

Multiplicity of Female Identification: An Appraisal of *The Inheritance of Loss*

Mrs. Pooja Malhotra

Assistant Professor of English

Credence Girls' College, Durg

Email: profpooja@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Kiran Desai is one of the new women writers, who have enriched the genre of Indian English fiction. Kiran Desai however, does not confine herself to the expression of the feminine ethos but elaborates and expands her writing to include international and contemporary issues of immigration, displacement, class, alienation, etc. The many faces of Indian womanhood are represented in the novel through the various female characters. Identity is a comprehensive and complex term; often elusive and incomprehensible. History, culture, society, education, aspirations and relationships give a shape and meaning to the identity of an individual.

KEYWORDS

Kiran Desai; Identity; Individuality.

Indian women novelists have given a new dimension to the gamut of Indian English literature. In the mid of nineteenth century, many Indian women started to write in the English language. Beginning with feeble attempts at being heard, women novelists have incorporated the recurring female experiences in their writing. Evolving from a representation of their traditional and confined position, their expression has emerged fully liberated and bold in the contemporary era.

Kiran Desai is one of the new women writers, who have enriched the genre of Indian English fiction. Kiran Desai however, does not confine herself to the expression of the feminine ethos but elaborates and expands her writing to include international and contemporary issues of immigration, displacement, class, alienation, etc. Her imagination goes

beyond the boundaries of her gender. She addresses herself to an Indian culture in which globalization isn't imagined but experienced whether the identity of the exile is constructed because of immigration or as a result of painful social and cultural displacement within the country itself. In her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, she portrays not only the legacy of loss that is a part of the contemporary era but has also given a voice to various female characters: some traditional, timid and submissive, some vain and lost, some assertive, confident and self-dependent.

The many faces of Indian womanhood are represented in the novel through the various female characters. Identity is a comprehensive and complex term; often elusive and incomprehensible. History, culture, society, education, aspirations and relationships give a shape

and meaning to the identity of an individual. The attempts at self-identification lie across the pages of contemporary fiction; more so in the case of the female characters whose identity is entwined and often enshrouded within the labyrinth of her relationships. The stereotypical image of the Indian woman has come a long way and has freed itself of the clichés associated with its makeup and its portrayal in literature. Today there is no single term or association that can be linked with the image of the Indian woman but there exists a multiplicity of identification wherein the traditional coexists with the modern the bonded with the liberated and the lost with the self-assured.

In Desai's novel, the most touching and pathetic female character is the wife of the Judge, Bela Patel. Traditional, naïve and submissive, she is unable to understand the ferocity and rage of her husband towards her. Jemubhai mistreats her, abuses and ultimately abandons her but she is docile as ever; the picture of the typical suffering and self-sacrificing Indian woman who accepts her lot without a word. Even a mere incident like going out with a female acquaintance is reason enough for her to bear the brunt of her husband's displeasure. She has no identity of her own, no voice to protest or assert. Even her name is not the one she was given after birth, Nimi but the one she has accepted after her marriage at the young age of fifteen years. The changing of the name shows that a woman is not even free to keep her own name; she is completely devoid of individuality.

It doesn't matter that Nimi or Bela Patel hails from rich families, her position is subdued due to her gender. Like every young girl brought up according to the patriarchal standards of society she has been conditioned to accept her fate and never to question her male master whoever he be; the father or the husband. Married to an anglophile who is estranged

from his own culture and identity, she is subjected to inhuman treatment by Jemubhai, who feels that he is far superior to her because of his education and exposure to Western society. His inferiority complex, his shame and humiliation that develops out of his inequitable position to be on par with the English people is expressed through his humiliation at the presence of his naïve and traditional wife, and his abuse of her.

The intense humiliation and isolation push Nimi towards a depressive state of mind wherein she drowns herself in her silence, "She had fallen out of life altogether. Weeks went by and she spoke to nobody..." (IL 172). Suffering silently and for a long time she does find the courage occasionally to answer back but her situation turns for the worse. Eventually, the torture crosses all limits and she is sent back home. Abandoned by her husband she suffers silently while the Judge doesn't even bother to take care of her or his daughter. She dies by the fire with not an eyebrow being raised as to the true nature of her death.

