and about their situation in cross-cultural contexts---states of 'in-betweenness' and 'border-crossing'. Thus, at the hands of the nationalists, social reform for women was turned into cultural reform in terms of the entrenchment of the dichotomies of the domains. It not only enabled them to resist the colonial discourse about India and its women but also gave rise to a new patriarchy which connected the home and the world in such a way as to produce 'the new woman' or *bhadramahila*, who would not only be different culturally from the Western women but also distinguished from the common women, who did not attain the superior moral sense and were also oppressed under the old patriarchy. This was the nationalist mode of challenging the Western claim of superiority on the one hand and to shore up its struggle for emancipation on the other and "thus the new woman was charged with the responsibility of culturally emancipating herself and emancipating the nation" (Ibid., 131).

Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that the resultant tension between individual and society, "could be studied in sharper contours when the protagonist's life was restricted within the narrow space with very few options regarding mobility, self-sufficiency or vocation---in other words when the protagonist was a woman" (Mukherjee, 144). Sai is such a protagonist in Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss,* who becomes the quintessence of the "New Woman" and derives her strength from her anglicised cultural refinement, acquired through the Western education in the convents, she attended. She is deeply immersed in her thoughts of loneliness and exile and being an orphan, she seeks solace in books and nature. This feeling of alienation and isolation is compounded by Sai's identification with Kanchenjunga: "a far peak whittled out of ice, gathering the last of the light, a plume of snow blown high by the storms at its summits" (Desai, 1). She is engrossed in an article about giant squid in an old National Geographic, the loneliness warps her through the grey mist that permeates everywhere and the image of the giant squid accentuates her isolation as she feels "...theirs was a solitude so profound they might never encounter another of their tribe" (Ibid., 2). Sai turns melancholic at the predicament of eternal loneliness and seeks refuge in the thoughts of love and her sense of crisis is a reality. In Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*, the plight of the protagonist Sindi Oberoi is similar to that of Sai as both of them are orphaned at an early age, undergo existential dilemmas and are intricately affected by the problem of post-independence Indian society.

Sai Mistry, being a product of the postcolonial situation, finds the remnants of the colonial past scattered all over her life. Born of the romance between her Zoroastrian father and a Hindu mother, who had died in Moscow, she was entrusted to the care of a convent. She became a westernised Indian brought up by English nuns, an estranged Indian living in India. She was a product of mishmash of cultures Lochinvar and Tagore: "Punjabi dance in dhotis", "national

anthem in Bengali" and an impenetrable Latin motto "Pisci tisci episculum basculum" (Ibid., 30). She learnt the colonial etiquettes and used the superior technique of incorporating in her life the ways and norms of the dominant culture; she accepted that cake should be preferred than ladduoos and fork spoon, knifes are better than hands. Sai was transferred from a life of cloistered nunnery to that of a companion to a grandfather who was "more lizard than human" who lived in a remote faceless corner of the world "with the solace of being a foreigner in his own country" (Ibid., 29). This indication of the residual effect of colonial domination is clearly visible in the life of the judge and Sai. The dynamic psychological and social interplay between Sai and the judge with their colonial culture and the native indigenous culture of the young gang of boys exposes Sai and her grandfather's inadequacy at meeting the insurgents on a dominant plane.

In addition to the cultural transformation required of all immigrants to anywhere, the individual transplanted to the U.S. must also cope with the changing world in which nothing, not even the landscape stays the same. Change and adaptability is the key to survival, and that the successful immigrant has the instinct of reinventing oneself in recurrence to adjust with the postcolonial exilic reality. Thus in the flurry of changes there is a nucleus of cross-cultural reality. This exuberance of immigration, which comes with the acquisition of Americanisms and the immigrant Indianness, result in a sort of a fluid identity. This liquidity of identity not only complicate the life of Sai but also the sisters Lalita (Lola) and Nomita (Noni) and like Sarah in Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, they are a product of East-West amalgamation. Lola and Noni in this fiction regret the passing of life, at having never experienced love at all, at never having taken any risk as Noni regrets: "I should have thought about the future when I was young" (Ibid.,

69). They are caught between two alternatives where they view their private world with rose-tinted glass and transitory world which they cannot identify with, where they face humiliation, deprivation and isolation. Their old way of life and the sudden transition is too violent for them to comprehend:

> Just when Lola had thought it would continue, a hundred years
>
> Like the one pas-Trollope, BBC, a burst of hilarity at Christmas-
>
> --all of a sudden, all that they had claimed innocent, fun, funny,
>
> Not really to matter, was proven wrong. (Ibid., 241-242)

