

“Unfulfilled Dreams Lead to Frustration and Loss”: A Scrutiny of Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

Any literary work is the result of the author's dreams, experiences and imagination. Ever since the existence of literature, dreams have always functioned as a valuable narrative tool for writers. A character interprets some valuable perception from interpreting a dream by one's unconscious and subconscious imagination. Every mortal has a dream of one's own. The unfulfilled desires need an outlet to ventilate it out which are exposed in dreams. They get filled when their aspirations come true. On the contrary, when one's dreams fail to become a reality, it eventually drags one to loss and frustration. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* portrays a dream each and every character possesses in one's life and how it eventually drags one to loss and frustration. This paper attempts to explore the dreams of all the characters in the novel and brings out how they ultimately lead to loss and frustration.

Keywords: Inheritance, Loss, Dream, Frustration.

Kiran Desai states “I write this book out of my own experience”, in an interview. The main theme of Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is the problems of migrants. It stresses the idea that man's only inheritance in life is one of poverty of various kinds. It can be realized that one can merely strive for fulfilment in one's life till she or he actually attains it. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* visualizes a globalised India, where the past and the future live in an uneasy juxtaposition; and also depicts the whole Indian communities in creation. Besides the portrayal of the characters' dreams, loss and frustration, Desai has also presented the universal existence, the multi-faceted culture, social inequality, violent political situation and the brutal side of humanity through this novel. She also attempts to explore the mysterious inner world of the human soul.

Deshmukh says, “*The Inheritance of Loss* is a melange of inter-connected stories about various losses inherited by a group of uprooted and isolated characters” (76). One of the main characters Jemubhai, the retired judge hates humans and wants to be isolated. His granddaughter Sai, after the break-up of her relationship with Gyan felt

isolated. Each character in the novel suffers some sort of deprivation. The losses are of different kinds. But there is no escape from them and they must bear them. This sense of loss engulfs almost all strata of society. They frequently face the problem of identity and alienation and become frustrated at the final stage. The twin motif of ‘Inheritance’ and ‘Loss’ is clearly depicted to mould the life of each of the major characters.

Desai portrays the postcolonial India with a cold eye and a warm heart. She writes of the poor as well as the privileged lot of India. All the important characters in this novel have been dismayed sometimes fatally when they encounter with other cultures or being wilfully blind to the demands and the limits of the world they presently dwell. Madhuri Deshmukh comments, “The novel circles furiously around this feeling of absence and loss at the centre of our increasingly deracinated world” (75). This novel not only fumes against the neo-liberal solitudes about the benefit of globalization, but also against the all-too-common celebrations of modern up-rootedness and hybridism.

The novel is set against the backdrop of Himalayas. It mainly tells the story of Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a retired judge, living in Kalimpong and his kinship with his orphaned granddaughter Sai. The author brings out the lives of her main characters with their dreams, loss and frustration of the judge's cook Panna Lal and his son Biju's frustrated life in America, Lola, Noni, Uncle Potty and Father Booty. She depicts Sai's love affair with her mathematics tutor Gyan. The loss of the central character Sai's parents make her learn the alphabet of loss in her childhood itself. She has been put into a convent school which she detests. Sai whispers to herself, resting in the infirmary that "My parents are dead. I am an orphan" (27). The death of her parents in Moscow makes her expelled from a boarding school at Dehra Dun and pushes her off into the only living relative – her grandfather, the retired judge. She falls in love with her mathematics tutor Gyan. Her romance with Gyan ends in frustration as Gyan joins the insurgent Gorkhas indulging in terrorist violence. After the loss of parental love, this is the second major loss Sai has suffered in her life. Sai faces the loss of both her lover and her love.

