

Enduring Fabric of Reminiscences: A Study of the Different Roles that Memory and Nostalgia Play in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

The paper studies Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss and examines how the author positions her characters on the social periphery. I further analyze the various ways in which Desai uses the narrative tools of memory and nostalgia in the novel. On one hand, the judge wants to escape from his past and blend with the English way of life. However, when he recalls his undistinguished Indian upbringing, he is ashamed and eventually, becomes a recluse unable to maintain a healthy social and family life. Unlike the judge, Biju fondly remembers his past life in India. Memory provides him a space of comfort and the reminiscences offer him an escape route from the exploitations and subjugations that he has to face on a daily basis as an illegal immigrant in the United States.

Keywords: Memory, reminiscence, marginality, isolation, immigration, diaspora, relation.

Marginality is generally a complex condition influenced by different factors – social, economic or cultural. Hence, representations of the marginalized have always been diverse and distinct. In her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai talks about the marginalized, but her characters are shaped more by the tensions resulting from immigration. Positioned in an alien, unfamiliar society because of immigration where cultural practices, rituals and codes are completely different, Kiran Desai's characters suffer from a diasporic crisis which is punctuated by a plethora of socio-economic factors. The characters often seek solace in reminiscences of the past. Memory serves as an effective device in the progression of the plot. For the characters, memory is a space where they can overcome their marginalized existence and attain a sense of familiarity and fulfilment. In this paper, I analyze Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and examine how the characters take recourse to memory in different ways as a means to escape from the harsh realities of life amidst which they are trapped in.

The Inheritance of Loss has two parallel narratives – one set in Kalimpong and the other in Manhattan. The first narrative revolves around Cho-Oyu, the judge Jemubhai Patel's decrepit house in Kalimpong. The other narrative centers around Biju, who illegally migrates to New York on forged papers.

Jemubhai Patel was born in Piphit and had received his education at the local Bishop Cotton School where he is deeply impressed by the portrait of Queen Victoria. What strikes him is the fact "a woman so plain could also have been so powerful" (Desai 2006). His doing well at higher levels of the school spurs his father to send him to England for further studies. Jemu's father knows a degree from England would impart a sense of social prestige and empowerment to the otherwise marginalized family, suppressed by the divisive and repressive policies of the then colonial British government.

Jemubhai feels alienated as soon as his journey to England starts. He feels humiliated when he sees the typical Indian meal his mother had prepared for him. He thinks his meal has given away his humble past and his Indian way of life to the co-passengers of his journey who presumably are Europeans. He feels angry at his mother for humiliating him, in her attempt to save him from the embarrassment that may arise from his inability to use the fork and knife in the dining salon of the ship and so, he tosses the food packet overboard. The overt show of affection fills Jemu with an embittered silence as he tries to shed his "Indianness" in the hope of getting adopted by British society. For Jemubhai, memory of his past life in the village of Piphit casts a constant shadow and reminds him of his plebeian Indian upbringing as the young Jemu tries to blend with the English way of life.

In England, Jemubhai sees the small grey houses with a sense of amazement, for the glorious picture of the country that he carries in his heart now seems colorless. He remembers that for him England had been a land of dreams, of glory and beauty, of wealth and happiness, but this notion is

soon shattered when he arrives at Cambridge. He is discriminated against and is made fun of. When he is wrongly accused of smelling like curry by young British girls, Jemubhai takes to regular washing of himself. He feels marginalized and withdraws into his shell. The impact of such experiences is so severe that he becomes obsessive about certain things in life, such as his preference for faded days to sunny ones lest sunlight reveal his skin color. These memories of subordination play havoc on the psyche of young Jemu and when he returns to India, he is a changed man. He begins to stand for English manners, rituals and the general English way of life, and by doing so, Jemubhai tries to wash away his past humiliation in the hands of the British. He hopes that if he manages to be a part of the mainstream British culture by adopting their ways and practices, he would be able to shed his shame of being the 'other' that was born out of the humiliation he had suffered as a brown-skinned student at Cambridge. He becomes the 'brown sahib' who wants things done with punctuality and precision much like his British masters. Jemubhai, uses a knife and fork to eat his 'rotis' and 'puris'. Imitating his colonial masters helps him in exercising the phantoms of humiliation he has suffered at their hands when he was an ordinary person in the town of Piphit. His fuss over a fixed English routine begins with the bed tea and ends with a hot water bottle, not only in winter but in all seasons in the manner of the colonizers. His fascination for hunting and hunting rifles also reflects his anglophilic nature. Even after retirement, the evening tea is more like a ritual, served with an accompaniment of pudding.

