

LOSS OF IDENTITY IN DESAI'S INHERITANCE OF LOSS

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Identity may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group. The formation of one's identity occurs through one's identifications with significant others (primarily with parents and other individuals during one's biographical experiences, and also with 'groups' as they are perceived). These others may be benign such that one aspires to their characteristics, values and beliefs (a process of idealistic-identification), or malign when one wishes to dissociate from their characteristics (a process of defensive contra-identification Weinreich gives the definition "A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future" ; this allows for definitions of aspects of identity, such as: "One's identity is defined as that part of the totality of one's self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one's construal of past ancestry and one's future aspirations in relation to ethnicity".

Despite many definitions and connotations 'identity' is referred to as a conscious sense of individual uniqueness, and at yet other places as a sense of solidarity with a group's ideal which seems to be most relevant with the present discussion. Seeking for identity goes through two aspects (a) the representation of difference and (b) the expression of a particular community. Thus, one's identity is an amalgamation of both the cultural difference and identification with the cultural tradition and

the lack of either generally results in a 'state of loss'. It was known that Macaulay who created a sense of 'loss' in the minds of many Indians by developing a kind of feeling of superiority or inferiority to fulfil his dream of developing the colonial mentality among Indians.

Macaulay advised the British government on education in India "we must at present do our best to form a class [in India] who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." His words led the then cultural and educational policies adopted by the British government in India and making English the medium of instruction in some schools and universities in India in 1850 was the starting point of the impact of the western culture on the mind of a class of Indians. It re-stratified the Indian society. The Indians 'in blood and colour, but English in taste' were recruited into the British rule and thus enjoying a respectful social status.

Loss of identity is very clearly reflected in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. In the famous novel, it is his education in a school of British milieu and then in Cambridge University which makes him enjoy the status. In colonial days, the English literature which was introduced in schools and universities was western culture with it and thus fulfilling the dream of Macaulay. English poured the concept and importance, especially for social status, in the minds of Indians and thus people began to look power in relation to English this is best reflected in the character of the judge. There is an interesting scene in *The Inheritance of Loss* revealing the influence of English education in establishing cultural hierarchy among natives. Above the entrance to the mission school where the judge studies in, a portrait of Queen Victoria, a symbol of imperial power is hung. The judge, everyday entering the school, looks at her and feels that "her foggy expression compelling,"

and is “deeply impressed that a woman so plain could also have been so powerful. The more he pondered this oddity, the more his respect for her and the English grew” (58)

The acceptance of cultural hierarchy leads to some enduring personal dilemmas resulting into identity crisis. Kiran Desai, in her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* very minutely paints this through Jemubhai. He grows up under the colonial project, does his secondary education at a mission school and college education in Cambridge, He follows British Culture blindly. He gets recruited as an ICS (Indian Civil Service) member and tries to become an official keeping up the British standards. It clearly shows his mind set-up that Britain represents a superior society to India. Homi Bhabha maintains that the powerful influence of a different culture will cause a tension between the desire of identity stasis and the demand for a change in identity; and mimicry represents as a compromise to this tension (86). ‘Mimicry of the center’, as Ashcroft claims, is “the periphery to immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become ‘more English than the English’” (4). Same is the case with the judge. He studies hard only and only to get more acquainted with western culture and tries to adopt the British standards in his daily life. He takes afternoon tea every day, tries to speak English in a natural way of a native speaker, covers his brown skin colour with the powder puff but he is always in a dilemma, a struggle of identity. All of his efforts to find a place among those who are in the centre are futile. Though he holds a highly prestigious position like ICS, he has to work only to reinforce the domination of Britain.

The situation becomes more pitiable, when Jemubhai returns to India; even to the members of his family, he is like a ‘foreigner’. Even in India he uses the powder puff .He does not use the puff to protect his

skin, but to cover his brown skin colour. This is because of the racial discrimination he faced during his education at Cambridge. On one hand, he could not find a room on rent in England for several days because people in Britain do not want to entertain Indians, on the other hand, when he returns to India, The members of his family are perplexed because of his odd behaviour and some even mock at him; The family faces a Herculean struggle, especially between the judge and his wife - 'a sense of estrangement is set up between the judge and others'. Therefore, the judge suffers a kind of double isolation. So he is neither recognized by the colonial centre nor by his own culture and family and a feeling of 'identity crises' has trapped his mind. His failure to get into the centre, his isolation from the Indian culture and differentiation of his own family corners makes it a difficult task for him to form any meaningful cultural identification and thus suffers from 'identity crisis'. Though, later on, the judge gets an idea of the impossibility of getting into the 'centre'. Once, while eating the chicken, his cook pronounces 'roast bustard' as 'roast bastard' reminds him of the Englishman's jokes on the way Indian uses Indianized English which makes him that he is also among the Anglicized Indians who are the subjects of such jokes. In spite of doing his level best in following an English lifestyle, he remains as 'the other'.

