

Identity Crisis in Desai's the Inheritance of Loss¹

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Abstract

The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai is a novel set in 1980s which deals with the theme of identity crisis especially of the Judge, the Cook, Sai, Biju and Gyan who struggle with their identity within their own nation and foreign land and fail to maintain a strong position even within their own community due to the effect of modernization and globalization. These lower ranked people are victimized from elite class in search of identity. Desai depicts how minority group's identity is excluded, back grounded and suppressed by the so-called majority group in literature through the discourse. She has also shown how world's globalized context has exploited and dominated the working-class people's identity and freedom. This study focuses on exploring the complex web of relationships between identity and discourse as well as investigating the significant roles of literature in the construction of identity. The question that it arises is how identity is shaped by discourse in literature. In order to answer this question a wholesale analysis of the text is carried out in light of Tope Omoniyi's Discourse and identity, James Paul Gee's Critical Discourse Analysis and Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity and Diaspora.

Key words: Colonialism, Diaspora, Exclusion, Identity crisis, Immigration, Minority group

Introduction

According to Advanced Learners Dictionary (2000), identity is defined as “the characteristics, feelings or beliefs that distinguish people from others” (p. 643). This study deals with the theme of identity in crisis, especially of the characters named the Judge, the Cook, Sai, Biju and Gyan who struggle with their identity and fail to maintain a strong position even within their own country due to modernization and globalization in

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Desai's (2006) novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. The book portrays the Judge Jemubhai Patel, who is living a retired life in Kalimpong, a hill station in the Himalayan foot hills. He lives with his anglicized granddaughter Sai. The novel also depicts Sai's love with an Indian-Nepalese student named Gyan. The novel is set against the backdrop of the insurgency in the Himalayas by the Gorkha people fighting for their identity.

The judge, Sai's grandfather kept her with him after her parents' death in a car accident in order to pay off the spiritual debts that he incurred from abandoning his wife, and later killing her, as well as shaming his father. Sai falls in love with her tutor called Gyan, and throughout the story they struggle to admit the natural love they have created. Their love is doomed from the beginning because he is an ethnic Nepali, and she is an upper-class, Western-educated Indian girl. The cook watches over them to make sure that Gyan does not take advantage of Sai's good heart and at the same time worries about his own son named Biju in the US. Biju, an illegal immigrant in the US is trying to make a new life for the opportunities of money there. Many leading Indians were considered to be becoming too English and having forgotten the traditional ways of Indian life, shown through the character of the grandfather, the retired Judge.

It is interesting area to explore how the identity of the minority group is patterned in *The Inheritance of Loss*. Jemubhai, the judge, Sai, the Judge's anglicized granddaughter, the cook, the Judge's servant, Biju, the cook's son and Gyan, the Indo-Nepali boy suffer of their identity in their own place. Language is a tool to show our identity. Omoniyi (2011) opines that "Language use is a parameter in determining identity of individuals or groups" (p. 260). People of a nation have multiple identities within their own nation, society and culture. But these people are lacking their identity in their own nation or foreign land in case of Biju. Omoniyi (2011) puts forward that "Human beings as social actors have multiple identities and these are articulated based on . . . social contexts" (p. 260). This study is carried out in terms of identity crisis of the major characters named Jemubhai, the Cook, Sai, Biju and Gyan including limited discourses from the novel and in light of Omoniyi and Hall's theorization on identity.

Kattel (2008) has prepared his dissertation on the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. In his study, Kattel discusses on how the characters Jemubhai, Sai, Biju and Gyan struggle with their identity. He makes a textual analysis of this novel applying Stuart Halls' theory of Cultural Identity and Diaspora in order to elucidate the problem of identity. He also focuses basically the identity of Gyan in the novel.

Neupane (2012) has conducted her dissertation work on this novel. She comparatively discusses the problems faced by the subalterns caused by modernity and globalization. She raises the issues of subaltern voices and sufferings. Her finding shows that because of the lack of agency subaltern issues and voices are being dominated. From village to urban area a chain of exploitation is created because of the capitalistic social structure in which the subalterns are entrapped. Globalization has victimized the marginalized people and due to the lack of agency the subalterns are unable to be freed from the chain of suppression and discrimination.

Sigdel (2012) in his dissertation on Lahiri's *The NameSake*, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, and Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, makes a comparative study of the main characters of these three novels in terms of the crisis of identities. His study is based on identity studies in terms of social, cultural, national and diasporic location. His findings show that geographical location and culture play a great role in determining one's identity.

My stance in this paper is that I will see this novel from identity crisis point of view. How the identity of majority and minority group is patterned in this novel? The aim of this paper is to show how different forms of identities are represented by the discourses in literature. I attempt to analyze the language use which determines the identity of the minority group in terms of gender, language, religion, profession, and culture which is not dealt in previous study on this novel. So, this might be a new perspective to analyze this novel through identity crisis following the Critical Discourse Analysis tool in light of Tope Omoniyi, and Stuart Hall's identity perspective.