All the characters in this novel suffer from a sense of ambivalence that leads them to a sense of deprivation. Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, the retired judge lives with his sixteen year old orphaned granddaughter Sai and his cook. He has a pet dog named Mutt. Jemubhai is so much impressed with western values and so he loses his original identity and feels "foreigner in his own country" (29). The life of Jemubhai has been one of frustration and bitterness right from his first night. He is a British-trained man. His wife Nimi does not have much education. All his attempts to teach his wife the western etiquette and manners result in failure. He always thinks of himself superior to his wife and acts so. The judge's pet dog Mutt has been his companion for a number of years. She sleeps in the judge's bed with her head on his pillow. "Oh, Grandfather more lizard than human. Dog more human than dog" (32). When she is stolen by two beggars, the judge gets distraught and goes about searching for her shouting like 'Please come home, my dear, my lovely girl, ... catch the bone!' (293). The signs of loss, identity and loneliness are seen in the life of the judge.

In the words of Desai, the cook "was a powerless man, barely enough learning to read and write, had worked like a donkey all his life, hoped only to avoid trouble, lived on only to see his son" (11). The cook has a son named Biju who works in America. The cook dreamt that his son Biju would take him to America one day. The cook also imagined that "Biju would make enough and the cook would retire. He would receive a daughter-in-law to serve him food, crick-crack his toes, grandchildren to swat like flies" (17). But Biju himself had returned to Kalimpong. The cook also had lost his assets to his brother. All his past losses and his unfulfilled dream have turned into present frustration.

Kiran Desai frames two parallel stories in this novel. One story which focusses on the characters Sai, the retired judge, Gyan, the cook, Lola and Noni is set against the backdrop of Himalayas. The other story focusses on the cook's son Biju who is an illegal immigrant in New York. He is a typical Indian immigrant who works for slave wages and stays illegally in America. Biju came to America thinking that he could achieve his dream. But the reality is rather dissimilar. Everyday he experiences more despair than hope. Desai deals about a terrible blow fallen on the aspiration of the Indian immigrants as she traces Biju's return to India penniless.

Biju has a dream about America in his mind. To his shock, he finds America a crowded spot where people from the Third world countries are engaged in an unequal struggle for existence. Resting along the basement shelf, Biju thinks of his village where he lived with his grandmother. They had a peaceful life there. They had fresh roti, butter, fresh milk etc. He is so restless in America that he can barely stand. He feels angry at his father for sending him alone to America. However, he knows that he would not have forgiven his father for not trying to send him. "Biju couldn't help but feel a flash of anger at his father for sending him alone to this country, but he knew he wouldn't have forgiven his father for not trying to send him, either" (82).

Biju suffers from loneliness since he got to America. But he is not disheartened. He realizes that he is not a single case but there are many like him. Each of them suffers alone in the pit of one's own hell dug by none other than one's own self. Mala Pandurang aptly quotes: "This is

a story as much of a loss, as it is of bittersweet longing for a world that eludes each of the characters, as a consequence of their class backgrounds and post-colonial of legacies. They thereby become the inheritors of loss" (94). Tired of pain and humiliation, Biju makes the return journey home out of concern of the greatest loss that can come out of a long term separation from one's family. The career of Biju is again one of the cases of gaining something by fraud and losing it to threatened violence. His dream of obtaining a green card remains only a dream. He returns to India and falls into the clutches of the Gorkhas who rob him of all his possessions. Biju's loss is so total.

Desai makes a line of latitude between the plight of Gorkhas in India and Indians elsewhere in the universe. Gorkhas are the Nepalis of India. They are labourers on the tea plantation. They also drag heavy loads. All the individual characters in the group of Indian Nepalese Youth are fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they are the majority. They want their own country or at least their own state in which they like to manage their own affairs. Their complaint is: "In our own country, the country we fight for, we are treated like slaves" (159). The Gorkha activists argue that the Gorkha inheritance so far has been mainly of loss with a little gain. One of the frontlines of the GNLF (The Gorkha National Liberation Front) movement reasons out, "We are soldiers, loyal, brave. India or England, they never had cause to doubt our loyalty. In the wars with Pakistan we fought our former comrades on the other side of the border. How our spirit cried. But we are Gorkhas. We are soldiers. Our character has never been in doubt. And have we been rewarded?? Have we been given compensation?? Are we given respect??" (158). Gyan joins the movement as an opportunity to vent his rage and frustration.

