



The Quintessential – Vol. 01, Issue 01, Jan-Mar 2023. ISSN-XXX-XXX
Web: www.thequintessential.co.in

Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss': A Post-modern Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The term 'Post-modernism' means different things to different people. There are different versions of post-modernism. The word originally used in architecture by Toynbee. Soon it is known as cultural situation, a critical practice and an economic condition. Post-modernism is not synonymy for 'contemporary' even though it is certainly present in the contemporary context. In fact, the term post-modernism has been in vogue. It is a critical tag for a host of contemporary writings.

Keywords: *Post Modernism, Modernism, Indian English Fiction, liberal humanism,*

Post-modernist literature is a one written after World War II and 1960's, initially it has sprung up in the states of America and Europe. The practitioners of post-modern movement have broken the modern tradition of liberalism and humanism by a variety of means. Post-modernism points to the collapse of western – liberal humanism. It is a reaction in this sense, to modernism. In some aspects it differs from modernism.

The basic difference in modernism and Post-modernism: "Modernism cultivated austerity, post-modernism is interested in pleasure. Modernism tried to capture reality through individual consciousness which was equivalent to life, for post-modernism 'realism' is just an incoherent and deluding notion".

Post- modern fiction in English: To speak about post-modern English fiction, it differs from modern fiction. Post modernism inherits the fragmentary self. Postmodern novel is divided into non-fiction writing, problematic novel, tabulations, pop-fiction or science fiction etc. This kind of fiction is a most reactionary movement. It is so because post-war people faced a distorted decadent traditional humanism. Like Restoration literature,

post-modern literature is characterized by licentiousness, down-gradation of art, liberty in any matter and and destruction of boundary line between art and non-art.

Global nature of Post-modern Literature:- Post-modernistic literature has become global due to mass media. It got global range and affected the worldwide scenario. Eminent writers across the countries have written their fiction in the stream of post modernistic thought and style.

Post-modern fiction is described as apocalyptic that is a literature that registers the dissolution of narrative, self and represented world. There is too much interpolation of verse in the form of songs, inter-textually preference or the colloquial to the formal language and inclusion of a large body of scientific information. People (characters) in it are neither liberal nor human, they are in fact, discouraged from being characters.

The sense of fragmentation in relations, in culture, in family and in nation is indicated through the strategies of techniques used in writings; in the use of montage and collage, in mixing of genres in an unexpected manner. Since postmodern culture is mass-culture, all canons are discredited, the traditional values are flouted, and culture is decanonized. Art is trivialized and carnivalized. It reflects the comic or absurdist ethos of post-modernism. They mixed genres and media, modes of aesthetic thinking and conceptual art, film and literature, advent – grade and mass-culture, the tragic and comic, the sublime and ludicrous, interior monologue and magic realism.

All kinds of stuff are lumped together, into a form which reflects new aesthetics corresponding to the post-modern situation. Contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness and short circuit are the six narrative strategies noted by David Lodge which are generally used by post – modern fiction writer.

The plots in postmodern fiction are complex, incomprehensive. Unknowability is one of the major aspects of post-modernism. The themes in the post-modern fiction are globalization, multiculturalism, Diaspora, nostalgia, economic inequality, fundamentalism, terrorism and violence. Sense of loss, alienation, dislocation, disintegration, cultural displacement is the marked features of Post-modernism.

Globalization a post-modern movement and its effects on India:-The post-modern novels illuminate the consequences of colonialism and imperialism of global conflicts and global changes due to economic policies dominated by America. The global and

local conflicts of religion, race, nationalism, regionalisms have been in the thematic areas of these post-modern novels. The crushed values and shattered relations, cut off lives and loss of self, loss of identity and rootlessness, spiritual vacuum and quest for self, such are the concerns of post-modern writers. The rise of techno culture and media culture has connected the developing countries to the developed nations increasing the commercial economical purpose in every walk of life: Global economic changes affected life drastically e.g. small-culture destroyed small shopkeeper's business. The policies of government, consumerism and industrialization led Indian farmers to suicidal deaths. The rise of gatekeeper journalism, cultural imperialism interference of politics in every walk of life, corruption, bad effects of sex-dominated media (TV) cyber-crimes all these are results of globalization. It is now happening in contemporary period. And post modern writers have featured them in their writings. The development of science and scientific discoveries encourage them to write science fictions and there is a good number of science fiction.