Analysis

Kiran Desai as one of the most insightful novelists shows the pain of exile and the ambiguities of post colonialism in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. This novel is set partly in India and partly in the USA. She elucidates it as a book that attempts to hold what it means to live between east and west and what it means to be an immigrant, and what happens when a western element is introduced into a country that is not of the west. That happened during the British colonial days in India and is happening again with India's new relationship with the states in the new era of globalization. Her aim was to write about what happens when we take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one. How does the imbalance between these two worlds change a person's

thinking and feeling and how do these changes play roles in maintaining identities in a personal and political sphere over time?

Identity has become the central area of concern in cultural studies during the 1990s. Identity is the process how we describe ourselves to each other. Culture creates enormous pressure for conformity today as it is often referred to the individual or group identity. Identity is the meaning or self-concept that one gives to oneself or the meaning in general that human beings give to them. In other words, it is the sum totality of values attached to individuals by an age and a community in terms of their group, profession, religion or culture. Relating to this issue, Stuart Hall in his essay *Cultural identity and Diaspora* claims that “Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think” (1997, p. 234). Individuals make their own identity but not under conditions of their own choosing.

In the novel the author attempts to show the minority and majority identity. The Judge and his anglicized granddaughter Sai seem to have majority identity. The Judge’s language to the Cook and Sai’s language to Gyan represent them as the power holder and superior personality. The Judge was strongly influenced by British culture which is shown in his expression. He seems to have loved more to his dog than his servant Cook. When his dog named Mutt was stolen, he shouted the cook saying:

If you don’t find her RIGHT NOW, I WILL KILL YOU. That’s it. I’ve had enough. It is your fault. It was your responsibility to watch her when I went for my bath... FIND HER. It’s your fault. Mutt was in your care. I WILL KILL YOU. Wait and see. You did not do your duty and you let her be stolen. How dare you? How dare you? (Desai 2006, pp. 312-313)

The words in the capital letters indicate the emphasis given to the dog than a man. He threatens of killing the Cook if the dog was not found. The Judge’s language shows that he belongs to the majority group and the Cook as the minority inferior group. Minority group’s identity is threatened, or challenged. Omoniyi (2011) in his essay *Identity and Discourse* claims that “Minority identity is used to mean any number of persons or groups forming a social unit that is numerically challenged relative to other groups within a polity; or one that has limited access to economic and political power (p. 261). While in response to this the cook pleads with the judge “Please living only to see my son please don’t kill me please I as a poor man spare me” (Desai, 2006).

Here, the cook's language is very polite and formal to the judge. He is pleading for the protection of his life. He uses the word 'please' to the Judge to show that he is superior to the Cook. Minority group's identity is subdued by the power holders. The Judge seems to have been so called superior than the cook. So, the cook uses the words 'Sahib', 'Sir', my dear sir etc. in his language in *The Inheritance of Loss*, for example:

"Too soft hearted, sahib. You should show your kind side to your guest, also" (Desai, 2006, p. 6).

[The cook said to his Judge] "My dear sir. I am fond of animals myself but in these times . . . it is a luxury we can't afford . . ." (Desai, p. 291).

"What is your status now, sir? I can't help you unless I know your status" (Desai, p. 81).

"How can I, Sahib? I am trying, I have tried . . ." (Desai, p. 313).

From the above pattern of the language use, it is not difficult to infer that the status of the servant is always low in front of the master. He addresses the Judge using the words like Sahib, Sir, my dear sir etc., the Cook's identity is lost in such situation. He seems working there because his son Biju is in USA. He wants to work there until his son comes back or takes him to America. He said "One day," he laughed "One day soon my son will take me" (Desai, 2006, p. 84). The cook's identity here seems to be the secret hopes of discovering beyond the misery of today and beyond the self-contempt. Regarding this Stuart Hall (1997) in his essay *Cultural identity and Diaspora* has argued:

Identity is often the object of what Frantz Fanon once called: passive research... directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others. (p. 235)

In the novel the Judge is presented as positive self and negative other. The cook as a poor is presented as other where the Judge commands him using fewer honorific words. When the cook is requesting for something else the Judge is angry and says to his cook "Go sit in the kitchen. Bar barkartarehtahai" (Desai, 2006, p. 11). Here, "Go sit in the kitchen" structurally is the imperative sentence and functionally it functions as a command. Commanding is given to the person who is junior or less powerful in addressor addressee relationship. Identity of the participants can be understood in terms

of their dialogic relationship. For this Hall (1997) claims “Identities always have to be thought of in terms of the dialogic relationship...” (p. 237).

