

LOSS AND REDEMPTION EXPERIENCED BY JAMUBHAI PATEL IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS: A POST-COLONIAL ANALYSIS*

Qazi Ehsan Ahmed*

PhD Scholar / Professor of English, Government Post-Graduate College Haripur
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, Qaziehsan123@gmail.com

Mustanir Ahmad

Associate Professor / Chairperson, Department of English, Hazara University, Mansehra
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, mustanir@hu.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

Kiran Desai as a diasporic Indian novelist has convincingly presented the experiences of life in England or America in her acclaimed Man Booker Prize winning novel The Inheritance of Loss. Immigrants from India, Pakistan or other such third world countries face issues of identity. They become witness to clash of the Eastern and the Western cultures. They show mixed reactions to the happenings over there. Some people show their deep concern about the threat which their native culture and identity face during their lives over there. Some other individuals like Jemubhai Patel in the said novel create a shell around themselves in which they hide their true feelings. The latter want to do mimicry of the White race in their appearance through dress, language, and lifestyle. Because of their non-acceptance by the West as their part, they confine themselves to their very self and remain victim to inferiority complex. After completing education or training abroad and assuming important and influential positions as government officials, their previously experienced inferiority complex turns into superiority complex when they go back to their respective native lands. They imitate the English people and deal their own people with strong hatred by treating them as ignorant and ill-cultured. Their relations are no exception in this regard. They are also in the row of all others who are to be ruled and subjugated. Jemubhai too loses relations like parents, wife, daughter, and granddaughter. For him his pet dog Mutt becomes the recipient of his love, care and attention. It is only through the loss of Mutt his journey of redemption begins. Only then, by the end of the novel, does he realize the significance of human relations. But this realization has been a torture process for him. It costs him mental calm and composure.

Keywords: Loss, Redemption, Mimicry, Identity, Diaspora, Relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Literature reflects different modes of life. The writers of various literary genres like novels, drama, poetry, etc. offer their own respective perception and meaning of life. They portray and present life as they see it lived by themselves or others. In the modern age in comparison to the other modes of writing, novel is most dominant form of literary creation which has attracted more readers. It is also most widely practiced by the diasporic writers to write about the life of natives lived abroad. The novels written by them are more authentic documents to record their perception of life lived by Indians or Pakistanis in the most immigrant attractive countries like The USA and Great Britain. Major issue faced these people is the sensitive matter of identity and culture. Different people show different reaction to the threats and dangers faced by their culture and identity during their exposure to the Western culture and attitude of the White race towards them. Some resist to the influence and stick to their native heritage of life left to them by their ancestors. Others after passing through the stages of ambivalence and mimicry turn themselves into hybridized products. The latter are not allowed to merge by the dominant Western race as their part. Distinction and differentiation is bound to be there. Their status always remains separate. The worst thing is when these mimic men or hybridized individuals return back to their native lands, they face non-acceptance by their relatives and other people. They become the men of no lands. People like them are not accepted by the West and the East. Those who are back in their homelands are not welcomed. Mainly it is because of the superiority complex that they feel regarding their native fellows. They lose relations, love, association with the culture and their true identity. They are not deemed as original.

Kiran Desai as a diasporic writer has raised this theme of loss of relationship and identity in her prestigious novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. She has highlighted this sensitive issue through the main character

* Corresponding Author

Jemubhai Patel. He leaves for higher studies in England and qualifies the competitive exam ICS. His stay in that country has completely changed his mind. On his return to India, he does not consider himself as an ordinary Indian. Being a civil servant he starts maintaining gap from fellow Indians. He considers them as ignorant people whom he has been sent by the British government as its representative to rule and subjugate them. Besides losing his fellowship with the Indians, he has also lost his personal relationship with parents, wife, and daughter. He has room in his heart for his pet Mutt. All his love and care is reserved for it. He can give hatred, humiliation and insult to the Indians. He thinks and really practices governorship of the ordinary countrymen. It is really unfortunate that he starts realizing his follies and blunders of mistreating his relations and other people through his loss of dog. Mutt loss teaches him a bitter lesson about the significance of human relations. But this act of redemption has not been very easy for him. It is as bitter as was his stay as an Indian in England in past.

