

Political Discourse in Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss': A Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract: Postcolonial studies offer compelling perspectives to its creative processes, approaches and literary reception in the literature of countries and provinces, once under colonial rule. Many past approaches for the analysis of literature were less pronounced or completely bereft of a political voice. Kiran Desai in "The Inheritance of Loss" explores the small town of Kalimpong, in the period of turmoil due to the GNLf movement and then explores how a quiet and laid back town suddenly becomes a hotspot of violence, propelled by dissatisfaction that was slowly gathering momentum over the past few decades. The novel reconnoiters with understanding and discernment almost every current global issues like globalization, multiculturalism, financial disparity, racism, fundamentalism and violence. Although a conglomeration of various overlapping issues and themes the striking one is the Gorkhaland movement; Nevertheless, it appears that the novelist has not taken either an ethical or moral stand on the issue of the Gorkhaland. It has been used as a mere back drop for her narrative. It seems that she did not want to take a political stand or rather her identity and socio-political beliefs are camouflaged.

1 INTRODUCTION

Post-Colonial studies offer compelling perspectives to its creative processes, approaches and literary reception in the literature of countries and provinces, once under colonial rule. Many past approaches for the analysis of literature were less pronounced or completely bereft of a political voice. However, Post Colonialism for the first time took a stand that was nothing if not political. Once the artist could be analyzed about political subject or context, it opened vistas into creativity where political posturing could be a pronounced overtone and not just a mere backdrop.

Contemporary writers positing Post-Colonial literature now feel this urge to be more open politically than ever before. It is not that literature in the past has not taken a political stand, there were many such attempts in one part of the world or another but never before this had become a trend. Indian literature in English has changed dramatically in the past few years. It has started to discuss about issues that until lately were better left unexplored by most of the mainstream authors. Earlier political

undertones were heard in passing, in books like 'A Bend in the Ganges', "Sunlight on a Broken Column", "Waiting for the Mahatma" etc., but there was never a conscious attempt at political posturing. Salman Rushdie has made a significant comment in this regard, according to him; "Nationalism corrupts writers to. Nationalism is that revolt against history which seeks to close to fence in what should be frontier less." (Rushdie S ,2003, p.67)

It is noteworthy that in the period before and after our independence when the ecstasy of independence was still haunting on and India as a country was constructing its image in Indian literature. However, English continued to be comparatively dissociated from the political situation of the country. Nevertheless, with the initial few blows to these Euphoria and with the actualities of national building eventually beginning in the late 70s and early 80s, we start discovering political expression gathering strength. Salman Rushdie's "Midnight Children" with its firm political voice can be figured out as substantive indicator of the fact. This was also a period when post-colonial attitude was also gaining

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momentum, although it was still to become a strong voice in critical literature. (Kapoor, 2011)

A look at the Indian literature in English in 80's and 90's to the present day there is seen an ever increasing desire in the writers to talk about forces that hinder, hamper and try to damage what is India the Nation. "The Shadow Lines", "The Circle of Reason", "Calcutta Chromosomes" (Amitav Ghosh), "The Great Indian Novel", "Riot" (Shashi Tharoor) "God of Small Things" (Anurudhati Roy), "Rich like us" (Nayantra Seghal) are some illustrious works with heavy political back drop. Kiran Desai in "The Inheritance of Loss" reconnoiters the small town of Kalimpong, in the period of turmoil due to the GNLF movement and then explores how a quiet and laid back town suddenly becomes a hotspot of violence, propelled by dissatisfaction that was slowly gathering momentum over the past few decades. It is also a microcosm of larger picture of various other separatist movements that have erupted in the past few years across the country. The novel opens with a young girl, Sai, the daughter of a mixed culture heritage, Sai is now an orphan. She comes to stay with her England returned grandfather, a retired judge in Kalimpong, on the eastern Indian side of the Himalayas. They live in a grand house named 'Cho Oye.' Sai falls in love with, Gyan, who belongs Nepali Gurkha mercenary however, he finally detaches himself from Sai's elitist halo and gets drawn to a bunch of ethnic rebels.