Born out of this loveless marriage and into the painful silence of her mother, the judge's daughter grows up without the affection of her parents. Nimi dies in her childhood and the father is the Judge who never cares to fulfil his role. He only provides financial assistance for her upkeep. She is the unnamed daughter of the Judge for Desai gives her no name. Her identity is referred to by the author not as herself, not as the Judge's or Nimi's daughter but as "Mrs Mistry" (IL 25). She falls in love when in college and marries Mr. Mistry, an orphan like her for she is also orphaned by the absence of her father. The absence of parental love brings them closer and enables her to decide to marry him. Unlike her mother who suffered in silence, she is free to choose her own life but unfortunately, her happy life is cut short by an accident in which she along with her husband dies.

Mrs. Mistry's daughter and the granddaughter of Nimi and the Judge is Sai, the third generation of women in the Judge's family. She grows up in a convent away from her parents and after their death is sent to live with her grandfather, the Judge. Unlike her mother and grandmother, she is lucky to be accepted into the life of the Judge due to the unavoidable circumstances brought about by her parents' death. Her character is neither docile as her grandmother nor negligible as her mother.

She is the face of the modern woman who is innocent, sensitive, and naïve but bold enough to break free of the mould. She adjusts herself to her life in Kalimpong in her grandfather's house and connects amicably with the people around her. She is not restricted by her class or position and relates to her environment and the people. She is equally sensitive to the needs of her grandfather as to the humane consideration for his cook and his son. Her attraction toward Gyan, her tutor is a result of his intelligence, knowledge and her own compatibility with someone of her own generation. The realization of Gyan's true background does shock her but experience makes her mature enough to understand and accept the differences. Though she realizes and accepts her role and responsibility in the Judge's house and her enduring love for Gyan yet she also becomes aware that she has to leave one day for the world beckons her; to experience and live her life, to grow, evolve and be herself; her own person.

She thought of her father and the space program. She thought of all the National Geographics and books she had read. Of the judge's journey, of the cook's journey, of Biju's. Of the globe twirling on its axis. And she felt a glimmer of strength. Of resolve. She must leave. (*IL* 323)

With the changing period, we find that Indian women portrayed by Kiran Desai also change. Apart from representing the transformation of women through the

three generations of the Judge's family, Desai delineates many minor female characters in the novel who are equally capable of portraying the varied and multiple forms of female identity that refutes all claim to a predetermined image as the only viable and authentic identification for an Indian woman.

Malani, the wife of Harish-Harry in America is a practical woman, equally shouldering the responsibilities of her husband's business. She handles his accounts and has a say in the business affairs too. She is ruthless in her business policies and exploits the workers to the optimum. Her character is a far cry from the stereotypical image of a traditional Indian wife; bold, confident and pragmatic. Mrs. Singh, another female character is rich and powerful in the novel. However, she is vain and deluded in her opposition to tradition as is reflected in her neglect of motherly duties and the extravagant show of lavishness. Her freedom is not genuine for she also has no identity of her own apart from the identity rendered to her through her relation as the wife of Mr. Singh. The other two women characters are Noni or Nonita and her widowed sister Lola. Like the Judge, they are also anglophiles as is evident from Lola's euphoric pride at the success of her daughter Pixie in England. Of the two sisters, Noni is far more an individual than her sister who feels lost and insecure without her husband. It is she who advises Sai, ". . . if you get a chance in life, take it." (*IL* 69). Even in their perception of the reality around them, Nonita is far more realistic and unprejudiced than Lola, but as women facing alone the insurgency they still come across as vulnerable and insecure.

Desai's female characters belong to different generations, which reveals the multiplicity of female identification contrary to what has been believed to be a static and mono image. Female characters like Nimi, Mrs. Mistry and Sai, belong to one

family but represent the change in these women's thinking and attitude to life and identity with the change in a generation. Even the other female characters are a representation of the multifaceted image of the modern woman, who can be like Sai, strong, free, mature and confident or like

Mrs. Singh, delusional and donning a false image of emancipation. Multiplicity of female characters portrayed by Desai in her novel successfully shatters the stereotyped and typecast image of the Indian Woman, making her more human and individual.

WORKS CITED

Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 2006.