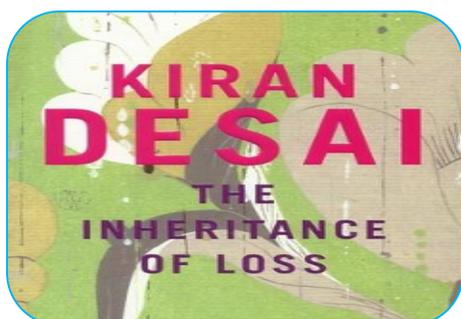




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NATIONALISM IN QUESTION: A STUDY OF KIRAN DESAI'S THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

Dr. C. K. Gautam

Associate Professor , Research & P G Department of English , Agra College Agra

ABSTRACT:

There is a general consensus among the liberal historians that the formative lessons of nationalism were acquired in the colonial classroom through the teaching of European histories. It is also believed that in its positive aspect nationalism ought to improve its citizen an understanding of the value of international concerns. However, some of the thinkers postulated European nation as a universal phenomenon capable of accommodating the rest of the world . This universal ethnocentrism gave birth to colonialism resulting into contradiction between the universal claims of western nationalism and the oppositions development of cultural nationalism in the third world. The awakening of

national consciousness is believed to bring rationality and development to the nation state , yet the anti-colonial nationalism in some cases invokes energies which are against the state , for anti-colonial nationalism is born and acquires meaning in terms of struggle which is rooted in shared tradition and culture and is indigenous. Thus , while some of the thinkers argue that nationness is the most universally legitimate value in modern political life and at the same time paradoxically, competing or " separatist appeals" for nationhood are generally condemned as signs of political illegitimacy. This short paper attempts to discuss Desai's The Inheritance of loss in the light of above contentious issues that surround the concepts of nation and nationalism in contemporary literary theory.

KEYWORDS: Gorkha, Marginalisation, anti-national, colonial ideology, illiberal tendencies

INTRODUCTION

Set against the Gorkha insurgency in North Eastern India in the 1980s Desai's text juxtaposes three worlds – the colonial world of judge Jemubhai Patel's youth. The postcolonial India of his retirement, which is also the world of his grand-daughter Sai Mistry and her Nepali tutor ,Gyan and finally the globalized world of Biju , the cook's son , an illegal immigrant in the U.S.

Colonial discourse interpolates colonial subjects by incorporating them in the system.

Born in a poor Gujarati family in the remote village of Piphit. Jemubhai is married at the age of twenty to the daughter of a rich man who pays for the ICS dream. His years in Britain turn Jemubhai into a mimic man- one who learns to act English but does not look English nor is accepted as such. Jemubhai sees history through the colonizers' eyes. Learns to eat English food, dress in English clothes and speak with an English accent. Colonial discourse interpolates

colonial subject by incorporating them in the system. His stay in England is a constant reminder of his colonized state. He has difficulty in finding lodgings in Cambridge, is ridiculed by the whites and at the same time has been witness to the humiliation and torment of a fellow Indian at the hands of the whites. These memories haunt him all his life. The conflicts aroused in his mind wrap him and have a deeply damaging effect upon his sense of identity manifested in his use of the impersonal "one" in referring to himself .Colonial ideology calls him and he begins to consider himself in terms of the racist

ideology that informs how others see him. Identity assigns him a role and an identity that he is made to recognize as his own. Though Jemubhai experiences the pain of being represented by others, he also experiences pleasure through a new sense of self-worth derived by complicity with the colonizer. Having internalized colonial ideology, he believes he is participating in the progress of civilization. Jemubhai returns to India with a deep disdain for all things Indian, including his wife. The more stubbornly she clings to her culture, silently refusing to learn the English language or accept the English lifestyle, the more intensely her husband dislikes her. He finds her unfit to play the role of the wife of an Indian Civil Servant who owes allegiance to the British crown. She becomes a major embarrassment to him and he hides her from his official world. His final humiliation comes when she is unwittingly drawn to participate in a ladies reception for the nationalist Nehru. He sends her back to her home where she delivers a daughter he never sees. She is forced to live on a resentful charity of a married sister and when she dies of burns under suspicious circumstances, Jemubhai prefers to believe it was an accident.

