



Women: The Subjects To Subjugation-Feministic Perspective In Kiran Desai's The Inheritance Of Loss

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Abstract

Kiran Desai, a recipient of the world prestigious literary award, the Booker Prize in 2006 for her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* acquired worldwide admiration for presenting multicultural and post-colonial issues. Feminism entails the demand of women for equality-equality for power, right and opportunity. Even after the independence, the women in India are still dependent and under the ascendancy of patriarchal society. It is preoccupied with the belief in the superiority of men over women. The women have to exert strenuous effort to whatever the men have traditionally been conferred. Man regards himself the subject to rule and woman to be ruled. Women have simply been treated as object. This paper highlights, among other things, the harsh realities of women in the novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. The novelist has delineated the three generations to depict feminine quest for identity. Some are subjugated and suppressed but other female characters grapple to achieve the authentic existence. Through the women characters, Desai exhibits women's search for liberty and right in real sense. The present research paper is an attempt to bring out the unfair and unjust treatment of women in the patriarchal Indian society. Kiran Desai exhorts that the dynamic and multicultural situation of the world today demands a new way of thinking.

Keywords: subjugation, patriarchy, feminism, disappointment, subaltern, liberty.

1. Introduction

The word "Feminism" has different uses that some writers use this term to refer to a specific political movement in the US and Europe and others use it to refer to the belief that there are injustices against women, though there is no consensus on the exact list of these injustices. Feminism is about liberty, the liberty to choose for oneself without having to meet the expectation of someone else. "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression." (Hooks. B p.1). This definition can be interpreted as it is a matter of different sex, between male and female, man and woman. It can be used in literary work as a critic by analysing the work based on feminist perspective about the characters and their action in literary work. The description of women in literature helps them to do so as it provides them with role models drawn from the sufferings of the women characters, persecuted

under chauvinistic male domination. Indian women novelists have incorporated recurring female experiences in their writings.

The prestigious Man Booker Prize winner Kiran Desai has achieved the worldwide recognition mounded upon her second novel in 2006. Kiran Desai is one of the most proficient writers of her generation. Kiran Desai was born in New Delhi in January 1971. At the age of 14, she with her mother shifted to England and then to the U.S.A. She studied Creative Writing at Columbia University. She is the daughter of well-known writer Anita Desai, who has been shortlisted thrice for her novels. She published her first novel 'Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard' in 1988. Kiran Desai wrote her second novel 'The Inheritance of Loss' in 2006 and it conferred her Man Booker prize in 2007, National Critics Circle Fiction Award in 2007, and the 2006 Vodafone Crossword Book Award. She is the youngest female writer to win the Booker prize.

The novelist has put forward many burning issues like women's quest for identity including the immigrants' life and struggle in the foreign land. She has depicted the female characters with little meekness and with some sparks too. Kiran Desai presents the image of a suffering woman preoccupied with her inner world, her sulking frustration, and the storm of conflict within. Through her female characters, she makes an appeal for a better way of life for women. Most of the women characters in *The Inheritance of Loss* are presented as successful in holding their position in a male-dominated setup. But the novelist doesn't fail to show how they are forced to consider subjugation against men.

Kiran Desai has shown many female characters with various colours that paint the picture of successive generations of women. She has given voices to various female characters: some conventional, timid, and submissive, some vain and lost, some assertive, confident, and self-dependent. The first generation belongs to Sai's grandmother Nimi, the second generation of women includes Lola, Noni, Mrs. Sen, and Sai's mother, and Sai comprises the third generation of women in the novel. Representing the first generation, Nimi is shown as subjugated by the patriarchal setup whereas the second and the third exhibit life of liberation and meaning along with their struggles. The novelist has touched on three generations to illustrate the long painful journey of women from subjugation to emancipation.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai seems more inquisitive in depicting themes of colonialism, race, ethnicity, and gender-related themes. In this novel, the most moving and tragic female character is the wife of the judge, Nimi. She is a naive, illiterate subaltern woman discriminated against due to her sex. It is interesting to note that Nimi is only presented as a minor figure in the novel, just like she is minor or subaltern in her life situations. She is mostly seen in relation to Jemubhai – her fate is described in a few pages. She is seriously tormented by her husband. Until she dies, Nimi is controlled by men - first by her father and then by her husband. From childhood until she starts her married life with Jemubhai, she is carefully locked up together with her mother and sisters in order to improve her father's honour in the community and to be kept at a solid distance from her father's business of supplying women to soldiers. Nimi and her sisters live a life of boredom. They are hardly ever permitted to leave the house and explore the world around them. They are obediently complying with their father's authority and they are just waiting to get married. Thus, Nimi feels trapped in her father's house, not being able to influence her own life.