Statement of the Problem

Kiran Desai as a diasporic novelist paints the bitterness of hybridity on the personality of Indian natives who have lived a part of their life in the Western world. They are at loss despite acts of redemption and recovery as they remain the men of no lands as neither accepted by the West nor East.

Objectives of the Study

- a) To discuss Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* regarding theme of loss and redemption.
- b) To analyze the issue of identity in *The Inheritance of Loss*

Research Questions

- a) How does Kiran Desai portray the theme of loss and redemption in *The Inheritance of Loss*?
- b) What are the areas which make *The Inheritance of Loss* an acceptable post-colonial text?

Significance of the Study

- a) It highlights important issue of loss of identity and associated loss of relationship which will be noticed by the third world countries immigrants to England and the USA,
- b) It will be beneficial for future researchers and teachers of diasporic writings.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Those immigrants who feel ashamed of their identity and cultural traits among the White race seek escape and solace by imitating the life style and cultural patterns of the colonizers. Such a mimicry of manners and values help them to hide their respective inferiority complex. (McLeod 23).

The mimic men who adopt the behavior and elements of the ruling White elite can never become like them. The difference of the original and the hybridized remains in vogue. How much effort may be done by the mimic men, they cannot appear as the same like the White men. Bhabha upholds the opinion that the difference between them is bound to be there. They are, "almost the same but not quite", "almost the same but not white" (127-128).

Orient stands for difference and in opposition to the Europe. The image of Orient is created to highlight the distinctive status and position of the West. It is used as contrast to serve as a foil to Europe to glorify its image in comparison to the former. It helps in establishing the superiority of the civilization, cultural, history and language of the colonizer as a superior race, "The Orient is ... also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other" (Said "Orientalism" P.1).

Frantz Fanon is of the view that identity issue can be tackled with the realization of one's place and space, both in the world of the colonizer and the colonized. Otherwise there is strong possibility that one may lose true identity. Place and position determine one's existence as a distinctive entity, "the especial post-colonial crises of identity comes into being with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place" (Fanon: 8).

The post-colonial writers have to take into consideration the binary opposition between us and them and self and other as both these exist at the same time and side by side. (Nayar: 200) Hybridity allows a room for adopting of the values of the dominant segment of the world but preservation of one's former self should be kept intact.

The analysis of Jemubhai's character can be convincingly gripped through the images which he by himself sees through his flashback of his past. Firstly, he remembers himself as an underprivileged child who remains mostly at social loss, then a rude, proud and insolent young boy who has got education in England, later a dreadful judge who creates fear in the heart of people, a disrespectful son, a very cruel and humiliating husband because of whom his wife dies. The judge is presented as a callous and hard hearted person who does not repent throughout his life. His feelings of sorrowfulness and repentance are shown by the end of the novel, sadly due

to the loss of Mutt. (Goodwin-Nguyen:6) His phase of redemption is very short but it carries significance as it presents him as a person who has finally realized his follies in mistreating his relations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research study is qualitative and descriptive in practice. It deals with social and cultural aspects of human life. It is about the issue of identity and culture faced by the South Asian immigrants to England and America.

The research design chosen by the researcher is as under:

- a) Close reading of the diasporic novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is done.
- b) Specific areas from the text are chosen and analyzed with reference to the issue of identity.
- c) The notion of identity is analyzed by having post-colonial literary theory as a theoretical background.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Jemubhai has feelings of estrangement when he gets settled in England as a student. He observes non-acceptance for him as an Indian imprinted on the faces of the White people. He remains perplexed and unable to adjust himself. He does not know how to communicate with anybody. This is a torturous experience for him, “for entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things” (Desai 39). He lacks courage to face people who are different from him in color and language. He cannot bear the impression of superiority in their attitudes. He confines himself and seeks solace in his studies, “he began immediately to study, because it was the only skill he could carry from one country to another” (Desai 39).