His choice of the breed of dog after retirement is significant. Usually Irish-setters are not very commonly kept as pets in India. However, the judge's fascination for the breed, which is often used as a gun dog by Europeans, confirms his inclination to emulate the British. When the judge employs the cook, the latter boasts of his ability to prepare all sorts of puddings. The cook's ability to "make a new pudding for each day of the year" (Desai 2006) confirms his appointment in the judge's household.

Jemubhai's futile efforts at trying to be like the British isolate him from his family members, who, unlike the judge, could not access western education and so, could not keep pace with the judge's love for British ways and customs. The judge's anglophilic nature even destroys his marriage. Jemubhai wants his wife Nimi to be English speaking but Nimi is too simple to learn English and can't stand on equal terms with her husband. He beats her mercilessly and never allows her to go out of the house.

Jemubhai's attempts to overcome his 'Indianness' and mimic the British in their ways and customs can be explained by Bhabha's definition of the term 'mimicry'. Bhabha believes that "mimicry is the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform ... which 'appropriates' the 'Other' as it visualises power" (Bhabha 1994). Jemubhai clearly wants to assume the power that is associated with the British imperialist government and he believes that imitating the British would help him achieve a power position that he or his family had never experienced before.

After retirement, memory again starts playing a negative role in the life of the judge. He remembers the power that he could exercise as a government official in British India when he was in service. However, he knows that his present retired life in Kalimpong does not grant him the previous privileges and prestige that he had enjoyed among his Indian relatives and friends. He almost never leaves his crumbling mansion Cho-Oyu, knowing that outside its walls his power and influence are uncertain. This rootedness is further demonstrated when he is reluctant to meet his old friend Bose in town. Living a marginalized life in Kalimpong after retirement, the judge becomes a parody of an Englishman devoted only to his Irish-setter dog Mutt. His small world confined within the four walls of Cho-Oyu corroborates his isolated and alienated existence and his failure to be a part of a social circle in his life.

Another character who migrates to the West is Biju. The son of a cook, Biju had always dreamt of making it big in the West. Unlike the judge who had migrated to England, Biju's choice of country is the US. The shift in choice is significant because the judge had migrated when India was a British colony. England was the place to be at that time. However, Biju's migration takes place much later, in the 1980s when America has already emerged as the global power in terms of economic superiority. Thus, for Biju, US is the dream destination where he is prepared to go at any cost. Although Biju initially fails in his efforts, he finally manages to migrate to the US, albeit on forged papers. The cook has high hopes for his son although he is not aware of the exact nature of Biju's work in the US. The nurturing of hope is evident in the letters that he sends to Biju. He regularly recommends to Biju names of boys willing to go to America. For him, the US seems to be the ultimate goal of a person's life. On the other hand, Biju too, expertly puts up this mask and pretends that he is doing fine in the US. His letters "traced a string of jobs, they said more or less the same thing each time except for the name of the establishment he was working for. His repetition provided coziness and the cook's repetition of his son's repetition

double-knit the coziness” (Desai 2006). The enthusiasm with which Biju writes the letters and the excitement that is generated back there in India when the cook reads them explains the migration of Biju because having a son in the US greatly enhances the prestige of the cook among his peers.

In contrast to the anxiety and pain of Biju, the cook survives in the illusion that his “son is in New York, he is the manager of a restaurant business” (Desai 2006). He glorifies the emergence of America as the most powerful nation, “the best country in the world” (Desai 2006) with exclusive control on economic resources and thinks that his son is successfully working there. Biju endures humiliation in the US while the cook seeks solace in an imagined socio-economic space achieved through his son’s economic prosperity attained in a country much beyond his own reach. Throughout the narrative Biju learns how his adopted nation treats him as a secondary citizen. Unfortunately for illegal immigrants like Biju, life becomes a living hell and instead of the luxury that they dream of, they literally become paupers and don’t even have the money to return home.

Biju thinks that the elusive Green Card is the panacea to all his problems:

The green card the green card ... Without it he couldn’t leave. To leave he wanted a green card (Desai 2006).

However, throughout the novel, Biju remains a marginalized entity. Unable to get the coveted Green Card, the American Dream that he nourishes doesn’t materialize.