The dominance of western civilization over Indian culture lingers in India. In colonial days, the Indians who accepted the cultural hierarchy appeared as to be great admirers of western culture. The mind of many Indians is still hovered by the thought that this is only the West which stands for the civilized. This can be seen in many scenes, especially where Biju, the son of the judge's cook, makes an appearance. When Biju is in the U.S. embassy for a visa, we find the Indians struggling to reach the counter window. One among them tries hard to

prove himself to a western civilized being so as to impress the U.S. officials:

He dusted himself off, presenting himself with the exquisite manners of a cat. I'm civilized, sir ready for the U.S., I'm civilized, mam. Biju noticed that his eyes, so alive to the foreigners, looked back at his own countrymen and women, immediately glazed over, and went dead. (183)

The idea that the West represents the civil, actually denies the Indians for the possibility of being civilized. The older generations of Indians who are duped with colonial mentality unconsciously help the Britishers to propagate the western culture. The behaviour and activities of Lola and Noni suggest of their effort to look like typical Anglophiles. They read nineteenth century British novels, grow broccoli with seeds from England, listen to BBC, and wear Marks and Spencer panties. Lola's daughter is an anchor at BBC and she is so proud of her that she asks her to get settled there. The cook's mind is always filled with the American dream of getting sudden wealth and living a modern life. He makes every possible effort to send Biju, his son, to the U.S. The judge does not want to send Sai, his daughter, to a public school in Kalimpong because of his fear that she will learn the Indian-accented English. Thus, the colonial mentality, to a great extent, becomes the inheritance for next generation.

Even today, the Indians, the people from the 'Third World', as the West look at, remain at the bottom of society and really the rights of the people of the 'Third World' are not guaranteed. Kiran Desai, the Inheritance of Loss, depicts the basements of New York restaurants as full of illegal immigrants from the 'Third World'. The wage is too little and to fulfill the desire of becoming wealthy. Many times they are being exploited and the boss cut down their wages and living expenses.

Kiran Desai, in the novel, as can be perceived, shows her or at least tries to show her agony on such western domination. Biju, Gyan, and Sai are a little different from the judge and the cook. While the judge blindly follows the existing cultural hierarchy Biju, Gyan and Sai, though trapped in, but at least, on some occasions seem to try to resist. Biju, like other illegal immigrants from the ‘Third World’ works in the basements of New York restaurants. He goes to the U.S. with his father’s ‘American dream’; since it is always his father who dreams of the modernity of the U.S. and thinks that it is too easy to get rich there. Throughout the novel, we find that Biju is fond of modernity and tries to enjoy it but with the passage of time the West reveals to him another part of it i.e. the disorderly and the uncivilized side. One day, Biju is amazed to see that Indians ordering beef in New York restaurants. This makes him abhorrent towards this disorderly situation: “One should not give up one’s religion, the principles of one’s parents and their parents before them. No, no matter what. You had to live according to something.”(136). This repulsion is little more obvious when later Biju becomes aware of his exploitation. He shows his anger to the boss but, pathetic that this could not lessen his fondness of modernity in the western society.

Sai studied in a convent school where English was the medium of teaching and consequently she learnt English and English Culture. After coming to live with her father, she meets Gyan, the Nepali tutor. Their different attitudes towards the western culture threaten their relationship. Sai eats with a fork and Gyan uses his hands as he is not aware of the western ways of eating. Later when he has a dinner with the judge, his discomfiture with the fork and knife is shown again. But, interestingly, when he dines at the judge’s house later on, he feels embarrassed for the way he uses the fork and the knife. He suffers from an inferiority

complex but later on he refuses to adopt the western culture and retreats to his own culture. Gyan joins 'Gorkha National Liberation Front', he admits to "the compelling pull of history and found his pulse leaping to something that felt entirely authentic" (160), and recovers a sense of recognition by mocking at the judge's mimicry of the western lifestyle but such attempts are nothing than illusions as Ashcroft maintains "within the syncretic reality of a post-colonial society it is difficult to return to an idealized pure pre-colonial cultural condition" (Ashcroft 108). The fact that today the whole world is toward a 'Global Village' makes cross-cultural exchanges and influences inevitable. Grown up in a convent school, Sai is influenced by western culture and impressed by her grandfather's use of better English than Hindus but the idea that the Indian culture is inferior is intolerable to her.

Finally, Desai, through her characters, tries to reveal how, in colonial days, people were trying to find out their identity in between: the centre and the periphery, the powerful and the powerless, the superior and the inferior, the authentic and the inauthentic, the dominating and the dominated, order and disorder, and thus giving us a message to root out the colonial mentality. She challenges the dominance of the West and the reality of so called orderly and civilized "centre". Desai unsettles the western hegemony by the description of New York City in the novel which reflects the same "disorderly" and "uncivilized" state both in the centre and the periphery. This is very clear in the last line of the novel: 'The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light' that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent.

Works Cited:

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