

**The Price of Visibility in a Woman's Imaginative Supremacy: A Study of Men's Quest for Masculinity in Kiran Desai's *the Inheritance of Loss***

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### المخلص

يهتم هذه المقالة بدراسة رواية ميراث الضياع للكاتبة الهندية كيران ديساي و كذا معالجتها لموضوع الذكورة عند بعض الشخصيات بصفة عامة و دراسة طرق تقبل هذه الشخصيات لذات الذكورة بصفة خاصة. تعتبر كيران ديساي واحدة من الكاتبات الهنديات اللاتي احتلن مكانة مرموقة في أدب ما بعد الكولونيالية. بنظرة ثاقبة استطاعت هذه الكاتبة أن تصور شغف الشخصيات الذكورية للذات الرجولية وصراعهم المستمر على عدة جبهات كالسلطة والمكانة و كذا حياتهم الجنسية. و لقد بدا جليا من خلال أحداث القصة الشغف بالذات الذكورية عند الشخصيات التالية: القاضي، جيان، بيجو و الطباخ. وقد نجحت الكاتبة إلى حد كبير في إظهار معاناة هذه الشخصيات، حيث قامت بتصوير أحداث عديدة لإسماع صوت هذه المعاناة. كما يهتم هذه المقالة أيضا بكيفية تصوير مختلف مستويات الذات الرجولية حسب الإملاءات الاجتماعية و الثقافية و السياسية ، و كذا ردة الفعل هذه الشخصيات على مختلف الأحداث. هذه الأحداث التي كان لها الأثر البالغ في الحالة النفسية لهذه الشخصيات. فمنهم من استسلم و منهم من قاوم ورفض الخضوع للأمر الواقع .

### Abstract

This paper aims at studying Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and her treatment of male characters with a special focus on the gendered ways in which she views their perception of masculinity. Desai is one of those Indian woman writers who occupy a distinctive place as a novelist in the realm of postcolonial literature. With a vivid feminist consciousness, she portrays men's urge to *restore* their sense of

masculinity and compete in many areas such as: power, position and sexuality. The quest for masculinity is clearly observed through four of her male characters: The judge, the cook, Gyan and Biju. Desai portrays the image of men who face void in their lives. The study shows how masculinities are constructed with different levels of anxiety according to the social, cultural and political dictum. Characters strongly put across their views about their masculinities with regard to many different incidents. These incidents disturb their psyche and cause serious personal discord. Some of them do seem to indulge questioning their situations while others dare openly rebel against the imposed circumstances.

**Key words:** gender, sexuality, masculinity/ies, quest and psyche.

## 1. Introduction

Indian women literature has become an area of engaging a direct dialogue with new perspectives. Western bearings encourage Indian women writers to demonstrate their vigor to adopt foreign values. They work to affirm their freedom, femininity and identity. They also challenge the difficulties shown by their society. Their novels offer an opportunity to see the life of Indian women from woman point of view.

Indian women writers act from the motive of deconstructing Western attitudes toward their culture. Their efforts contribute also to the ongoing process of emancipating Indian women. They show strong will to grant Indian women the status they deserve. Feminism has thus been well acknowledged among them. They picture women's journey to gain equal opportunities with men. They acquainted themselves with feminist thoughts "to speak on behalf of 'authentic' Indian women, who presumably endorse every feature of their culture." (Tong, 2009: 229).

Indian women writers are interested in elaborating the status of women, their images and types as molded by man. Another interesting thematic variation can also be seen in the representation of victimized men. These representations include the probing of the clash resulting from the victimization of/ and discrimination against subordinated men.