Biju is constantly on the run, switching from one job to another, devoid of any identity and constantly subject to suspicion by the immigration authorities. He lives in squalor and his sense of place is tenuous. He finds himself in a state of perpetual exile and helplessness in trying to accommodate to the surrounding social environment. His personal choice and opinions are made redundant in the face of oppression by the restaurant owners, who take full advantage of the weakness of characters like Biju. To add to the humiliation of Biju, the wife of the proprietor of the Italian restaurant disdainfully observes that Biju smells and for this reason, Biju has to leave his job. Biju seemed completely alien to the restaurant owner’s wife:

She had hoped for poorer parts of Europe - Bulgarians perhaps, or Czechoslovakians. At least they might have something in common with them like religion or skin color, grandfathers who ate cured sausages and looked like them (Desai 2006).

This hostility of the host society towards Biju gives birth to the psyche of resentment in Biju. Surrounded by a completely unfamiliar culture and code, Biju often undergoes mixed feelings and 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 wouldn’t have forgiven his father for not trying to send him, either” (Desai 2006). The statement effectively demonstrates the deep desire of Biju to be upwardly mobile as well as his mixed feelings of isolation and alienation in the US that make him lonely and sad. Critic Reena Mitra observes, “Desai has demonstrated in her novel the havoc wrought in human societies by initiations of migrations, settlements, journeys and movements, voluntarily or involuntarily made, of individuals and mass communities” (Mitra 2009). Biju certainly epitomizes the plight of the illegal immigrant who has no future in his/her own country and who must bear with abysmal living conditions if s/he is to work illegally in the United States.

There is however a difference between Biju and the judge’s experience abroad. Biju is never attracted to the new culture of America and constantly engages himself in romanticizing about India. The judge always considers his travel to England as a means to better himself. Biju resists assimilating into the new culture of the host nation, whereas, the judge, though he cannot participate in the mainstream British culture when he is a student in England, tries every possible means to emulate the British in their ways.

Kiran Desai uses the flashback technique for the narrative and often memory becomes the source of narration. Unlike the judge for whom memory becomes a source of discomfort, Biju frequently resorts to reflections from the past. These reminiscences provide him the succor and strength to continue with his marginalized life in the US. He dreams of his father, grandmother and the village life that he has left behind in India:

Lying on his basement shelf that night, he thought of his village where he had lived with his grandmother on the money his father sent each month. The village was buried in silver grasses that were taller than a man and made a sound shuu, shuuuu, shu shuuu, as the wind turned them this way and that. Down a dry gully through the grasses, you reached a tributary of the Jamuna where you could watch men traveling downstream on inflated buffalo skins, the creatures' very dead legs, all four, sticking straight up as they sailed along, and where the river scalloped shallow over the stones, they got out and dragged their buffalo skin boats over. Here, at this shallow place, Biju and his grandmother would cross on market trips into town and back, his grandmother with her sari tucked up, sometimes a sack of rice on her head How peaceful our village is. How good the roti tastes here (Desai 2006)!

This remembrance eases his pain and Biju escapes from the hard reality and the marginal existence that he has to face while living in the US. Scorned, humiliated and isolated, Biju leads a life of vulnerability being trapped in a miserable chain of underprivileged jobs. Through memories, Biju tries to re-create his homeland:

The atmosphere of Kalimpong reached Biju all the way in New York; it swelled densely on the line and he could feel the pulse of the forest, smell the humid air, the green black lushness; he could imagine all its different textures, the plumage of banana, the stark spear of the cactus, the delicate gestures of ferns; he could hear the croak trrrr whonk, wee wee ... the rising note welding imperceptibly with the evening (Desai 2006).

Like Biju, memory also provides a source of comfort to other characters such as Joydeep and Lola. Joydeep had a romantic notion of settling in the countryside and so he sells his property in Calcutta and settles in Kalimpong. He leads a happy life with his wife Lola but suddenly Joydeep dies, leaving Lola in utmost misery. After the death of Joydeep, Lola begins to live with her sister Noni. However, when the Gorkhaland movement starts, the insurgents encroach upon Lola's property and pitches tents within her premises. When she protests against the encroachment, the leader of the insurgents refuses to vacate and instead, insults Lola. Lola ardently feels the loss of her husband and consoles herself by recollecting the happy days she had spent with him:

Then, in a moment, quite suddenly, she went weak. "Your eyes are lovely, dark and deep." He used to kiss those glistening orbs when he departed to work on his files. "But I have promises to keep," First one eye then the other - "And miles to go before I sleep □ And miles to go before you sleep?" She would make a duet - "And miles to go before I sleep (Desai 2006)."