They never strive to learn the ways of their adopted country. As Pramod K. Nayar writes in his essay "Hybridity, Diaspora, Cosmopolitanism": "Exiles tend to hold on to their traditions in an almost desperate effort to retain/reclaim their original culture..." (Nayar, 195). Thus the two Afgan princesses stick to their own cultural code and when the reality invades their lives, they become disillusioned and aware of their insecurity and vulnerability as females, unprotected in an alien land among alien people. Desai's novel suggests that the global call for melting borders that became the political statement of the Indian nation in the last quarter of the 20th century, also created its reactionaries in the localised spaces of the land, and the contending forces generated narratives that challenged not the phenomenon of globalisation per se but the politics of exclusivity that invariably conditioned the countries vision of melting border.

This condition of displacement challenges the diasporic to negotiate his gender identity in ways that will allow him to survive in the newly constructed spaces and gender becomes, as Judith Butler argues, "a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (Butler, 177). Like

Ashima, the protagonist in Jhumpa Lahiri's book *The Namesake*, the problems of identity crisis which the diasporian people suffer from and the loneliness is projected through the lives of these two sisters as all of them are trapped between two situations---one unacceptable and other unaccepting. Like Anita Desai's psychological novels, Kiran Desai also presents the image of a suffering woman preoccupied with her inner world, her sulking frustration and the storm of conflict within. Kiran presents in this fiction Sai's awareness of the foibles of the society which is exposed through the life of her grandfather. She strives to create a life of her own, far removed from the colonial grasp with which the judge and the two Afgan princesses hold on to the hangover of the past. Through these characters Kiran, like Anita Desai, makes a plea for a better way of life for women. The result of the inculcation of English leaves Sai alienated in his own country. She seeks to escape her loneliness being engaged to her tutor Gyan. But after a brief interlude of romance between the two teenagers, their attachment dries out as each finds the other as alien, belonging to different cultures, and different life patterns. The sight of chickens being hurt and raped by the rooster refers to the colonial situation where the rooster represents the 'English' and the chickens the 'Indians':

> The birds had never revealed themselves to her so clearly
>
> A grotesque bunch, rape and violence being enacted, hens
>
> Being hammered and pecked as they screamed and flapped
>
> Attempting to escape from the rapist rooster. (Desai, 256)

This scene illustrates the helplessness and vulnerability of the Indians in a colonial situation. Although Sai's sensuality traps Gyan, who enjoys prohibited pleasure, sexual dominance of Sai

compels Gyan to feel as if "...she had chased and trapped him, tail between his legs, into a cage" (Ibid., 249). When Sai seeks out Gyan and enters the prohibited domain of "other" her face unconsciously mirrors her distaste and Gyan is no longer her beloved "momo" but a "dirty hypocrite". The act of betrayal by Gyan stems from the fact that Sai is not one of them and that she cannot speak any other languages than English and Hindi. Sai and the two Afgan princesses undergo what Homi Bhabha refers to as "unhomeliness":

> This feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging
>
> To neither rather than to both, of finding oneself arrested in
>
> A psychological limbo that results not merely from some in-
>
> Dividual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the
>
> Cultural displacement, within which one lives. (Tyson, 421)

Sai is not the timid, easily subjugated woman, she is superior to Gyan as she defies the norms of a docile of a docile Indian woman and makes Gyan feel inferior. Gyan is ashamed of surrendering to "the feminine pish pash mash, sicky sticky baby sweetiness..." (Desai, 250). His refuge from this smothering suffocating world is to join in the Gorkha movement, to stand tall and to assert his masculinity. Sai, with her free-self expression and unrestrained enjoyment, is a temptation, an unattainable and mysterious empress, a forbidden fruit to be enjoyed. Sai defies God who has forsaken her and decides to create her own world of happiness and live within it by leaving everything. By resolving to her own mistress, free to adopt and regulate her own life, she typifies the new woman. But Kiran Desai also projects the traditional long suffering Indian woman who seeks to conform to the norms as she has limited alternative options.