The rejection of country is symbolized in the rejection of the wife. Jemubhai continues to live as a foreigner in his own country, preferring to forget his own nationality. Not surprisingly when he retires as a judge, he buys a colonial house in Kalimpong from a Scotsman returning home. The only other vestige of colonial glory left in his life is his cook who helps him play out the pretence of being English. The cook, having internalized colonial discourse with its concomitant sense of inferiority, remains a faithful servant slaving in the antiquated Kitchen of Cho Oyu to produce English meals and keep up old preferences. Besides he believes that it was a comedown for him to be working for an Indian, when his father had served only white men. Like many old servants, he had regretted the Indianization of the ICS too. He now lives in the hope that his only son Biju would make it in the new white man's land, America.

The judge remains cut off from anyone who might point out to him the "lie he had become". He takes in his orphaned grand-daughter Sai in the hope that "an acknowledged system of justice was beginning to erase his debts". He is relieved to find that they are two of a kind, for she is Anglicized as he is, having spent most of her seven years in a convent.

The postcolonial world of Sai is circumscribed by the Anglophile Bengali sisters, Lola and Noni, Uncle Potty, an alcoholic from a once affluent Lucknow family and his Father Booty, a Swiss Jesuit priest who runs a dairy. Her only link with the native Nepali population is her tutor, Gyan. Her world is not sensitive to the mood of the other world around them, people by ethnic, Indian-Nepalis.

The novel suggests not only the invention of national borders during the colonial period, but also the internal divisions that have come to the fore after the end of the colonization. As McLeod rightly puts it, "...Central to the idea of the nation are notions of collectivity and belonging, a mutual sense of community that a group of individuals imagines. These feelings of community are the emotive foundations for the organization, administration and membership of the 'state', the political agency which enforces the social order of the nation". When the sense of collectivity and community is not shared by all the people living within the nation's territorial boundaries, it can stimulate division and conflict such as the Fiji-ethnic Indian conflict, the ongoing Sri Lanka- LTTE problem or the recent Malaysia Hindraf confrontation.

Race and ethnicity have been used to set the norms and limits of the nation's imagined community. In West Bengal, the Gorkhas form an ethnic community who feels its interests threatened by the Bengalis. They do not feel they have experienced liberation in the period of formal independence. Their growing sense of continued oppression within the national population culminated in the Gorkha insurgency of the 1980s. The movement announces its arrival with a series of strikes and processions. To Sai's world, it is merely the work of "hooligans in the bazaar." Then new posters appear in the market "referring to old discontents"- "We are stateless". It is better to die than live as slaves" and "We are constitutionally tortured. Return our land from Bengal". "Liberation: is scrawled across the waterworks. The youth wing of the Gorkha National Liberation Front swears to fight to death for the formation of a homeland- Gorkhaland. Suddenly, there is talk everywhere of "insurgency".

Noni recalls how the Nepalis were thrown out of Assam and Meghalaya and the king of Bhutan had branded them as illegal immigrants. She admits that the Nepalis have cause to be worried. They have been living in the region for several generations and are justified perhaps in demanding that Nepali be taught in schools. Lola's response highlights the internal divisions that have come to the fore in many nations after the end of the colonial period.

As Gyan watches GNLFF protest march, stories of nationalism during India's struggle against the British flash through his mind: "India for Indians. No taxation without representation. No help for the wars. Not a man. Not a rupee. British Raj Muradabad." A significant thought crosses his mind. "If a nation had such a climax in its history, its heart, would it not hunger for it again?" raising a question about the extent to which all Indians share a "deep horizontal comradeship." Gyan hears fiery speeches not as stories told by others, but live. They are, however, not directed against the British but against the Indian nation. Gorkha agitators draw attention to the discrimination and marginalization they have suffered in postcolonial India. Their loyal services to the nation have not only gone unrewarded, but they have been denied respect or recognition. The rhetoric continues as the speaker points out how the Nepali makes up eighty percent of the population; there are ninety tea gardens but not one is Nepali-owned. Their children are not taught Nepali in schools; they have no share in the job market.

This view is in sharp contrast to the perception of the sub-divisional officer who remarks to the judge and Sai, "They [the Nepali-Indians] are using the problems of Bhutan, Assam as an excuse to make trouble here. This country of ours is always being torn apart and it's sad for people like us, brought up with national feeling.... These anti-nationals have no respect for anything or anyone...The whole economy is under threat."