The memory of the past that she had spent with Joydeep makes her feel sad and she misses her late husband deeply who used to love her very much. She remembers the happy days she had spent with him. This reminiscence makes Lola think that had Joydeep been alive, she wouldn't have had to face such humiliation. She realizes how "false" their "ideas of retirement" were, and instead of "sweet peas and mist, cat and books" (Desai 2006), Lola now has to face the humiliation of the insurgents. Later, Lola and Noni find pleasure in remembering their past lives in Calcutta:

And do you recall, said Noni back to Lola, those Russians who lived next door to us in Calcutta? They'd go running out every morning and come back with mountains of food, remember? There they'd be slicing, boiling, frying mountains of potatoes and onions. And then, by evening, they'd go running to the bazaar again, hair flying, coming back crazy with excitement and even more onions and potatoes for dinner. To them India was a land of plenty. They'd never seen anything like our markets (Desai 2006).

The cook too resorts to reminiscences when he falsely glorifies the judge's past life. When Sai asks the cook about the judge's former life, the latter gives her a false account of the judge's conjugal life.

When I joined the household, all the old servants told me that the death of your grandmother made a cruel man out of your grandfather. She was a great lady, never raised her voice to the servants.

How much he loved her! In fact, it was such a deep attachment, it turned one's stomach, for it was too much for anybody else to look upon (Desai 2006).

For the characters, recollection becomes an escape from reality. Nishi Pulugurtha observes, "Longing is perhaps the only thing that the characters in this novel do best – they long for home, love and acceptance, but rarely achieve it" (Pulugurtha 2009). They seek to create an imaginary world, a homeland of fantasy that will bring back their lost days of glory.

The Inheritance of Loss ends with the return of Biju from the US. Biju is stripped of his clothes, belongings and without his pride by the Gorkhaland insurgents who were demanding a separate state for the Gorkhas living in the Darjeeling hills. He is left without his hard-earned savings or the gifts that he had brought from America. Biju cannot be identified as a wealthy America-returned person and all that remains of him now is only a bare piece of cloth that Biju uses to cover his body:

Darkness fell and he sat right in the middle of the path □ without his baggage, without his savings, worst of all, without his pride. Back from America with far less that he'd ever had (Desai 2006).

Biju is forced to dress in rags that "must have been carefully picked from a pile at the bazaar" (Desai 2006). His shabby dress makes him hardly recognizable at all to the inhabitants of Cho-Oyu.

Biju's return from the US without any visible signs of wealth indicates that Desai is trying to project unadulterated love of family relationships as the sole factor that binds human beings together. The union of the cook and Biju against the backdrop of the golden Kanchenjunga re-establishes the bond between father and son. The concluding comments of Desai that "truth was apparent" or the "luminous light" (Desai 2006) that made the five peaks of Kanchenjunga turn golden suggest that the novel ends with a sense of hope in the form of the union. The childlike enthusiasm of the father-son duo when they see each other are suggested in expressions like the "two figures leaping at each other as the gate swung open" (Desai 2006). The union signals the assertion of filial love and relationship that rise "above the parting clouds" (Desai 2006) just like the golden peak of Kanchenjunga.

The Inheritance of Loss constantly records the characters' responses to experiences when cultures are brought into conflict. Desai advocates that globalization is not always multiculturalism, progress and modernity as put forward by many critics. Instead, it embodies the same domination upon which imperialism and colonialism were grounded. The historical systems of domination have simply changed their forms. Although globalization has been garbed in the guise of bettering the world, the novel poses a question through characters like Biju whether globalization engendered economic inequality between the two worlds is ultimately good. Tony Simoes da Silva rightly comments that "Desai exposes the materiality that underpins the presence of refugees in the modern world" (Da Silva 2008). For despite their numbers, Biju and other illegal immigrants like him with whom he competes for poorly paid jobs and flea-ridden beds shared round the clock, remain invisible to most New Yorkers whose lifestyle they support. Kiran Desai emphasizes the transcendence of humanity beyond the national cultural codes, which can ensure a more stable and progressive community moving fast in search of a global society.

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