Indian writers are not far away from these post-modernist movements and on-coming trends of post-modern world. The effect of post modernism or globalization over India like developing country is a mixed one. It is beneficial to limited group economically though it loses culturally and at the personal level of human relations. A large part of India remained untouched by the benefits of global revolution. In spite of global revolutionary economical changes the level of inequality between developed and developing countries are not reduced and there is no equal distribution of gains of globalization.

Today in India globalization appears to be Westernization or Americanization because of its unchallenged presence in the areas of economic activities and technological advancement, communication and warfare. It is and it can not be discarded. It is inevitable.

We now largely tend to associate globalization to post-modernity. Globalization is intrinsic feature of multinational stage of capitalism. The present role of India is not leading but of consumerism in the process of globalization.

"It is not new to India. Its effect on India is notable. As third world society India is already divided society, 'Unity' and 'nation' (nationality) is lost. It is essential to resist

globalization. In the process of globalization it aggravates uneven development existing between developed and developing nations. Though the world has become richer, it presents misery, made it a world of extraordinary deprivation and staggering inequality”.(The Indian Journal of English studies - vol. X LIV 2001 P. 52)

It has been ever happening phenomenon in India in different periods and globalization - attacks on India are not new. But present phase is subtler than the previous encounters. It is most sophisticated and subtle for invisible institutions or interest groups from abroad and native come together and reap the consequent benefits leaving the nation subjected to fragmentation, division and loss. But Dr. Abdul Kalam has expressed hopefully that India will succeed in receiving globalization critically, judiciously and truly ensure fair and equal sharing of benefits of the process. He says in his ‘Vision India 2020’, “India has to excel in three domains of ‘Shastra’, ‘Shastra’ and ‘Arthashastra”.Only by doing so, will it succeed in eradicating inequality at eco-socio-political, at national, making its voice heard at international fora. (Ibid: P.35)

II

Indian English fiction in post modern period: Taking note of these all pervasive changes, in a brief survey of Indian fiction in English we can notice that the recent trends in global fiction nationalized as postmodernism have been successfully used by some recent Indian English writers writing in English.

In recent years, in the history of Indian English fiction Sulman Rushdie’s novel ‘Midnight Children’ (1980) was the first Indian manifestation of the international trend of Post-modernist novel writing. With this novel there has begun a new era in the history of Indian

English fiction. His novel was the major text to represent the spirit of the ‘new novel’ in regard to its form and content.

This new novel in India has embodied a new sensibility which is radically different from the Indian English novel of the earlier period of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and even from the other generation of Anita Desai, Sahgal, Zhabwala and many other modern Indian writers of post-independence era. The Indian ethos influenced by

freedom – movement or post-independent characteristic of socio-political and psychological novel is radically changed in new era of Post- modernism.

With ‘Midnight Children’, other succeeding novels in India project a new perception and a new vision of Indian social, cultural scene with new approach. It is unmistakably Post-colonial and Post-modern in its spirit and identity. They have a strong post-modernist new on the planes of form and content that represents a breakthrough. Here came in swarming a host of new signatories intensifying the spirit generated by Rashdie’s novel ‘Midnight Children’.

Amitav Ghosh, Upmanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor, Allan Sealy, Shobha de, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Manju Kappor like post modern writers of 21st century have created a new novel with new perception about Indian life and Indian sensibility with their own experience and observation of the world wide trends in the wake of globalization. “Their works have given a radical orientation to Indian English fiction. Indian English fiction is now on equal terms with its American and European counterparts. Moreover, their voices have been authentic, natural honest and full of confidence. Indian intelligentsia found their true aesthetic articulations in these work”. These writers are involved in the epistemological process to know, understand and communicate the Indian World of realities in the post-colonial period. They are highly innovative in their use of fair and aesthetic representation. They have subverted modernist modes, broke up narrative continuity, and violated usual syntax and coherence of narrative language. They used completely new modes of narration at graphic and colloquial levels. They have changed traditional ways of presenting characters emphasizing dehumanization of their characters.

