

Multiculturalism in Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss

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Abstract

A multicultural society usually invokes cultural conflicts. People belonging to any culture, any community expects to be identified and survive in the entire human society. If some dominant culture pulls them back to insignificance, cultural conflicts arise. In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, almost problems are related in various ways. As is evident from a thorough reading of the novel, while globalization and colonization affect the cultural life of the Indian society of mid eighties, racism invokes terrorism and cultural conflicts. While globalization makes people multicultural, cultural conflicts pull them back to their roots. Though the story of the novel is set in post colonial human society, Desai's characters become parts of today's life. The study finds that, how much multicultural a man is, does not matter, but his identity is rooted in the culture he inherits without which he is a rootless person. He has to preserve his cultural heritage which he owns. This is an analytical research based on primary and secondary sources.

Key Words: Culture, multicultural, globalization, racism, heritage

Introduction: The term 'multiculturalism' is very much relevant in the context of the postmodern world. In this age of globalization, people from different parts of the world are in communication with one another. Their feelings and emotions are shared. Their problems are universal. The concepts of multiculturalism and globalization are closely related. Globalization has totally changed the world. In fusion of different traditions and cultures, people acquire a new identity which is called multicultural identity. This is the real identity of a person living in the postmodern world. Today one can neither ignore nor overlook this stark reality. Globalization has its impact on every individual, it doesn't matter how conservative he or she is.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* focuses on the complexities of Indian cultural life in the postcolonial era and the frustration of Indian immigrants in Western countries. The novel deals with contemporary themes like multicultural identity, racism, effects of globalization and terrorism. Some other themes dealt with in this novel are love and loss of love, desire for modernity and better life, chaos and despair of postcolonial Indians, rootlessness and so on. The proposed study takes a dig at how different characters of the novel adjust themselves in a society of mixed cultures and customs. It explains what the characters of the novel lose and what they gain in an ever-changing world of globalization. It explains how the characters of the novel identify themselves or how they are identified in a process of being multicultural.

Methodology: The proposed study carries out primary and secondary data based method. It follows descriptive research designs. Data collected from books, journals articles, internet and observances are analyzed.

Objectives: The objectives of this research are:

- To study the impact of multiculturalism on the characters of *The Inheritance of Loss*
- To study cultural conflicts and identity crisis as depicted in the novel.

Discussion: Kiran Desai in her *The Inheritance of Loss* brings to light the disappointments and the miseries of immigrant life. Jemubhai, a retired judge, is the protagonist of the novel. He is embittered, eccentric and arrogant. His hatred for his Indian origin makes him live like an alien in his own country. Again during his stay in England, his envy for the British people is visible, the reason being he is unable to be like them. However, he believes in the superiority of the English language and culture and he tries to influence a soldier by speaking in English.

Sai Mistry is one of the three major characters in the novel, the two others being the judge and Sai's lover Gyan. Sai is a Westernized Indian not only in her behavior but also in her attitude towards life. Though she is originally an Indian, she is looked after by English nuns in her childhood. She is convent educated and introduced to both Indian and Western cultures and traditions in her curriculum. But practically she is accustomed to the Western life style. When she comes to live with her grandfather, her life is confined to a narrow environment where everybody imitates the Western way of living. Sai's upbringing makes her what she is.

Gyan is Sai's tutor and lover. But soon he turns his back to Sai's love and all her material comforts, as he becomes involved in the Gorkhaland Movement. He begins to realize that he must sacrifice his relationship with Sai for his people and that he can't spend his whole life eating cheese toast. He feels ashamed when he remembers his tea parties with Sai, his eating cheese toast and Queen cakes bought from the baker. He even recollects his intimacy with Sai and their infatuated conversation. He becomes conscious of his own cultural heritage. He finds his rejection justifiable as Sai lives like a foreigner in her own country. He abuses her, because she eats, dresses and talks like a Westerner. Because of her unfamiliarity with Indian language, she can't communicate with others outside of her narrow Westernized society.

The minor characters in the novel like Nimi, Bose, Father Booty, Biju and Haris-Harry are also depicted with their individualities confronting the complexities of a multicultural world. All of them including Bose with his daring pursuits, Lola and Noni with their Anglophilic sentiments, Nimi and Biju with their traditional outfits, Haris-Harry with his business spirit, Father Booty and Sayeed Sayeed with their generosity are parts of everyday life. Two exceptional characters are Sayeed Sayeed and Father Booty who are more human than multicultural. There are also some characters in the novel who symbolize the power and influence of the West all over the world. They are Harish-Harry's daughter, and Lola's daughter Piyali.

Findings and conclusion: Almost all the characters in the novel are affected by the cultural exchange between the East and the West. Jemubhai becomes more lizard than a man. Sai is deserted by her lover Gyan. Very opposite of the judge's character is Biju who believes in the narrow purity of his Indian culture. What differentiates Biju from Sayeed Sayeed is that Biju can't come out of his cultural prejudice, but Sayeed Sayeed easily mixes up with people from different countries and cultures. Again while Biju retreats from the multicultural society of New York to his Indian origin, Harish-Harry tolerates his daughter's immodesty for the sake of money.

Culture changes when social environment changes. Globalization has made this change very accessible. What is often true about human nature is that different people behave differently in relation to the society they live in or the people they are with. Different people with their different attitudes towards life exist as different individual beings in the same socio-cultural environment.

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