Meanwhile in the world outside 'Cho Oye', a growing insurgency is threatening to explode across the hill. The novel begins with a news reading of February 1986 which sets the tone of the Novel and hints at the brewing trouble related to the struggle for Gorkhaland. The novel reconnoiters with understanding and discernment almost every current global issues like globalization, multiculturalism, financial disparity, racism, fundamentalism and violence. Although a conglomeration of various overlapping issues and hemes, the striking one is the Gorkhaland movement; may be because Kiran Desai is one of the few novelists, or probably the only one who has subjectively explored and experienced this issue and creatively recreated a story of joy and despair.

2 ABOUT THE GORKHALAND MOVEMENT

This called in for an exploration in New Historicism and deserves to be treated as a prominent feature of this novel. The origin of this movement dates back to the times when the protest was just a whimper for mere acceptance and recognition and later went to become a full-fledged insurgency with a claim for Gorkhaland. Kiran Desai has majestically woven into the texture of her novel as an integral part, the aspirations and desperate moves of a polarized community in alternating comic and contemplative tones.

The demand of GNLF movement was started by the Gorkhas residing in Darjeeling and Duars of West Bengal and also by Gorkhas in India and abroad, although they regard India as their nation, they were asking for a distinct state for themselves inside the constitutional structure of India. The Historico-Political and geographical situation of Kalimpong and Gorkhaland has had a long history of turbulence. Gorkhaland is the name given to the area around Darjeeling. Inhabitants of the part majorly Gorkhas have since long wanted a distinct state for them to conserve their Nepalese individuality and to develop their social and economic conditions.

It was in the year 1907, the leaders of these people for the first time kept the demand for a distinct administrative structure for Darjeeling before the British Government. The GNLF which led the drive in the 1980's was the first organization actually to use the term "Gorkhaland" of their long cherished dream. The GNLF which led the movement, disrupted the peace and order in the district with massive insurgent operations between 1986-89. The GNLF in 1986 was unsuccessful to get a distinct administrative status from parliament, once again claimed for a different state of Gorkhaland. Subash Ghising who was their head lead a protest that eventually went violent and was firmly suppressed by the State government. The disturbance nearly shutdown the district mainstay of flourishing tea business, tourism industry and timber work.

There is also another aspect contributing to the agitation of the Gorkha community which has Postcolonial residue as its under currents. The problems of insurgency in Kalimpong too has its roots in the colonial past of India. The travails of the inhabitants of Kalimpong represent those of the whole North Eastern region which has been suffering for the ill-governance and the exploitative myopic administration of the imperialist rulers. The geo-political imperatives had

been neglected by them during its inclusion into the Raj territory and also during the partition of India.

As T.P. Khaund points out in his scholarly article in the monthly Yojana: "History and Geography had combined to make the North East a distant frontier land and a paradox of being poor (in material sense) in the midst of plenty. The region experienced the biggest trauma at the time of partition of the country in 1947. North East was practically cut off from the mainland and its geographical isolation was further aggravated, being connected with the rest of the country by a small corridor called the 'chicken neck' at Siliguri, suddenly, it found that 98 per cent of its border is with foreign countries and only 2 percent with the mother country. That one single political development had put back the economy of much of the region by a quarter century as it lost its markets, transit routes and arteries of communication. This man-made demarcation of natural boundary not only snapped social and family links but, more importantly, the traditional trade links as well, throwing the economy of the bordering States like Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura into haywire" (Khaund,2006, p13)

3 POLITICAL BACKDROP IN THE NARRATIVE

The novel opens when a bunch of young lads under twenty who had barged into the judge's bungalow, they had come walking from the jungle. Dressed in a universal guerrilla fashion leather jacket, Khaki pant bandana and a gun, they were looking for anything they could find for an impoverished movement with a raging army, kukri, sickles, axes, kitchen, knives. They came to judge's house searching for guns, but took everything they could lay hand on drinks, cigarettes, ordered tea and snacks and before leaving defecated in the toilets, left it stinking and forcefully made the judge and others to say "Jai Gorkha", 'Gorkha land' for Gorkhas.