In another context, when the dog was not found, the cook drank wine and went in front of the Judge. The cook asked for punishment for not caring his dog. He says “I am a bad man beat me sahib” (Desai, 2006, p. 319). “I am a bad man, forgive me, forgive me...” (Desai, 2006, p. 320). The Judge was angry of not finding the dog Mutt and disturbing him. So, he yelled “*WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?*”(Desai, 2006, p. 319). In response to him the cook apologizes and says:

I have been bad. I have been drinking. I ate the same rice as you not the servant’s rice but the Deharadun rice. I ate the meat and lied. I ate out of the same pot. I stole liquor from the army. I made Chhang. I did the account differently for years I have cheated you in the account s each and every day. My money was dirt it was false sometimes. I kicked Mutt, I did not take her for walks just sat by the side. I the road smoked a bidi and came home I am a bad man.I watched out for nobody and nothing but myself- beat me. (Desai, 2006, p. 320)

The above given dialogue clarifies that there is the hierarchy of identities between the Judge and the Cook. The Judge as a master threatens the cook whereas the Cook uses the words like ‘Sahib’; ‘forgive me’ etc. in his language. Omoniyi (2011) in his essay Identity and Discourse claims that “The hierarchy of identities is a situated social construct that demonstrates the dynamic rather than static property of identification” (p. 260).

On the other hand, if we see the relationship between Sai and Gyan we find Sai being dominant over Gyan. Sai as an anglicized western influenced girl depicts her superiority over Gyan, who is the immigrant Indian fighting for Gorkhali identity. Sai in one conversation says to Gyan that “You bastard, my dignity is worth a thousand of you” (Desai, 2006, p. 175). In this utterance, it can be derived that Sai presents her identity as a majority group, highly cultured, and positive to herself and depicts Gyan’s identity as minority, less cultured and negative one. James Paul Gee in his essay “Discourse Analysis: what Makes it Critical?” argues that “we use language to get recognized as taking on a certain identity or role: that is to build an identity here and now” (2011, p. 31). In another context Sai also says to Gyan that:

Budhoo? But he is Nepali. Who can trust him now? It is always the watchman in a case of robbery. They pass on the information and share the spoils...remember

Mrs. Thondup? She used to have that Nepali fellow, returned from Calcutta one year to find the house wiped clean...".(Desai, 2006, p. 43)

As a minority group his identity is hidden here. She blames a Nepali watchman being responsible for robbery and can't trust on him. Similarly, for other context we find Sai showing her Christianity identity over Gyan's Hindu identity. About the celebration of Christmas and Diwali Sai says to Gyan that "if I want to celebrate Christmas, I will, and if I don't want to celebrate Diwali then I won't. Nothing wrong in a bit of fun and Christmas is an Indian holiday as much as any other" (Desai, 2006, p. 163). Here, she is creating her identity which is influenced by her race, ethnicity, nation, and religion. They also contribute in creating group identity. About group identity Omoniyi asserts "Group identity is organized around sociological variables such as race ethnicity, nation, religion, sex and age" (2011, p. 261). Sai in her every conversation is trying to foreground her identity and background Gyan's identity. So, due to superiority, power and culture identity is foregrounded or backgrounded.

Similarly, in Biju's case, he is the typical Indian immigrant son of the cook who gets a visa to the U.S. and stays illegally there working for slave wages in the kitchen basements of New York City. There, he is used and abused by his boss who also happens to be an Indian. Being upset with his life style in U.S., he decides to leave that place with his earnings and return back to his home and his father because he found his identity lost in USA due to different culture. Hall claims that "Cultural identity is understood as a collective, shared history among individuals affiliated by race or ethnicity that is considered to be fixed or stable" (1997, p. 234).

At every stage where ever they are the Cook, Sai, Biju and Gyan are forced to negotiate with a stratified society and struggle with their cultural identity and the forces of modernization, westernization and globalization. All of them aspire to create an identity that comes with destructive consequences, leading all of them to frustration. For a poor person it is very difficult to create an identity. They search for their identity by looking up at their masters. Lack of faith in India forces Biju to America. Had he remained in India, he would have struggled, just like his father. Both father and son believe that to create an identity of their own, an American green card is necessary. After receiving his visa, a bystander has told Biju, "You are the luckiest boy in the whole world" (Desai, 2006, p. 187). For other Indians his identity is like a lucky boy who got a chance to work in America. America is presented as the dream nation for the people of

the East. Biju's father also appreciates America as the country for all. This way it can be concluded that language, culture, religion and profession shape different kinds of identities of the people.

Conclusion

Finally, this research work shows that the major characters like the Judge, the Cook, Biju, Sai, and Gyan are suffering from their identity crisis due to western influence in their nation in Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. It has been found that for a person his /her identity is of great importance and geographical location, profession, religion and culture play a great role in determining one's identity. Our identities are never discovered. They are always constituted, constructed, invented and imposed by others as the Cook and Gyan's identities are imposed by the Judge and Sai respectively in the novel. The Judge and Sai's identities are in crisis due to diasporic condition. And identities are Diaspora identities. For Diaspora identities Stuart Hall says "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves a new, through transformation and difference (1997, p. 244). Every character in this novel is found struggling for his or her identity. In fact, identities have a lot to do with people's images and imagination and in summary according to Stuart Hall "Identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea" (1997, p. 244). So, Biju and Gyan have failed to maintain their strong identity even within their own community due to their lower rank and are victimized by the elites.

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