The feelings of inferiority complex grip his mind and heart. He cannot bear his identity in color and language. He wants to get rid of these identity marks. He feels ashamed of himself. He forgets how to laugh. His very self becomes a stigma in itself from which he cannot escape. He creates a shell around himself so that he as well some others become unable to see his actual self, “Jemubhai’s mind had begun to warp; he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely manage to lift his lips in a smile” (Desai 40).

Jemubhai becomes timid. He lacks courage and he cannot face even English boys who make fun of Indian complexion, “why is the Indian brown?” he shifts upside down, HA HA HA” (Desai 209). On such another occasion he witnesses that an Indian has been surrounded by a gang of English boys who target him. He is beaten and humiliated by them, “One of the boy’s attackers had unzipped his pants and was pissing on him, surrounded by a crowd of jeering red-faced men” (Desai 209). Jemubhai has seen all this with his own eyes. Cowardliness and timidity have controlled his whole self. He does not feel repugnance and hatred against the White race. He does not protest and demonstrates lack of courage to stop all that insulting happening. He rather prefers to run away secretly and does nothing to resist all this, “And the future judge...what had he done? He hadn’t said anything. He hadn’t done anything. He hadn’t called for help. He had turned and fled, run up to his rented room and sat there.” (Desai 209)

Jemubhai dies with the desire to look like the English. He loses his originality and true identity. He wants to get rid of his Indian color and local Indian accent of speaking English. He imitates the English. He starts speaking in a fake English accent and applies powder puff on his face to look like an English man, “a fake English accent and [a] face powdered pink and white over brown” (Desai 93).

Jemubhai after clearing ICS and getting education from England assumes the position of a judge in India. He treats his fellow Indians by imitating the English sahibs. He keeps Indians at a distance. He has great awe in his mind for the English. They become his role models to express his repugnance and hatred for the Indians. He behaves with them as if they are his slaves and as if he possesses a right to rule them. But the matter of irony is he cannot be accepted by the English as their equal and what he can get from them is hatred and by treating Indians as his slaves, he loses relation and connection with them. He is such an unfortunate person that he gets hatred from the English and Indians, “This accidental poise became more important than any other thing. He envied the English. He loathed the Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both” (Desai 131).

Jemubhai has lost relation with his father. His pride and sense of superiority costs him love of his parents. For him they become ordinary Indians to whom sahibs like Jemubhai are born to subjugate. He feels ashamed of the presence and company of his father. The relationship between them as father and son is lost, “Jemubhai looked at his father, a barely educated man venturing where he should not be, and the love in Jemubhai’s heart mingled with pity, the pity with shame. His father felt his own hand rise and cover his mouth:

he had failed his son.” (Desi 42) Jemubhai begins hating his mother too. He does not want to have maternal affection, care and love of his mother. He thinks that these are shackles which do not allow him to become a man of prestige and dignity in society. He feels as his culture and love of mother and land have lost attraction and beauty. The unconditional love of his mother does not appeal him anymore. He thinks that he has been groomed and refined by the Western education and culture to treat all Indians as his slaves instead of loving them. His mother like his father is also one of the Indians. What he can gift them is just hatred and distance. The bond between him and his parents is lost forever, “Didn’t his mother think of the inappropriateness of her gesture? Undignified love, Indian love, stinking, unaesthetic love—the monsters of the ocean could have what she had so bravely packed getting up in that predawn mush”. (Desai 43)

Jemubhai mistreats his wife Nimi Patel. For him if a standard matters in life is just the standard set by the English. He is already prejudiced against the Indians as mere brutes. His wife is also no exception. She cannot find a pace or some space in his heart as her family member. He loses relationship with his wife as he has lost love of his parents. He does not care and love of Indians. His behavior with her is based on ignoring and hating her as if she does not exist. For him it is only the English ladies who may possess refinement and beauty and Indian women including his wife are brutes, “He did not like his wife’s face, searched for his hatred, found beauty, dismissed it. Once it had been a terrifying beckoning thing that had made his heart turn to water... An Indian girl could never be as beautiful as an English one.” (Desai 168)