The new writers represent contemporary Indian reality ontologically in its general or specific sense used by Mchale, the writer of ‘Post –modernist fiction’. In true sense of the word, “Indian English novel today is characterized by the elements of Post-modernistic fiction by presenting literary anomalies through colloquing of literary germs, resisting traditional literary modes of judgment. It has created an elastic frame which expands obediently to contain every kind of subversion. (Connor:1989:126)

They also tend to subvert the foundation of our accepted modes of thought and experience in philosophical context. They too reveal the ‘meaningless term, the

underlying ‘abyss’ and ‘voids’ or nothingness of life. Thus we find in new Post-modernist Indian English novel, the incarnation of modernism and postmodernism. The Indian Post-modernists are in search of new areas of faith as a substitute for the debunked value system. In their fictional attempts of using new techniques they seem to belong to the contemporary mainstream of novel writing.

The novels like – *The circle of Reason* (1980), *English August* (1988), *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), *Bombay Duck* (1990), *Trying to Grow* (1990), *Memoirs of Rain*, *The Glassblower’s Breath* (1993), *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and such many are closely related to the post-modern novels in America. They display all elements of Post-modernism with culturally fragmented and disintegrated form of life in the ethos of modern era.

The emergence of the new generation of Indian writing in English has been enthusiastically received recognition by the forgiveness even with awards of international status.

Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Arvinda Adiga have been awarded with Prestigious Booker Prize and many others may be in the nomination for it in future.

In the light of this successful and significant contribution of Indian English fiction to Post-modern movement in world literature, it would be better to concentrate and focus our attention on recently published and well acclaimed novel of Kiran Desai, ‘*The Inheritance of Loss*’ in Post-modern perspective.

The attempt is made here after examining the concept of Post-modernism to trace out its elements in Kiran Desai’s novel ‘*The Inheritance of Loss*’ focusing the trend of globalization and multiculturalism which is at its thematic centre.

In every respect *The Inheritance of Loss* is proved to be a novel of Post-modernist movement in its form, content, narrative strategy, language use, style and view point etc. However, the paper restricts to the thematic aspect of the novel in post-modern perspective.

III

Kiran Desai’s *Inheritance of Loss*



A Post-modern perspective: In this novel Kiran Desai narrates the story of unsuccessful and tragic love affair of her female protagonist, Sai and her maths-tutor Gyan, but more than this, with touch of humour and irony Kiran Desai explores into inexplicable and mysterious world where beauty and truth lie within reach but invisible.

It is novel not only of love affair of Sai, the young girl. Sai is the observer and witness of such many things happening in India in modern-postmodern and recent years of globalization. The author tries to explore and put before us almost every contemporary international issue: globalization, economic inequality, fundamentalism, terrorism migration and such like post-modern problems. Yet it has a moral vigour.

It is the story of how peace of mind and of peaceful place is disturbed by violent advent of global as well as local incidents. It narrates thus disturbed peaceful life of the old retired judge Jemabhai Patel who is living at the foot of mount Kanchenjunga in his home Cho Oyu, which at present shows little sign of its former glory. He lives in isolation, cut off from the present society and all hubbubs of modern life. He is cynic, eccentric, loves peace and loneliness.

But all the tranquility and peace of his life is completely shattered by the unexpected intrusion of his granddaughter Sai.

Sai comes to her grandfather after the accidental death of her parents. Her grandfather has to accept her unwillingly. Her arrival disturbs his isolation, he wanted to forget his past and it comes before him in the form of Sai. Sai is symbol of western culture rather of hybrid culture. Her western style, behavior and western medium culture causes tremendous sensation and psychological upheavals in the life of the judge. She manages well but he is disturbed. This is not only disturbance in his life but is at domestic or personal level. Also his life is disturbed by the intrusion of the revolutionaries of the separatist 'Gurakha movement' which was then in force.

The novel presents a live and sensational picture of the multi-problematic lives of the Indians who suffer a lot many globalized effects. This is the story of Indians who are flowing with a strange force in the unavoidable flow of modernization. It shows how post war conditions and problems of the western world have been spread all over the eastern world under the guise of globalization.



The novel describes a world where people forgetting their culture of heritage, are biased about caste, creed and religion. It depicts a world of agonies, pains despair, disharmony and inhumanity.

These all are gifts of globalization. The world came close by technical development and scientific progress but the humans are separated, the unity and integration is lost – It is fatal loss and 'loss' has become our 'inheritance'.