Being inspired to become a young woman writer, Kiran Desai sets her works into motion dealing with failed men's experiences. The drama of masculinity takes short time to feel it has a voice in her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. Desai's success lies in large part in her portrayal of the sensitivity to the emotional measure of Indian men lives, failure and loneliness. She takes seriously the gendered dicta through which her male characters negotiate their powerlessness. She reveals them as something of a drama queen. She inhabits enough social spaces for women and offers views of unhegemonic status of her male characters. Masculinity is seen, by her, as a certain order of suffering in the context of race, caste, illegal immigration and colonization.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* has become a simultaneous critique of the changing power structure and an act of de-conditioning and reconditioning realities. With a feministic awareness, Desai encompasses the protest of all the marginalized include those men who have been subordinated. The foregrounding of the hitherto oppressed experiences of Indian men entails a critique of the normative masculinity in its moment and milieu. Her strategy involves acts of subversion. These acts take shape through the forging of new narrative strategies that include language, style and diction. In nutshell, Kiran Desai initiates a move towards a literature of one's own that embeds within its own problematic as she throws plethora of drama on failed masculinities for a close examination. This not only maps the changing thematics of contemporary Indian women's writing but also tries to unravel its socio-political dynamics.

## **2. Masculinity theorized**

Traditionally, masculinity is based on physical powers and fosters the life of duty, hard work and the meeting of laudable goals. It also entails enjoying life, leisure and pleasure. It refers to "the range of physical, behavioral, and attitudinal qualities that characterize what it means to be a 'man' in any given historical or cultural context." (Code, 2000: 273)<sup>7</sup>. Its absolute value is mythologized to the extent that it

depends on the combination of inborn attributes, learned behavior and choices.

The historical origin of the debate about men and masculinity is rooted in second wave feminism. The second wave feminism has not only expressed women's concerns, but has challenged many assumptions about the construction of gender roles. In *Taking Care of Men: Sexual Politics in the Public Mind* (1999), McMahon states "Since the issue clearly raises the question of the feminisation of men, it allows us to explore the negotiation of male identity in a particularly delicate situation." (4) He also adds "It is particularly useful to examine cases where masculinity is made problematic by men's entry into fields previously considered feminine, including occupations such as nursing." (*ibid.*) Changes in man's life are affected by the constant venture of women's liberation. These changes find voice in two different forms: (1) Men's demand for equal rights with other men, and (2) Men's quest for masculinity.

The study of men and masculinities seeks to explore the dilemma faced by men. This dilemma is a part of the constant adjustments of masculinity across time, space and cultures. As Darity (2008) explains:

*Because gender varies so significantly—across cultures, over historical time, among men and women within any one culture, and over the life course—we cannot speak of masculinity as though it is a constant, universal essence, common to all men. (2)*

Masculinity is not limited to be defined by the relationships between men and women. It is also defined by the relationships among men too. Masculinity is, then, a social cite to highlight power, position and men's performances. As the experience of being a man is not standardized, scholars prefer using the term "masculinities" rather than "masculinity". In his groundbreaking work *Masculinities* (2005), Connell states "masculinities are configurations of practice structured by gender relations." (71) Masculinity cannot be visible only in relation to femininity. It cannot be seen as mere character type or behavioral norm.

He also adds "Masculinity, to the extent that the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality, and culture." (*ibid.*) Connell suggests that masculinity is contextual practice in time and in space that is to say masculinity must be understood only when being performed.

Masculinity is exposed to performative change as Reeser (2007) states "My performance of masculinity includes evoking and rendering other types of performances impossible." (87). It is a gendered identity in a form of ideology. It embodies a set of cultural ideals that establish fixed and appropriate roles, values and expectations for and of men.

### 3. Masculinity in Crisis

The social roles, which men are expected to perform, are in desperate need of repair. Brittan (1989) argues "One of the central difficulties in attempting to write about masculinity is that, as a topic it did not really exist until feminists began to attack the presuppositions of traditional, political and social theory (78). This also leads to the problematizing of both masculinity and femininity. Masculinity, however, is still evoking debates in the contemporary social science discourse and literature well as.

