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Subaltern identity and problems portrayed in Kiran Desai's the inheritance of loss

Shravan Kumar and Ambedkar Bodigadla

Abstract

The first generation of writers, including Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R K Narayan, evoked social reality through epic novels. The representation of social reality has always beckoned authors, dramatists and poets throughout history. In fact, it is their commitment to bring to light the current social situation through their works. This is not an exception for Indian English writers. However, following colonialism, there was a second generation of Indian writers such as V S Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Arvind Adiga who carved a niche in Indian Writing in English through their extraordinary novels. Many of them honored with the Man Booker Prize. The purpose of this paper is to investigate why people, who leave their homeland, particularly from third-world countries to first-world countries, feel like subalterns and continue to live as such even after they have immigrated to a transnational land. People who leave their home country lose their freedom, joy, and happiness, as well as their identity. It is for their presentation of contemporary issues such as identity crisis, hunger, poverty, unemployment, corruption, moral degeneration of self-centered societies, illiteracy, cultural hegemony, identity and so on. This paper attempts to discuss the portrayal of the subaltern which is prominent theme in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of the Loss*.

Keywords: Subaltern identity, refugees, unemployment, exploitation, entrepreneurships and globalization

Introduction

India became a powerful country after post-colonialism. The contemporary Indian English novels serve as a reflection of this emergence. A few examples include V. S. Naipaul's *In a Free State* (1971), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008). These books were recognized with the prestigious Man Booker Prize for their role in reflecting the shifting Indian society. These books portray the emergence of a new social, economic and political order. Desai depicts the lives of the privileged and elite class on the one side and the subalterns and the marginalized on the other. However, the goal of this essay is to highlight the suffering of the weak. The main focus of this article will be on their poverty and the wounds it has left behind. It also discusses how people in the past have responded to a world that has changed as a result of globalization. She has also dealt with the idea of class conflict both domestically and internationally. It takes on a new dimension of change as it nears its conclusion.

Discussion of the paper

The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai brilliantly explores the theme of subaltern identity through the characters of her novel in a bewilderingly fascinating style all its own. She has captivatingly revealed the vicious and tragic undertones of her theme (identity crisis). The title itself foreshadows the synaesthetic blending of positives and negatives like "Inheritance" and "Loss." The setting and inhabitants of Cho Oyu are described in the opening pages of the book. Sai, the judge's granddaughter, is reading a National Geographic article on the front veranda while Jemubhai plays chess against himself. Mutt the dog is soundly dozing beneath his chair. This elegant scene demonstrates the judge and Sai's privileged and pleasurable activities. Even dogs can appreciate life's pleasures. The publication Sai is reading makes reference to an intellectual setting, education and ties to the West. The cook is attempting to light some damp wood in the back, away from the light and apart from the others, to make tea. It goes without saying that the judge is the master and the cook the servant. The cook stands in for the oppressed while the retired judge and his granddaughter belong to the upper class. The cook serves the judge with sincerity, devotion, and commitment despite his advanced age.

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The cook is poor. He lives in a mud and bamboo hut on the judge's property. He has only one extra shirt and few other personal belongings. He started to work when he was ten years old and was hired by the judge at the age of fourteen. Since then the judge and the cook have been living together. The judge has been the powerful master and the cook the submissive all-round servant doing his best to fulfill the demanding tasks of the judge with primitive facilities. Further their places of accommodation also represent their class.

The master's room decorated with the public monument and the rooms were spacious in the old manner of wealth, windows placed for snow views, whereas the kitchen was like a storeroom piled with the Ping-Pong table and only a corner of the kitchen was being used, since it was meant originally for slaving minions, not the one leftover servant". Further the novel contains a suggestive reference to the life of poverty; the cook is doomed to live with a few cheap domestic items at his disposal.

It pained Sai's heart to see how little he had: a few clothes hung over a string, a single razor blade and a silver of cheap brown soap, a Kulu blanket that had once been hers, a cardboard case with metal clasps that had belonged to the judge and now contained the cook's papers, the recommendations that had helped him procure his job with the judge, Biju's letters, papers from a court case fought in his village all the way in Uttar Pradesh over the matter of five mango trees that he had lost to his brother. In the sateen elastic pocket inside the case, there was a broken watch that would cost too much to mend, but was still too precious to throw away he might be able to pawn the parts.

The Judge's granddaughter Sai, was irritated with her grandfather and moved to compassion for the cook by the Judge's callous disregard for the cook's pitiful state. She was expressing her concern for the cook's family income level. We can thus see that there is a class divide right from the start of the book. She says, "They are the poorest family in the village. Their house is still made of mud with a thatch roof." The cook is treated badly by the judge only because he is poor. His devotion to his master goes unrewarded. All that he gets in lieu of his twenty-four hours of service is the little money that he spends on himself and his son, Biju. For the low payment that he gets monthly, he performs all kinds of domestic chores including preparing and serving tea and food, polishing shoes, washing and ironing clothes, cleaning utensils, taking care of the dog and so on and so forth. In spite of doing all these things sincerely and diligently he is often abused and even sometimes beaten by the judge. The cook bears all this because he is without money. He says, "Terrible to be a poverty-stricken man, terrible, terrible". Born in a poor family, the judge developed hatred for the poverty and the poor.