The title suggests such sense of despair and desperation due to this all-pervading loss. Unexpectedly Sai returns to her own land, her grandfather's land whose life she shatters, her falling in love of native of gorkhaland- a Nepali is again shattering issue to both to herself and to her lover. Her parent's marriage had also been disapproved and she losses their company and love before she understands it well. She is not loved by her cynic and whimsical grandfather she seeks for true love and fails everywhere. Sai is true representative of Indian circumstances which has become hollow, yet searching for love and unity, harmony and integrity.

The problems and violence aroused due to demand of separate states have created havoc and humans are thoroughly separated from their own land and their own 'self'. Judge is such self-separated fellow, lives in loneliness. He is portrayed as an eccentric or sarcastic who ignores his family and friends and finds comfort in the company of his pet dog Matt. Sai's arrival forced him to recall his past, his wife & family whom he always looked down or insulted for the sake of his own false ideals.

Gyan, tutor and lover of Sai is such contradictory character who is a misguided Nepali youth. He is torn apart because of his love for Sai on the one hand and his hatred for everything that Sai represents in Indian Society. He is involved in both Sai and in the 'Gorkha separatist movement'. The circumstances pulled him into the movement and he cannot go back or accept Sai's love. It is the time of unrest when the whole of Kalimpong burns under the fire of separation – the GNLf fighting for the separatist state, the police hiding their own identity rather than protecting others, the common man in a state of fear and shock and death unexpectedly crawling over shadowing the grand and saintly Kanchenjunga.

With the story of Sai and her grandfather the parallel runs the plot of the pathetic tale of Biju, the son of cook in the house of the judge. He is working as a cook in America. He

belongs to the shadow class of immigrants. His story brings in the theme of migration and human exploitation – His despair and pathetic predicament is pointed out with the modern problem of migration. He lives and works in America as illegal servant in Harish Harry's Gandhi cafe. Harish Harry exploits him cruelly and pays him low wages without providing any facilities. Such many immigrants are living in America and their parents and relatives in India are proud of them for their being in foreign countries.

Moreover, these youngsters are forced by themselves and their parents to go abroad (America) to earn money and not to think to return. Their parents do not understand their immigrant –class problem and the boys cannot speak openly about their desperation or exploitation.

They have lost all glamour and hopes about their future and also lost their identity. They do not belong to either country, Biju is thus representative of this class-fellows. His father has told him not to return to India and he continues to live hard life in America like rich country.

This is also effect of modernity and craze for modernity and craze for new cultural identity.

Biju notices the absurdity of America and suffers cruelty in the behaviour of the Americans and his master. But he is like slave; he becomes more conscious about his own wretched and helpless condition. He knows about himself that he is like an insect in the ' basmat rice sack' in his hotel. It is too absurd and ridiculous that his father thinks it is thing to pride when Biju is made waiter there and is called upon to prepare 'Angreji Khana'. He thought it is his promotion from Indian food maker to Angreji Khana maker.

Biju however, feels sense of exile without having any kind of social standing.

The story of Biju in America and the judge in India is really the story of 'immigrated' exiled' and 'lost' Indians in their own country and abroad. (in the stay abroad). The globalization brought the countries together economically yet the disparity between the developed and developing countries – has not gone. It has widened the gap at the cost of cultural loss. They have created master-servant issues in new ways. Russian communism failed in modern era but this new Americanism started affecting the eastern countries, eastern cultural life and relations of people in the third world. The

dominance of American and slavish mentality of Asiatic is at the stake. Consequently, the conflict started to throw away this American dominance at global level and the wars in resistance of American dominance disturbed the whole peace and life of the world. It uprooted the values of life and its deceptive face created an attractive glamour, for third world countries.