Nimi is a victim of the patriarchal system. In the life of Nimi deprivation, injustice, oppression, alienation, and isolation are well noticeable. Nimi is an example that shows how traditional women are bound to suffer bitter treatment in the name of the husbands. Apparently, this is the lot of average traditional Indian wives. In her married life with Jemubhai, this seclusion

continues, and he makes all the decisions. Most of the time, she is left alone at their house in Bonda. Even though Jemubhai leaves her alone for long periods, she is not able to enjoy any kind of freedom. Due to his mental oppression and physical abuse of her, she becomes very depressed and indifferent to her situation. In addition, she is used to being locked up that the thought of leaving him never really occurs to her. Although she is privileged by the wealth of her husband, she is still severely discriminated against, as the judge has an immense need to suppress her in the same way he was humiliated himself in England. The judge's hate for himself and his nationality also makes him hate Nimi simply for being Indian. Thus, she is never able to recover from the humiliation and violence she suffers in her marriage. She feels caught up in a world dominated by men. She is not able to fight back or leave her husband. Instead, her reactions to his abuse are silence.

She has lost herself, and even her previous name Bela is changed. She is sketched as a traditional wife for whom the husband is everything. When he sees the ridiculous behaviours of his wife, he could not control himself and bursts on her caring little about her feeling. His blows become intolerable to her but she doesn't revolt till her last patience. He discovers her footprint on the toilet seat, he lost sense and his rage knows no bound and took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl. On another occasion when Nimi went to a meeting of Nehru and was identified by Jemubhai's boss, he could not digest this and felt very insulted. Consequently, he kicks and thrashes her blue and black. Being a woman, she suffers all as she is ready to get all blows given by her husband and never opens her mouth against him. However, Nimi's view of him as a ruthless man is maintained until the end of their relationship, and ultimately, she gets the courage to talk back: "You are the one who is stupid" (304).

After this incident, Jemubhai sees no other option than to return her to her family, as he fears he will kill her if she stays on. She is sent to Gujarat and there she takes shelter in her uncle's house but even there she is not allowed to stay more. Her uncle tells her angrily:

"You are your husband's responsibility. Go back. Your father gave a dowry when you married – you got your share and it is not for daughters to come claiming anything hereafter. If you have made your husband angry, go ask for forgiveness." (IL 306).

Kiran Desai very skilfully has visualised how after the marriage; the girl has no right to live in the parents' house and is taught to face everything whether good or bad. Because of that most Indian wives are having a life of isolation and loneliness despite having all their relationships. They are not treated as humans; their voices are not heard. Nimi in the hand of a brutal patriarchal system suffers double loss, loss of her human self, and loss of her sanity. Nimi ends her life in the house of a brother-in-law where she accidentally catches fire over a stove. Like many other women in India, she is killed without a witness, without a case in a country "where human life was cheap, where standards were shoddy, where stoves were badly made and cheap saris caught fire as easily" (307). Death is the last refuge and the only relief to her whom the patriarchal society has crushed all her life. So, her journey has been full of challenges and predicaments. Born out of loveless marriage, the judge's daughter also grows up without the affection of her parents. Judge never cares to fulfil his role as a father. He only extends financial assistance.