When the Gorkhaland National Liberation Front robs the Judge, they take the food, liquor and guns. When the cook is still reeling from the shock of the Naxalites, he laments loudly, "hamara Kya hoga, hai, hai, humara kya hoga," "Hai, hai, what will become of us?" The judge responded. "Shut up," and thought that these servants are born and raised to scream. The master has frequently insulted the cook. He 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 only to see his son," because he was a servant. Furthermore, the judge does not agree with the cook's interference in his conversation during the investigation.

When the cops arrive to investigate the robbery, the cook attempts to participate in the conversation. This irritates the judge, who says, "Go sit in the kitchen. "Bar karata rahta hai". The conversation between the judge and the cook is usually in Hinglish, which is a strategy to keep the class distinction. The judge gives the cook orders in both English and Hindi. This implies the judge's allegiance to the colonisers and the Hindi is used to confirm that the cook correctly understood the instructions. The investigators naturally pay a visit to the lowly cook, who is a natural suspect. This presents an opportunity for Sai to confront the abyss of class firsthand.

Economic sufficiency determines the social status of an individual. When the cook demands hike in salary because it has not been raised for years, the judge refuses to do so. For him the cook's salary is like "pocket money: All your expenses are paid for housing, clothing, food, medicines. This is extra," growled the judge. The judge is insensitive to the hardships of the cook's life. Whenever the cook prays for an increase in salary, he is rebuked in harsh words to which he has become accustomed. These wealthy people frequently give the impression of hiring workers without taking their needs into account. Because of their disintegration and illiteracy, they are merely exploited.

Desai uses the cook as an example of how, given the chance, he could have achieved much more in life. She draws attention to how challenging it is for someone from a low social class to improve their circumstances. The cook's ambitious thinking is apparent in his decision to send his son Biju to work as a waiter or cook abroad. Biju makes his initial effort to find employment in America. The cook, despite being in the lowest position of the class, takes the risk of producing a product like chaang liquor, sells it to the right people and places and establishes his own reputation for producing the best wine.

Despite their abilities, the cook and his son were unable to change their class and identity due to their low caste. Biju's treatment in the United States is notable in that he is not only a victim of class but also of race. His peers were also troubled by identity and class issues. Biju's living conditions were deplorable:

Biju joined a shifting population of men camping out near the fuse box, behind the boiler, in the cubby holes and in odd-shaped corners that once were pantries, maids rooms, laundry rooms and storage rooms at the bottom of what had been a single-family home, the entrance still adorned with a scrap of colored mosaic in the shape of a star. The men shared a yellow toilet; the sink was a tin laundry trough. There was one of fuse box for the whole building and if anyone turned on too many appliances or lights, *PHUT*, the entire electricity went and the residents screamed to nobody, since there was nobody, of course, to hear them". (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 52)

Biju and other illegal migrant workers "lived intensely with others, only to have them disappear overnight, since the shadow class was condemned to movement. The agonies of the migrant workers knew no bounds of the hurdles. Biju joined room on rent basis.

"By offering a reprieve from NYC rents, they could cut the pay to a quarter of the minimum wage, reclaim the tips for the establishment, keep an eye on the workers, and drive

them to work fifteen-, sixteen-, seventeen-hour donkey days". (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 146)

Confrontations; c2007.

All the above discussion suggests that that the underprivileged are struggling to change their social and economic positions. They have also realized that at the root of the colonial dominance lies the illiteracy and ignorance of the colonized. It is not only that the poor only gets dominated but is the ignorant ones also. After the post-colonial era the people became aware and conscious of their rights and freedom. The poor and the downtrodden are educating themselves and challenging the age old system. Frantz Fanon's prediction brings the point home:

But if we want humanity to advance a step farther, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries.....From Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.

Conclusion

Thus, the underlying principle of globalization is to convert this globe, our planet Earth, into a caste less, class less, free economic zone and to effect free trade among nations through two processes: bringing the global to the local and freedom and *vice versa*. This "globalization" has only one culture: freedom, and all checks, barriers and boundaries are anathema to it. "Globalization thus aims to make the world "flat," as Thomas Friedman elaborates in his outstanding book. As a result, any entrepreneur from any part of the world can now establish his business anywhere on the planet.

In the modern age, many in the world have suffered from the existential conundrum of belonging and identity. Problems are complex and have multiple interpretations of race, ethnicity, religion and policy. People may sometimes deal with their crisis of identity and alienation; at other points they appear to have a higher calling, becoming the mouthpieces for the confusion and aimlessness of a nation or a generation.

It is time to reconsider and redefine the boundaries of class, caste, race and culture. The new culture has its own face, obscuring the original while assimilating with the global. A new class has emerged, implying a class of skilled and unskilled entrepreneurs. Moving gradually toward an economy created and controlled by entrepreneurs. People's attitudes are gradually changing and issues such as class and caste are losing their hold, seriousness and intensity. This new order is represented by the Cook and his son Biju.

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