'The Inheritance of Loss' Pictures this entire post-modern scenario with multiple themes related to the post-modernistic trends. The novel moves between first and third worlds emphasizing the agonies of exile and ambiguities of post-colonialism. It deals with mixing up different cultures and its impact on Indian society which gives way to cosmopolitan culture. The author talks about the suffocating predicament of the low Indians working abroad. The inequality issue is not abolished in spite of changed Indian economical policy and entry of foreign rich and affluent civilization. Mobility and migration are the markers of our times and they feature commonly with the post-colonial subjects. Kiran Desai depicts this feature through characterization of Biju. The theme of nostalgia is in the story of Biju, his desperate efforts for survival in foreign country and his father's false notions about foreign status are ironically stated in the novel. Kiran Desai has presented miserable life of such many illegal immigrants living in America craving to return but can not return to their own country. Their pathetic condition becomes more and more intensive. This problem of illegal immigrants is a current issue which is discussed forcibly and effectively by Kiran Desai in this novel. Along with Biju are shown the nationals of Pakistan, Africa, Zanzibar, Malasia etc. These are the laborers that undertake ill-paid jobs in the hope of bright future, but receive only humiliation and exploitation. They are after green- card to live as legal citizens of America. They do not get it and remain illegal immigrants working like donkeys for their selfish master, living in the dirty places, hiding their identity.

The novel throws light on this current problem breaking through the traditional methods of expressions. In its honest efforts Desai tries to awaken a human consciousness to the hard truth of our existence, full of compassion for the people living in rich, modern techno-cultural ethos. Its characters represent the reality and actual reaction. Kiran Desai uncovers the invisible reality as she describes the lives of the people fated to experience the modern life as a continuous affront to their notion of order, dignity and justice. Her artistic power in expressing it is marvelous. She makes

experiments with language. Here is used colloquial language of immigrants and Indians as they use it in its hybrid form which is called as 'khichadi' type English, suggesting that hybridity lies not only in culture but in language also. Such type English is a common feature of immigrants and Diasporas writers. It is specially used in the dialogic space of the text relating to lower and middle class characters of Indian society.

The Inheritance of Loss strikes many readers by many ways. It offers an overwhelming bitter view, "People in the west are scarcely aware of this overwhelming feeling of humiliation that is experienced by most of the world's population". (Orphan Pamal:2008:9/11)

The novel is a more remarkable for its attempt to portray realistic yet pathetic predicament of suffering lot a third world population than for its other Post-modernistic features regarding form and style etc.

All post-colonial apprehensions are reflected in this novel. It depicts post-colonial effects. The term 'Post-colonialism' seeks to emancipate the oppressed depressed, the deprived and the down trodden all over the world. The oppression could be political economic, social or gender based. There are two forms of colonization: one is the physical conquest of territories, the other is the colonization of minds, selves and cultures. The first mode is violent, transparent in its self interest and greed. The second is that of the rationalistic modernists and the liberals who claim to have the responsibility of civilizing the universal world.

Colonialism has faced to a certain extent ambiguity, nostalgia, inferiority complex among the certain classes of Indian society, which too and nakedly depicted in this novel with great caution and craftsmanship. Gyan, a Nepali boy suffering from inferiority complex, hates everything that is English, yet loves Sai, English mannered girl. He is highly prejudiced, bias-minded.

Also we see colonial cultural enslavement in the character of Jemubhai Patel. He wants to adopt everything that is English and hates all that is Indian including his mother and wife.

Thus the novel emphasizes the agonies of exile inferiority and ambiguities of Post-colonialism.



The novel deals with mixing up of different cultures and its impact on Indian society. The characters are racing between colonial and post-colonial India suffering the same feelings of loss, of nostalgia, of dislocation and displacement, exiled in every sense. They are mentally slaves to Post-colonization and strangers to their own homeland. It is most satiric narration of a disintegrated culture and pathetic predicament of Indians in Post-colonial and postmodern period. The novel concludes that in the modern situation the man with his biased, confused and racial attitude has lost the power of visibility and he walks with faltered steps towards the direction of unfair world. Unknowingly they enter the uncomfortable situation and unwisely they bring misfortunes to all. Imagination has taken new directions where people crave not for beauty and poetry but for separation and subjugation. The thirst for blood rises continuously and the quench is never satisfied. Humanity is in crisis, globalization is at stake and beauty is in chain. So the unfair world should uplift the biased veil to see splendors and truth in nature and inhale the aroma of life.

Most significantly, this disintegrated & fragmented picture of modern life and culture strikes the common reader. And the reader experiences the sense of awe and fear, as well as of absurdity and desperations, he experiences it in Kafka and Sartre. In a sense, it is continuation of modernity in post-modern literature. Yet it is seen that Kiran Desai poses the situations implying the need of love, harmony and truth. She describes in the end of the novel hopefully–

“The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent.

All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it”. (Desai: 2006:324).

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