

## EXPLORING THE COLONIAL IMPACT ON POSTCOLONIAL INDIAN SOCIETY: A STUDY OF KIRAN DESAI'S NOVEL, *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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### ABSTRACT

Historical events have a profound impact on the lives of people, and the impact passes from one generation to the next. The colonial experience has continued in spite of, and long after, the withdrawal of political control and cultural power of the former colonial powers. The representation of the lingering effects of colonialism and the socio-political and cultural problems of postcolonial Indian society is the central concern of this research paper. This study makes an attempt to explore the representation of these problems which include migrations, sub-nationalism, transformation of colonial culture and its effects on the native culture and tradition as depicted in Kiran Desai's novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*.

**KEYWORDS:** Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Racism, Ethnic Separatism, Migrations, Immigrants' life

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### INTRODUCTION

Desai's novel vividly portrays the socio-psychological problems of Indians who are living in India and abroad. Being an Indian immigrant in America, she portrays the attitudes of the westerners and the way they treat the third world people. James' character in the novel represents how the colonial system of education destroys an individual's psyche as well as his native identity.

### OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this research paper are as following. They are,

- To understand the problems of the Indian people migrating to America and the dream of new life.
- To present the sense of exile as a universal experience and the imbalance between the East and the West that changes a person's thinking and feeling.
- To understand the British colonial officials' success in pursuing a policy of demographic change and its impact on post-colonial society.

The colonial introduction of English education helped the British to occupy the superior position over the native language and culture and made the Indian people feel that their culture and language are inferior to the western culture. Derek Hooks in his book *A Critical Psychology of the Postcolonial* (2012), notes Franz Fanon's words on the psyche of once colonized people.

A psycho-affective relation or response has the semblance of universality and timelessness because it involves the emotions, the imagination or psychic life, but it is only ever mobilized into social meaning and historical effect through an embodied and embedded action, an engagement with (or resistance to) a given reality a performance of agency in the present tense.(102)

Similar to Franz Fanon's explanation in the above lines, through James' character in the novel, Desai represents how the colonial system of education converts the native people to become the anglophiles. Jemu, in the novel is a victim who is exhausted with the colonial system of education and culture. He is a representative of the first generation Indians who went to England for higher studies and faced the racial psychic problems due to the racial discrimination. His journey of life in the novel begins from a small village called Phipit of Gujarat. He was born in a peasant family; his primary education begins at Bishop Cotton School in Gujarat. When he was pursuing his primary school education, he was fascinated to see the portrait of Queen Victoria on the wall of the school building. He likes her portrait passionately and gradually develops much interest towards English education. He plans to study in England in order to make his future better. He explains that power of the portrait like this:

He found her foggy expression compelling and felt deeply impressed "that woman so plain could also have been so powerful. The more he pondered his oddity, the more his respect for her English grew. (58)

Jemu's impression towards the royal portrait of Queen Elizabeth and his perception towards English education shows the impact of colonial education system on Indian society.

Though Jemu's father does a low status job and earns less money, he procures money and feels proud to send his son to England. He sends Jemu to England with an aim of pursuing higher education as well as to get the social dignity through making his son a high court judge in India.

His son might, *might, could!* Occupy the seat faced by the father, proud disrupter of the system, lowest in the hierarchy of the court. He might be a district commissioner or a high court judge.... father below, son above, they'd be in charge of justice, complete. (59)

The above lines make it clear that Jemu's father act of sending his son to England, his admiration for English education, and his dream of making his son a high court judge indicate the attitudes of the Indian people and their perception towards English as a superior language.

After his arrival to England, Jemu's life becomes very horrible, he often encounters many troubles, he fails to get a shelter in London, he moves around the streets for many days in search of a room. He requests many people to rent him a room but they hate to answer Jemu and they shout on his face:

"Just let," "All full," or a curtain lifted and quickly dropped, stillness as if all the inhabitants had, in that instant, died. He visited twenty-two homes before he arrived at the door step of Mrs. Rice on Thornton road" (38).

Jemu's precarious condition makes him habituate the new culture and to live like an English man. After passing some days in England, he registers his course at 'Fitz Williams College', but the troubles in London haunt him once again. At the college, Jemu experiences the racial discrimination by the whites. Eventually his life in England makes him enter into a life of emptiness, he loses his hopes which he carried from India, he fails in Indian Civil Service exams, and hence he develops the sense of loneliness. The narrator says:

"His loneliness had found fertile soil. He treated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man and it crushed him into shadow" (39).

Eventually Jemu's adoption of English culture, experiencing the racial discrimination and other bitter experiences force him to self-alienation. His behavior, attitude and everything resembles the lifestyle of the West. He behaves like an English man and sees everything through the lenses of Englishness. His life of England, sense of Englishness, racism and other traumatic experiences force him to experience his life in the shadow. Jemu, after returning to India, feels like a stranger to his own mother land and to his own people, he almost forgets to laugh and talk to other people, he always wishes to live like an English man wearing a coat and shoes.

