

Nowhereness and State of Un-belonging in

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Kiran Desai's 2006 Booker Prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with the themes of "alienation, rootlessness, disillusionment and death".¹ Man's life on earth has never been a bed of roses. It is full of sufferings, sorrows, pains and pangs. These sufferings are sometimes brought by fate and sometimes they come owing to ruthlessness and cruelty of other people with whom one come into contact during the course of one's life. The predicaments of an individual assume more serious dimensions when he/she is out of her home place/country or when he/she undergoes a cultural dislocation. The pains of life are also due to the ambition of man to achieve something beyond his reach. These realities of life are unfolded in a superb manner through a variety of stories in *The Inheritance of Loss*. The novel "manages to explore, with intimacy and insight, just about every contemporary international issue: globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence."² The central event of the novel is the life of Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a retired judge. The stories of Lola-Noni sisters, Sai-Gyan affair and Biju's sojourn in America are parallel narratives that are woven around the main story. The events are mostly set in a place named Kalimpong at the foot of Himalayas in the northern province of West Bengal. Some more events are set in New York, America and England. The time covers the pre-independence period and immediate post-independence period in India.

Jemubhai is brought up in a village, Pilphi, in Gujarat. His worldly-wise father arranged Jemu's marriage with Bela (Later on Nimi) the daughter of a rich man, Bomanbhai Patel, before Jemu sails to England to pursue ICS in England. He extorts a huge amount of money in the form of dowry to facilitate his son's stay in England. Jemu comes back with an ICS and joins the British Govt. service as a judge in Bonda district in Uttar Pradesh. The process of cultural dislocation sets to work from the very beginning. Jemu throws away the packed food his mother gives to

him when he sets out for England. He discards his mother's love terming it as "undignified love, Indian love, stinking unaesthetic love..." Now westernized, Jemu fails to accept the traditions of his own country. He undergoes a superiority complex, therefore, others appear inferior and unacceptable to him. Instead of '*roti*' he forms the habit of eating 'ham roll', 'Tuna fish soufflé' and 'khari biscuit pie'(p.17) ³ He begins to dislike his rustic wife and now considers her "Just a county bumpkin" and "incredibly stupid". He says "she is unsuitable to be my wife"(p.306) Therefore he harasses, tortures and finally abandons her. She gives birth to a girl-child. While living with her sister, Nimi meets with a fire accident and dies tragically. Her daughter is educated in a convent. She falls in love with one Mr. Mistry, they get married and have a daughter named Sai. Sai loses both her parents in Russia and comes to India, studies in a boarding school and finally reaches her only relative, her grandfather, Jemubhai who at that time spends his old age at Kalimpong with an only companion, Panna Lal, his cook. The other living being is a female dog, Mutt. Sai is a new entrant there. At the fag end of his life, Jemu's hypocrisy, cruelty and misanthropy must have subsided. Therefore he does not object to providing room for Sai under his roof- the bungalow named Cho Oyu. During the Gorkah's agitation for a separate Gorkha land, he is molested by the strikers. He becomes an alienated self as he abandons his wife, ignores his father calling him "a village idiot"(p.306), neither sees nor meets, nor supports his own daughter and son-in-law. In the end we find him beating his cook, for his negligence in safe-guarding his dog Mutt which is lost. It is ironical that he feels the loss of the dog so deeply that he is unmoved at the loss of human relations. He stands nowhere and without any sense of belonging. What he inherits here is merely 'loss.'

Sai takes educational coaching from Noni, a spinster, living with her widowed sister Lola in a bungalow named Mon Ami which is adjacent to Cho Oyu. Sai's dissatisfaction by Noni's tuition leads to the entry of a new tutor, Gyan, a Nepali Gorkha by birth. The teacher-taught relation results into a love affair which turns sore sooner. Gyan is an educated, frustrated unemployed youth. He joins Gorkha Land Liberation Movement. Insulted by Sai, he breaks his ties with her. When Sai approaches him at his place, he insults her and even resorts to charging her with a stick. Thus Sai-Gyan love relation remains only an illusion. It

can be viewed as a failure of fusion between the two estranged cultures. Gyan's assault on Sai represents the ever possible violence during the cross cultural encounter. Both remain alienated.

Lola-Noni sisters also suffer from loneliness, nowhere-ness and sense of un-belonging. Lola's husband Jaydeep dies leaving her a pension. Her daughter works with BBC in London. Lola, once in two years, visits London to see her daughter. Noni lives with her sister. They are alone; without any support of a male member. They have a watchman, (Buddhoo) and a maid (Kesang). During the Gorkha's agitation Mon Ami is invaded by young Gorkha activists. They harass and trouble the sisters. Later on, Gorkhas encroach upon the open land in front of Mon Ami which becomes a nuisance for Lola. She cries in disgust as Jaydeep had built a house in Kalimpong instead of building one in Calcutta." Lola and Noni's obsession with their satellite television programs, which cause them to have virtually no idea of what is going on in the immediate world around them"⁴ stands as a metaphor to their remoteness from the place where they live in.

The lives of Panna Lal, the cook and his son Biju too do not come to a happy ending. Being the narrator Panna Lal occupies an important place in the novel. Since his childhood, he has been serving Jemubhai. His wife died when his son was still a small boy. Panna Lal is superstitious. He believes that his wife's ghost troubles his son and he could save his son by sending him abroad. So he sends him to America – the so called 'melting pot' and hub of multiculturalism. Actually the recruiters cheat Biju. Somehow he goes to America as an illegal immigrant. In America he is subjected to many insults and ill treatment. Biju writes letters to his father stating that he is going to become a manager of a Hotel there. Panna Lal longs to go to America to see his 'successful' son. Biju, after a knee injury, returns to India. He is robbed of his belongings by the Gorkha activists. When he reaches Cho Oyu, he finds his father being beaten up by Jemu for he could not take proper care of the dog Mutt. This tragic scene is deeply ironic. Deception, illusion and disillusionment are part of modern life. It is shocking for Panna Lal to see his son half-naked, as he thinks high of his son, as he is in America. Therefore both the father and the son are betrayed. The realities of nowhere-ness and state of un-belonging are manifested through some more minor characters like the refugee Afghani Princess and the Swiss

evangelist/priest Father Booty, who is packed off back to Switzerland by Gorkha Liberation Movement activists.

For reasons like education, employment, trade, marriage and other political or economic motives, often, man moves away from his location to other places and encounters other peoples and cultures. Very often his dreams of finding a congenial atmosphere in the form of ideal and perfect human beings are shattered. Most of the times, he finds the world around him selfish, cunning, deceptive and exploitative. Therefore he is caught in nowhere-ness and in the state of un-belonging. Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, though in fictional terms, puts these realities on record.

Works consulted:

1. Gulrez Roshan Rehman, "Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*: A study in Themes of Rootlessness, Alienation and Death" in Critical Response to Kiran Desai, ed. Sunita Sinha and Bryan Reynolds, (Atlantic Publishers, New Delhi, 2009):118-144

2. Srutimala Duara, "Conflicts of Globalization, Multiculturalism and Economic Inequality in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*" in ed. Sinha and Reynolds.

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

(Here and henceforth, in this paper, numbers in parentheses refer to the same edition)

4. Melisa Dennyhy, "Globalization's Discontents: Reading "Modernity" from the Shadows" ed. Sinha and Reynolds.