Feminism provides contexts through which gender roles could be re-examined and deconstructed. The movement highlights the importance of gender divisions as a way of ordering or structuring social relations. It leads to the recognition of the imbalance of power in the relationships between men and women. Feminist critics suggest that: "the greatest advance in feminist theory is that the existence of gender relations has been problematised, so that gender can no longer be treated as a simple natural fact" (Flax, 1987:627). They attempt to assert equality of power relations and redraw gender roles which make a large threat to masculine authority. Their argument centers on women's powerlessness. And now, they feel that it is time for men to experience this powerlessness. Farrell criticizes feminist attack as he

argues "feminism articulated only the shadow side of men and only the light side of women" (Farrell, 1993: 4). Feminists' critique of power relations had failed to put into consideration that men too felt oppressed. As result, the idea of subordinated masculinity is not well appreciated by the feminist critics.

#### 4. The tragedy of men

*The Inheritance of Loss* narrates the story of simple hopes that have been frozen on the rooftop of the mid 1980s India. Set in different parts of world, the unlikely events of characters' collapse that inspired the writer are dramatically narrated. In an Anglophiliac family in Kalimpong, Indian girl lives with the remains her Cambridge-educated grandfather. The cook who has been relegated to be treated even less than Mutt; the retired judge's dog is another image of suffering and humiliation. Sai's first love; the Nepalese math tutor becomes seduced by the masculinity of the Gurkha's movement and leaves her spiraling into heartsickness, anger, and frustration. Biju, the Indian illegal immigrant, realizes the trauma of his uselessness that chases him in an alien land. The writer to whom every word in the story mirrors her attachment to India; the motherland, effectively conveys the difficulties involved in the subjugated efforts to make their voices heard. Obviously these men who try to recuperate their status get frustrated as their approximation to "masculinity" is not perfect. All men in the novel are disturbed and have lost the ability to belong to their own masculinity.

##### 4.1 The Judge

Jemubhai Patel the central character of the novel. He works as a judge after being sent to England. He feels he is completely out of history and always puts himself in the position of 'third person'. "He had learned to take refuge in the third person and to keep everyone at bay, to keep even himself away from himself like the Queen." (Desai, 2006: 111) The mimic judge could neither get transformed completely into an English man nor could he connect himself to his fellow Indians.

The judge is, in fact, a victim haunted by painful past. He seems tired of remembering his memories. The judge "felt old, very old, and as the house crumbled about him, his mind, too seemed to be giving way, doors he had kept firmly closed between one thought and the next, dissolving." (*ibid.* 117) These lines picture a moving image of the old house which well symbolizes the disintegration of the judge's psychological being.

The lack of belonging to neither culture has deepened his inferiority. He tries to keep himself away from the world of love and connectedness and fulfills his wild character by brutally raping his wife. Throughout the novel, readers can learn about the judge's ambivalence. In his ardor for getting anglicized, he develops a sense of shame for he has failed to assimilate the English manhood and realizes:

*He found he began to be mistaken for something he wasn't—a man of dignity. This accidental poise became more important than any other thing. He envied the English. He loathed 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.*

(*ibid.* 119)

The judge, loaded with self-hate for everything for not being British, falls victim to estrangement. As result, he withdraws from fellow men and builds up a rapport with Mutt (his dog) as his mimicry is imperfect. The experience of powerlessness and humiliation serve to scratch his wounds which "certain moves made long ago had produced all of them" (Desai, 2006: 199) rather than heal them.

Reacting to this disturbed state of mind that questions his maleness, Jemubhai tries to save his sense of masculinity in many ways. He has the conviction that he needs to do something to make himself feel that he has not lost his entire grip over his masculinity. He is driven to be a macho man i.e. the kind of man who dislikes the idea of being emasculated and puts his masculinity into crisis. In doing so,

Jemubhai chooses to exercise violence over the cook and his wife than being robbed by the sense of loss. His loneliness, his self-hate as well as the shame for his family, community and everyone for not being English, the judge's life is like a crumbling old artifact from colonial era. His masculinity seems like an old cottage decorated with hundreds of spiders' webs and therefore appears to be in an urgent need of repair.