Desai strikes the keynote of her feminist apprehension in a superbly innovative way simply by preferring Sai as the chief protagonist. In the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, Sai emerges to be a strong young woman who trusts her own decisions. With her westernized influence she grows up as an educated, favoured by the money and the position of her grandfather. Sai, through this female character, Kiran Desai has illustrated the condition of an orphan. She is an educated, frank, bold, and independent character. Her mother is the judge's daughter who has eloped with a Russian guy. Her

father has not given his permission to go far in this love but she does not care. She has freely chosen her own life but unfortunately and unexpectedly her happy life has been cut short by an accident. Sai is the daughter of a Zoroastrian father and a Gujarati mother who has admitted Sai to a convent school. Her upbringing has been done in a completely secluded and isolated environment. That is why she has made her world where she finds herself alone. No one is there to share her emotion and feeling. The sudden demise of her parents in an accident, becomes the root cause of her removal from the convent school. Then she lives with her maternal grandfather Jemubhai, and he likes her as she is educated and can interact in English. Her harsh experiences from the convent and her difficult family situation make her into a confident and independent girl. In her relationship with her grandfather, she seems balanced, and in many situations, she proves to be the most capable in the Cho Oyu household.

Kiran Desai presents in this fiction Sai's awareness of the foibles of society which is brought to light through the life of her grandfather. She strives to build a life of her own, far removed from the colonial grasp with which the judge and the two Afghan princesses hold on to the hangover of the past. Sai falls in his love with Gyan, her maths tutor. But their love could not meet its destination. Gyan takes his steps back in love with her and deceives her hope on him. On other hand, Sai comprehends all very well regarding the reaction of Gyan. He never tries to delve deep into Sai's heart and losses her with no pain. Sai is not the timid, easily subjugated woman, she is superior to Gyan as she defies the norms of a docile Indian woman and makes Gyan feel inferior. She is angry with him because of his loyalty to the GNLF, and several times she encounters him in order to make her points clear.

Hence, in this respect, she is very different from her grandmother Nimi who as a young woman was suppressed in her relationship with men. Her westernized lifestyle naturally makes her more easily adjusted to a postcolonial setting. Sai eventually goes to confront him, but the encounter ends in disappointment. She is mature due to experience in her life with many ups and down. Desai has portrayed the bold character, ready to face challenges through Sai, who holds reality and never sees dreams. Desai is more pessimistic in her discussion. Through the character of Nimi, she represents a woman who is so abused by suppression that she does not have the strength to fight for her dignity and freedom. Desai's description of Sai, however, shows a strong young woman in modern India, who still needs strength to construct an independent life in a demanding society characterized by poverty, political instability, violence, and corruption. The novelist also outlines many minor female characters in this novel. Among other female characters, Nonita (Noni) and Lalita (Lola) are also significant who pine to live their lives in their own way. Like the Judge both are also anglophiles. Lola is a widow and lives her life with her sister. They are not pleased with their life for their pangs reveals from time to time. Noni lives with her sister Lola and recalls how she has been unable to attain her goal under the pressure of her father. She encourages Sai to meet her destination desired in life having the chance not to spoil her life. She convinces her with the following words:

“If you get a chance in life, take it. Look at me, I should have thought about the future when I was young. Instead, only when it was too late did, I realize what I should have done long ago. I used to dream about becoming an archaeologist. I'd go to the British Council. But my parents were not kind to understand, you know, my father was old-fashioned type. A man brought up and educated only to give orders ...” (IL 69).

Her anguish and discontentment are reflected in her advice to Sai. They live on their pension and need more money to lead a good life. Lola, Noni, Pixie, and Mrs. Sen are also trapped by British ways. Lola and Noni are publically humiliated by Pradhan of GNLF, who degraded the dignity of

genteel women while both the sisters go to complain against encroachment in Mon Ami. The loss of dignity and dreamland make them helpless.

2. Conclusion

Through the story of Nimi, Desai brings out a realistic image of how many women in India suffer. They are not able to voice or convey their difficult situation to the world around them. In their oppressed situations they are not able to disseminate their fear and hopelessness to the world around them, as the listeners are either silenced themselves or influenced by the same patriarchal culture or customs. Finally, it is interesting to imply what kind of feminist message the novel communicates. It is evident that women must never give up fighting for freedom and respect, in spite of their suffering and difficulties. They must struggle to free themselves from male power and try to obtain the same rights as men. This requires that they go out and participate in society. Education and work are factors that will make them stronger and more independent in this respect. Thus, through this novel, Kiran Desai attempts to give voice to these subaltern women and to draw attention to their lives and difficult situations.

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