According to Kiran Desai, Nepalis earn their livelihood by hook or crook. Sai's tutor Gyan represents the Nepali youth. Though he is a brilliant student of mathematics, he is jobless and relies on tuition for livelihood. His ancestors had left their village in Nepal and arrived Darjeeling and work on a tea plantation. Gyan lives in an old thatched house in Bong Busti. Gyan's father was a meek teacher in a tea plantation school. The story of Gyan is likewise one of losses and deprivation. His father died in a war in

Burma. Gyan's first loss is the passing of his father. The second loss Gyan faces in his life is in regard to his love affair with Sai. A Shakespearian reader may go with William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* that says 'Journeys end in lover's meeting'. But on the contrary, the journey of Sai and Gyan ends only in lover's beating.

One of the characters in the novel *Father Booty* is a Swiss national. He opens a Swiss dairy and produces cheese, curd and chocolate cigars for the entire locality. He had never considered himself as none but an Indian. Father Booty is compelled by Gorkhas to run away from there by depriving his properties to a meagre amount. They threaten Father Booty by saying, "I have arranged it and you have no choice. You are lucky to get what I am giving you. You are residing in this country unlawfully and you must sell or lose everything" (222). When he has to leave his property and home and go back to Switzerland, in one way or another, he loses his faith and discovers himself as an alien for the first time in his life in a foreign land.

In a contemporary world of technology, people all over the world are fascinated to have the opportunities to transcend boundaries. The life of the two sisters Lola and Noni is no way exceptional. The two Bengali sisters live in a rose-cottage named Mon Ami. After the death of Lola's husband, both the sisters live on Lola's husband's pension. Lola's only daughter Pixie is a BBC reporter in London. The GNLF workers accommodated the property of Lola and Noni. When Pradhan, the local leader of the movement insults Lola, she screams silently to her husband Joydeep who was dead so long ago. '*Joydeep, look at what you've done, you bloody fool!!!*' (245).

Any reader can clearly visualize the American dream of the Indian immigrants through the character Biju, as Kiran Desai traces his return to India penniless and demented. The pathetic reunion of Biju and his father towards the end of the novel is a crashing, ironic commentary on the illusion that post-colonial India cherishes on America as the ideal land of the future. She also has shown how the innocent poor people are harassed. They are tortured even in their own country or in America.

The Inheritance of Loss shows how all the events have a profound impact on the lives of people and how this impact is passed along from one generation to another.

The novel exposes the ambiguities of post-colonialism, possession and dispossession of how one person's gain becomes another person's loss. The life of the poor, the marginalized and the uneducated is contrasted with the life of the rich, the powerful and the educated. The racial difference does not mean one race superior and the other inferior. It does not make one forward and the other backward; it does not make one race naturally privileged and the other deprived. It is only man's personal thoughts based on his personal profit and loss produce racism and make racial discrimination.

Desai clearly depicts the dreams which bring loss that lead to frustration in the life of each character in this novel. The theme of loss is dealt with sensitively from various angles. Ultimately the novel in general ends with 'losses' in many ways. When one has a dream, it has two sides, either fulfilment which gives happiness or loss which leads to frustration. The central character Sai loses her parents and her dream of leading a happy contented life with her lover. The judge loses all his prized-possessions. Biju dreams of becoming rich and loses all his savings which results in frustration. The two sisters Lola and Noni lose their property. Father Booty loses his dairy farm. The Teesta valley losses its earlier charm and calm in the wake of insurgency. Despite all these losses, there is still a

possibility of hope and gain at the end, as we see "The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the 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). Even though the novel ends with a hope, there is no facile solution to these kind of losses as humans are not contented with what they receive. Such is depicted in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

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