#### 4.2 Gyan

Gyan, the twenty-year old Nepalese tutor, seems well motivated to change his life, although he is disturbed by such serious concerns. Gyan's mind could hardly blank out the sore memories as he remembers his grandfather's return as a broken man. The Gurkha movement comes to trigger this feeling in him which has remained, for a long time, suppressed.

Being overwhelmed by his frustrations, Gyan chooses to sacrifice his love to Sai. Although, he finds out that the innocent Sai and her grandfather are not the causes of his tragedy. Sai's anglicised behaviour and privileged lifestyle sickens him. He starts viewing her as an enemy. His love to Sai vanishes dramatically after his betrayal. Full of hatred and bitterness, Sai declares "You hate me" (Desai, 2006: 260). "You aren't being fair" (*ibid.*), she desperately adds.

To seek self-authority, Gyan connects himself with a mass of angry ethnic Nepalese. This could also be true for many of the Nepali protestors. At first, Gyan does not have the courage to join Gurkha's movement to fight against injustice of the Indian government. His half-hearted involvement with the Gurkha's movement is due to his frustration. This clearly demonstrates the fact that he will go to any extent to make his voice heard.

Gyan is ready to sacrifice his love for the purpose of gaining a respectable status. He is the character who represents the postcolonial trait of multiculturalism. Gyan's sense of loss is said to be the major quality that he internalizes when his love to Sai went beyond his expectation.

Being in that kind of situation, it is difficult for Gyan to act or feel masculine. His masculinity has been sucked out of him as the expectation associated with his poor family works as a source of humiliation. Gyan needs to be convinced about how he still owns a bite of masculinity even though his descendent has made him feel the contrary.

### 4.3 Biju

Biju is another victim of terrible social bias and racial discrimination. With his expired visa, Biju is just like a nomad wandering aimlessly as he "had been cultivating self-pity." (*ibid.* 191) His character is different from that of the judge as he has only modest desire to become successful in life and not to erase his identity. Like most illegal immigrant workers in New York City, Biju can never escape from the grievous cruelty and exploitation of Western hegemony. Struggling with his cultural ambivalence to survive within the forces of modernization is the only thing he can do.

Living in a seedy squalor with a group of other immigrant men, Biju imagines what comfortable his life would be like with a futon, TV and a bank account. He comes to the US thinking he could achieve his American dream, but the reality is quite different. He is "left as a new person, a man full to the brim with a wish to live within a narrow purity." (Desai, 2006: 139)

Desai is incredibly unromantic as she puts ordinary lives into the clash between modernity and tradition. Biju, after his hellish journey through the dirty kitchens of New York City restaurants hopelessly, is back home loaded with disappointment and nonsense. His father's devotion appears to be the only thing of value in his life. Biju has been struggling to survive in America doing odd jobs.

A sense of masculinity starts to warn him in America. Biju is hunted by sense of nostalgia to his motherland. Before his departure,

his mind was overwhelmed by American dream. But after experiencing nightmares, his experiences assist him to refresh his Indianness in his mind.

#### 4.4 The Cook

The cook remains without name in the story. His nonexistence symbolizes his lower caste in the Indian society. His caste is predetermined by birth and can never be changed. He is doomed to be the subaltern till the last day of his life. He resides in a modest shelter near to Cho Oyu (the judge's house). From the early age of his childhood, the cook has been in the service of the judge. This poor man represents the tragedy of the no name downtrodden. The word 'cook' immediately brings to one's mind the image of female domestic roles for wages i.e. cleaning, washing clothes and cooking.

The aftermath of the chaos and the lake of blood scattered on the ground dramatize his delusional life. It is obvious that the cook is suffering from trauma after witnessing terrible events. His sense of inferiority is clearly demonstrated by his reaction when the beloved pet's Mutt is disappeared.

The cook is a kind of man whose true joy in life is his son Biju. He regales Sai with tales of the beautiful past of her grandfather claiming his ownership to palace and his excellency in hunting that makes him admired. The cook's joy is to see Sai enjoying listening to his factious tales. "The cook couldn't help but enjoy himself, and the more he repeated his stories, the more they became truer than the truth." (Desai, 2006: 232). He appears to be delusional and lives in an imaginary world.