### **Postcolonial Migrations**

Human migration can be understood as a physical movement by people moving from one place to other, migration or movement from a place begins when people voluntarily move from one place to other or they move involuntarily. According to the *New World Encyclopedia*, the movement of populations in modern times has continued under the form of both voluntary migration within one's region, country, or beyond, and involuntary migration (which includes the slave trade, human traffic and ethnic cleansing). It is significant to understand that migration is one of the important topics of postcolonial studies. The migration or movement from a country can be linked to its historical, cultural, religious and economic backgrounds. In the context of India the postcolonial migrations are linked to the history and political policies of the colonial rule in India and the exploitations of Indian economic resources.

The British ruled India for two hundred years and exploited its every economic resource and destroyed the country economically, politically and culturally. As a result of the economic exploitations, the post independent India emerged as an independent country with multiple disorders in its social structure. Due to the poverty and unemployment, people in postcolonial India started migrating to different parts of the world, mainly to the Western society. Dadabhai Naoroji's work *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901), and Gauri Vishwanathan's work *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989), explains how the British Government destroyed the Indian society economically, politically and culturally.

Desai in her novel provides the best example to understand that the historical events have a profound impact on the succeeding generations. In the novel, Achootan speaks about the nature and attitudes of white people towards Indians and other third world people. Achootan who spends his life in Canterbury for eight years shares his experiences with Biju (in New York) and tells him how the British treat the Indians:

Shit at least this country is better than England, he said. At least they have some hypocrisy here. They believe they are good people and you get some relief. There they shout at you openly on the street, go back to where you came from. (135)

As Achootan told Biju in the above lines, Achootan in return to the response of the British, he shouts back like “your father came to my county and took my bread and now I have come to your country to get my bread back” (135). Here Achootan’s words ‘your father came to my country and took my bread’ represent the exploitations of the British who ruled India and exploited its economic resources and forced the country to live under poverty.

Desai describes the postcolonial migrations as the result of not only the British exploitations of economic resources, but it is also due to the colonial mindsets of the Indians who submissively think that the Western people like the Americans and the British have more knowledge and wealth than the Indians. In the novel, the cook who sends his son Biju to America explains to his neighbors about its greatness. “New York very big city, the cars and buildings are not like here, in that country there is enough food for everybody”(4).

Here the cook’s attitude towards the Western society is very evident that for him as well as many of the other third world people the Western society is greater and richer than their own country. Moreover the cook’s perception of American society represents the socio-economic variations between the Eastern and Western society, his words “in that country (America) there is enough food for everybody” (4), reflects the insecure feelings of the Indian immigrants who want their children to depend on the Western economy. Desai’s novel, clearly indicate the economic domination of America in the present global world. With related to the post-colonial migrations and the afterwards consequences of colonial rule in the third world nations.

### **Colonialism and the Ethnic Separatism**

The British colonial officials’ success in pursuing a policy of demographic change through immigration cannot be separated from the question of political power in North-east India. Colonial conquest meant that British officials with elaborate views about population, progress and civilization were in power and they could now make and implement policies of populating the newly colonized lands according to their whims and fancies. In Assam there was a compartmentalization of ethnic groups by virtue of their occupation and area of settlement. In the colonial economic order, the indigenous population was not in general as commercially successful as the immigrant, producing from time to time ill-feeling and suspicion in everyday encounters between members of ethnic groups. India’s North-east is the location of the earliest and longest lasting insurgency in the country. Separatist violence in Nagaland commenced in 1952. Since the late 1970s, a multiplicity of more recent conflicts has also proliferated. Every State in the region is currently affected by insurgent and terrorist violence. Indeed, the North-east has been an area of great and continuous civilizational intercourse throughout history, and has been thought of as a gateway of commerce and culture that linked India over land to east and Southeast Asia, and a complex transition zone of linguistic, racial and religious streams. (Web, Sahni Ajai) The indigenous tribes’ of the North-east represent successive waves of migrants, both from East and West, with many entering the region as late as the 19th Century. The cultural mosaic was made more complex as a result of the British policy of ‘annexing colonies’, importing large numbers of administrators, plantation workers and cultivators from other parts of India and neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Bhutan etc. (Sajal Nag, 2002). 16 Stalin, while discussing the foundations of Leninism, in his *The National Question*, explains the functions of colonialism in view of annexing the colonies of India and other nations: Imperialism cannot exist without exploiting colonies and forcibly retaining them within the framework of the integral whole; because imperialism can bring nations together only by means of conquest, without which imperialism is, generally speaking, inconceivable. (Morris 1880: 288). Confirming Stalin’s explanation about the dynamics of colonialism, in the novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, we can observe Desai’s depiction of the Gorkaha National Liberation

Front. They constitute a Nepali Indian people fighting for a (Gorkhaland) transnational land' which was once integrated by the former colonizers at Kalimpong in Darjeeling.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The research paper tried to locate the dynamic effects in the postcolonial society through the novel. Moreover, this study paves the way and broadens the scope for further research in the field of Postcolonial studies. In this study the lingering effects of colonial culture or consciousness may be evident as two facets; first, its acceptance of an imperial model and the other, its simplistic rejection. We will have to come out of this colonial Cocoon and take a critical look at our own cultural roots, with which we can identify ourselves, in our own mirrors with our own eyes as we are- good or bad; measure ourselves not by imported yardsticks or ideologies, but by our own indigenous norms.

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