Jhumpa Lahiri opinions in one of her article: "I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, is more explicit and distressing..." (Sinha, 230).When Mr. Jemmubhai Patel went to England for higher studies, he never feels at ease there as the English landlords do not like him and even in the filthy cluster of houses he is refused accommodation before he could get space in the house of Mrs. Rice. Displaced again and again from his sense of home, Jemmubhai is entrapped within a space of the diaspora that continually cracks his sense of himself and makes his space a volatile one. The result of all these humiliations finally creates a warped mindset within him which is hardly human. The judge is his own intimate enemy, caught in a luminal spatiality which continuously challenges his sense of himself. The opening page of the novel presents the judge with his chessboard, playing against himself. Franz Fanon in his influential book, *Black Skins and White Masks*, discusses this complex in terms of an "epidermal schema". Mala Pandurang comments:

> Yet despite his unhappiness as an alien in land, he envies
>
> The English and loathes the Indians and grows increasingly
>
> Embittered by the realization that he would be despised by
>
> Absolutely everyone, English and Indian both. (Pandurang, 94)

In the scene, depicting the first conjugal night between the twenty-five year old Jeemubhai and nineteen year old Bela, an ancient aunt instructs Jemmubhai to break the bed, suggesting violent activity and subjugation of a passive wife. Her activity is restricted by patriarchy and the new bride resists the chase and seeks to escape through the door that is locked:

The aunt had locked it-just in case. All the stories of brides

Trying to escape now and then even an account of a husband

Sidling out. Shame shame shame shame to the family. (Desai, 169)

Bela, transformed to Nimi by the Patel family, suffers the countless, faceless, silent Indian women as she becomes an object, a lineament, only to gratify Jemmubhai's desire and then be relegated to the background. Jemmubhai's anger has no subject but only a strategic objective. It is an interdictory desire, a "metonymy of presence" as Bhabha terms it in his *Location of Cultures* (Bhabha, 36). She fails to be aware of the world outside the home that can allow her to venture out as long as she does not deviate from the norms of femininity laid down by patriarchy. Nimi takes the final step of no return; she dares to raise her voice against her husband, to defy his authority and to voice her pent-up hatred and fury with clarity: "you are the one who is stupid" (Desai, 304). This is the death knell for Nimi as she is beaten by her enraged husband and her lack of protest finds her bundled off in humiliation to her parents' house where she gives birth to a daughter. Nimi accepts all the sufferings and abuses of her marriage since she is controlled by this institution and she cannot become a typical "good" wife. The fight of oppressed women against patriarchy drives them either into madness or death as in Anita Desai's *The Innocence of the Death* which is a tale about the complete expurgation of women. The women, bereft of the love and companionship they deserve from their husbands, are forced into insanity. In *The Inheritance of Loss* the cook remembers that the judge's wife went mad due to her husband's unmitigated hatred and revulsion towards her, which is reminiscent of the mad woman of the attic in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*.

With this novel Kiran Desai takes a sceptical view of the West's consumer-driven multiculturalism that fails to address the causes of extremism and violence in the modern society and the predicament of woman in a postcolonial world. Desai's novel seems to argue that even the theoretical basis of postcolonialism, confined to the Western metropolis, and does not address the real issues and causes. "Never again", Sai concludes towards the end of the novel, "could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to her, that she might create her own mean little happiness and safely within it" (Ibid., 320). Desai offers little possibility of redemption to her women characters although Sai, at the end of the novel is allowed to transcend her homelessness. The strength that she derives comes from this resolve to cross the boundaries of life: "And she felt a glimmer of strength. Of resolve. She must live" (Ibid., 324). Thus ultimately the novel reaffirms faith in relationships and sustainability of life as Sai recovers her home. She witnesses the reunion of Biju and his father against the background of "The five peaks of Kanchenjunga, turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that true was apparent" (Ibid., 323). Actually the novel is about patterns of loss---the loss of selfhood, identity, nationality and loyalty and loyalty. The Indian immigrants in America long for "home", the root itself and they long for love and acceptance. New identities are generated into new spaces of knowledge that one has experienced. These identities born in such interactive spaces, inevitably retain influences not only from memories of origins or roots, but also absorb influences of the new culture in the transnational space. The individual living in this space, being conscious, constructs himself by uniquely combining the cultures of his roots and of his land of domicile. This space intensifies the "politics of polarity" by continually highlighting the vision of the individual living in this space rather than elude it as Homi Bhabha

suggests in his celebration of this space as the "Third Space of enumeration" (Bhabha, 38). The researcher would like to conclude his paper by quoting Carole Boyce Davies:

> Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces
> The rewriting of home. Homesickness or homelessness, the reje-
> Ction of home or longing for home become motivating factors
> In this rewriting. Home can only have meaning once one exper-
> Iences a level of displacement from it. (Shameem, July 2007: 52)

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