As the insurgency intensifies, there is a realization that there is some justification for it: "It did not come from nothing, even Lola knew, but from an old feeling of anger that couldn't be divorced from Kalimpong. It was part of every breath. It was a part of every breath. It was in the eyes that waited, attached themselves to you as you approached, rode on your back as you walked on with a muttered remark you could not catch in the moment of passing."

The colonial world of the judge and the postcolonial world of Kalimpong highlight certain facts. A subjugated society such as that of pre-independence India could, simultaneously, be a subjugating society. The cook and the judge's wife are examples of subjugation on the basis of class and gender. Further, in postcolonial India, that subjugation could continue, and expand to include in its fold race and ethnicity.

Reading the newspapers, Sai reflects that the country appears to be coming apart at the seams with militant activity in Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram and the Punjab. The problematic relation between the nationalist elite and the masses is underscored by a further report that the government had unveiled its new financial plan after much secrecy and debate. It had seen fit to reduce taxes on condensed milk and ladies' undergarments and raise them on wheat, rice and kerosene. As the GNLFF bring life to a grinding halt and spread terror in the once-tranquil Himalayan foothills, there is an interrogation of the very concept of 'nation'- the "myth of the nation." A nation is not a natural phenomenon. "What was a country but the idea of it? She thought of India as a concept, a hope and a desire."

The text introduces a third world country through Biju- the illegal immigrant's U.S. Kiran Desai, in an interview, remarked. "There is such a myth about States being a country where people find their dignity after leaving behind horribly undignified situations. They think of themselves as a benevolent nation. Nations operate like religions. They seduce themselves with their own image and seduce the rest with good advertising. With deep irony, Desai constructs the exploited lives of the Mexicans, Indians, Pakistanis, Colombians, Tunisians, Ecuadorians, Gambians and Guatemalans slaving in the kitchens of U.S. restaurants, "...perfectly first-world on top, perfectly third-world twenty-two steps below. As he ekes a living sleeping on dirty kitchen floors, weeping from the cold, saving money in an envelope in his shoes. Biju experiences conflicting emotions, " Biju couldn't help but feel a flash of anger at his father for sending him alone to this country, but he knew he would not have forgotten his father for not trying to send him either." He feels increasingly alienated, despite switching it to an Indian restaurant that did not beef. Looking down at the Hudson, he thinks that he "possessed no name at all for this black water. It was not his history." Accosted by a Lithuanian Hare Krishna, he thinks, "What was India to these people? How many lived in the fake versions of their country, in fake versions of other people's countries? Did their lives feel as unreal to them as his own did to him?" he begins to wonder if he continued in the U.S. would he too manufacture a fake version of himself, like his Gujarati restaurant owner Harish-Harry. He is filled with nostalgia for his country. He decides to return.

Biju has only a very vague idea of the trouble in his hometown. He is shocked to hear comments of his newsagent. "They should kick the bastards back to Nepal. Bangladeshis to Bangladesh, Afghans to Afghanistan, all Muslims to Pakistan. Tibetans, Bhutanese, why are they sitting in our country?" Biju does not

know of how Father Booty, who had lived for forty five years in India and had been working for the lot of the local farmer, is suddenly perceived as an “illegal immigrant” and national threat who must be forced to leave the country. When Biju returns India, to Kalimpong, to his “imagined community”, he is treated as an alien by the GNLf boys who strip him of all the his possessions and leave him “without his pride”. His father has just been hit by the realization that “instead of foreign enemies, instead of the Chinese , they had been preparing for building their hatred against, they must fight their own people...” he also realized that “ he was not wanted in Kalimpong and he did not belong.”

CONCLUSION

The Sai-Gyan relationship appears to suggest that the nation as an ideal is not completely rejected. The westernized, upper class Sai, despite knowing that Gyan had unwittingly set the GNLf boys on Cho Oyu still longs for him. Gyan contemptuous of Sai's convent educated way regrets the break in their relationship and hopes to make amends by finding and returning the missing Mutt. Perhaps relationships can be built between different people who do not smother differences, nor set “norms and limits” that lead to marginalization and illiberal tendencies.

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