Jemubhai’s heart, if he has, is burning with hatred for his wife. For him she is not a human being who may be given some basic respect and honour. He does not lose any opportunity to demonstrate anger and hatred for her. For him she is just an ill cultured animal. Whenever possible, he goes to the verge of crushing her self-respect under his feet and turning her into a living dead body, “One day he found footprints on the toilet seat—she was squatting on it, she was squatting on it! he could barely contain his outrage, took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl” (Desai 173).

Jemubhai has reserved his love for his pet Mutt. He ensures it that it gets meat and nutrinuggets during the days of famine. Human beings may starve but his dog must have expensive food. As yet he has not realized that he has lost all human relations because of his imitation of the English. He does not care whether they live or die. He is concerned just with his pet. The day comes when he is shocked and becomes mentally traumatic when he comes to know that he has lost his pet. Mutt is stolen by someone which ruins whole mental fabric of Jemubhai. It is the loss of Mutt which makes him realise that he has been cruel and hard hearted towards all his relations, particularly his wife, “Now Jemubhai wondered if he had killed his wife for the sake of false ideals. Stolen her dignity, shamed his family, shamed hers, turned her into the embodiment of their humiliation.” (Desai 308) Ironically his journey of redemption begins with the loss of a pet. He starts realizing the importance of human relation through his love for an animal.

Jemubhai has sorrowful feelings after the loss of Mutt. He thinks that he has been punished for mistreating his Indian fellows, particularly his parents and wife. He becomes a soft hearted person and begs before God for the eradication of his tensions. He is appealing to that God in whose existence he has string doubts. He realizes that he has been a stupid who did not believe in the pure love of his parents and sacrifices of his wife. He takes the loss of a dog as the punishments inflicted upon him for his past sins and all wrong doings:

The judge got down on his knees, and he prayed to God, he, Jemubhai Popatlal the ignostic, who had made a long hard journey to jettison his family’s prayers; he who had refused to throw the coconut into the water and bless his own voyage all those years ago on the deck of the *SS Strathnaver*. “If you return Mutt, I will acknowledge you in public, *I will never deny you again*, I will tell the world that I believe in you—you—if you return Mutt--” Then he got up. He was undoing his education, retreating to the superstitious man making bargains, offering sacrifices, gambling with fate, cajoling, daring whatever was out there—Show me if you exist! Or else I will know you are nothing. Nothing! Nothing!—taunting it. But by night, the thought reentered his mind—Was this faith that he had turned away, was it paying him back? For sins he had committed that no court in the world could take on. (Desai 301)

CONCLUSION

Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* paints the dilemma faced by the immigrants to the developed countries like England and the USA. They decide either to protect their native culture and identity from the influence of the White race or to become hybrid by accepting their culture. Sometimes this hybridity causes them to lose balance and they tilt more towards the side of the culture and life style of the English people. By imitating their

accent and facial complexion through various treatments and applications available to them, they imperceptibly adopt the mentality of the White race. Jemubhai Patel is presented as a character who completely imitates them. The mimicry of their mentality is very threatening as it is full of hatred against the Indians. Resultantly people like Jemubhai return to their native lands with prejudice and contempt in their hearts and minds against their fellow Indians. Being ashamed of their original identity they seek revenge from people like them i.e. fellow Indians. The superiority complex that they carry with them, causes them even to lose relations like parents, wife and daughter. By the end of the novel we see that Jemubhai is empty handed so far as these vital human relations are concerned. Though he passes through the phase of redemption at last by self-realization that he has been cruel and hard hearted towards his loved ones. He realizes that punishment for him is strong enough for his sinfulness and wrong doings which has caused him to lose precious relations. The novel ends at a happy note by presenting the picture of Jemubhai bowing before God for the forgiveness of his sins.

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