### 5. Men's Quest for Masculinity

The evaluation of the novel selected for the study begins with a probe of whether the postcolonial condition can lead to a sense of loss in masculinity. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, where masculinity is a central feature, shows that natives who cannot fully free themselves from the western colonial hegemony continue to play shadow roles both at home and abroad. Writing with a preformed mindset, Kiran

Desai creates situations that smack of the traits of failed masculinities to stress the need to make their expressions felt. Subalterns who are not treated with equality resort to destructive strategies that are very harmful to them as well as to the society at large. Male subalterns' reactions do not get the attention they genuinely deserve and are hit harder when all their moderate attempts fail. The story of masculinity is as melancholy as that of all characters. The socially confused habits of mind that imprison male characters dramatize the course of their lives.

In the changing social and cultural context of 1980s India, some Indian men are feeling gradually more powerless. This powerlessness can lead to a disruptive psychological disturbance. In such context, Jemubhai's abusive behavior towards his wife is an expression of hegemonic masculinity with the aggressiveness of domination. Violence is used by Jemubhai as a strategy to maintain control and dominance, and also to counter any expected threats. The use of physical, sexual, and emotional violence reflects his insecurity about his gender identity. The hopeless judge, in his way of repairing his masculinity, enacts power, toughness, domination, and control over the helpless creature the cook who has been the object of his hegemonic masculinity.

*The cook's strategy of recuperating his of masculinity is presented in his dream of his son Biju's success in US. His son is the only hope remained to restore his masculinity and escapes from servitude forever.* In his way to regain masculinity, the cook finds escape in dreaming his son successful journey in US. Dreaming of comfortable life after his son Biju's arrival is the least the cook can do due to his lower caste which works as psychological constraint that prevents him to repair his masculinity.

For Gyan, participating in conflicts or insurgency may be the only viable strategy for him. GLNF grants access to alternative masculinity that helps Gyan to re-build a sense of self-worth and reduces threats of frustrations and anxieties. He feels he has to reject Sai's westernized and bourgeois lifestyle to position himself in a direction that support his

sense of manhood. Refusal becomes another strategy in the process of self-assertion through which someone like Gyan chooses to perform his masculinity. By refusing the overwhelming femininity of Sai, Gyan involves himself into an ideology of patriarchy which can allow his masculinity to transform him into a powerful and liberates man.

In his way to maintain his masculinity, Biju tried to escape exploitation in India seeking refuge in a foreign soil. Biju's illegal settlement in US questions his perception to his Indian masculinity in many ways. Ideals, ambitions and opinions about masculinity shift during his story in response to prevailing social and cultural milieu of US. For the Indians, love, faithfulness, friendship and humanity can only be flooded in Indian true masculinity.

## 6. Conclusion

*The Inheritance of Loss* is still being hotly debated. It highlights a lot of customary issues in the world these days. It also presents major issues like globalization, post-colonialism, economic inequality, discrimination, marginality, immigration, racism, personal achievements and losses. The novel throws more light on how historical events have a deep impact on the lives of individuals and how this impact is moved through generations. It explores the existing practices which are discriminatory and deals with various crisis of dispossession. Beside all this, the feminist resistance is obvious in the novel but less discussed by scholars. Desai gives a new perspective of herself as a postcolonial woman writer by presenting the tragedy of failed men in the course of their search for masculinity.

As she portrays the losses confronted by male characters, Desai enlightens her readers to realize that survival begins in the mind. Survival, however, works unconsciously to give the feelings of being challenged by new state of mind. When men attempt to struggle for their masculinity, the need for a change gets introduced in their minds. Consequently when they become mentally disturbed, this need will be of such priority. The judge, the cook, Gyan and Biju encounter the problem in implementing true sense of masculinity. The condition

would, at least, influence how they see their masculinity and how could they react under different circumstances.

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