Initially nobody had heeded much to the happenings of the hill side. For a while nobody knew which way it would go, but one fine day around fifty young boys from youth wing of GNLFF assembled to pledge at Mahakaldara to crusade throughout their lives for the creation of a home land-Gorkhaland. The group shouted "Gorkhaland for Gorkhas", waved their unsheathed kuris, and soon almost everyone started to talk about the word "insurgency".

In English literature what Robert Frost did for Mississippi and Thomas Hardy did for Wessex and

Narayan created the fictional town of Malgudi, may be Desai did it to Kalimpong.

'The Inheritance of Loss' is termed as a postmodern "historiographic meta fiction". The narrator has at once touched Kalimpong, its varied ethnic clusters and the on-going Gorkhaland movement of 1980's. Her sense of place is not limited to the landscape only. She talks much about its people, culture and the on-going GNLFF movement. Eighteen out of the fifty-three chapters from the book are solely devoted to portray and discuss the natural beauty, landscape and insurgency in this ill-fated area of North-Easts. The question arises why did Kiran Desai choose Kalimpong as a setting? The answer lies in the fact that Kiran Desai had an abiding connection with Kalimpong since her childhood. She disclosed that in an interview published in 'The Guardian'. Desai spent quite a time in India for the research and scripting of "The Inheritance of Loss", nevertheless, the local people of north-eastern part had different opinions related to Kiran's sense of 'Place' or local color of the novel. Many praise the literary merits of the book where as others have criticized her deriding treatment of towards Nepali speaking people, insurgency and Kalimpong.

According to the Scholar Neeru Tandon, (Tondon,2011) the author has insensitively dealt with issues and the projection of the people there in her book which has enraged the locals. She observes that the author is more concerned about her characters struggling with the violent upheavals rather than the insurgency and the problems of the locals. Similar concerns and observations are given by Satish Shroff in his review of the book. People from the region are angry with the author for setting her novel in this landscape. People were seen burning the book for warmth on cold mountain nights. So strong was the rage that Desai's aunt Dr. Indira Bhattacharya, who has been in Kalimpong for twenty years informed the 'Outlook Magazine' that she has not disclosed about her relation with Kiran Desai.

Many feel that the place is not that horrible during monsoons as projected by the author in the novel. The dreadfulness of reptiles, lizards, moths and rats are only imaginations, slightly run wild. Vimal Khwas remarks that, the book speaks about the agitation however it does not comprehend the aspects of the movement's undercurrents. It correlates its roots to the unification of Sikkim into Indian Union and also the political arm twisting through the insurgencies in north east India. However, this started long before the independence. (Khwas, Review)

When Anubha Sawhney asked questions from Desai in this regard during the Jaipur Festival, she

said "I felt very sad about the flack I got from Kalimpong because I thought I did present a sympathetic view of the situation. But frankly it's not a writer's role to portray people in a heroic light. (Sawhaney,2007)

Desai also declared in one of her interviews. "The political information is accurate to my knowledge and based on my memories and the stories of everyone I know there" (Washington post.com,2006)

As Neeru Tondon puts it, we must not forget at the same time it is a piece of fiction and nothing more than that. Kiran Desai is a novelist and not a historian. Vimal khwas has also supported the views.

4 CONCLUSION

In her narrative, the Gorkha land struggle is reduced to a narrow ethnic identity struggle. Narrow in its world view in the age of the globalized village. Though such struggles create headache to the elite like Sai, her grandfather, Jemubhai Patel, or Noni or Lola who are hitherto comfortably placed in Kalimpong, one of the major centre for GNLF.

From the perspective of all the central characters, insurgency is a great disturbance and all the main characters wish that it should end soon.

In most of the reviews the Gorkhaland statehood movement is described as "Nepalese Insurgency in the mountain" which "threatens Sai's new sprung romance". It is also described as the insurgency which has brought in chaos and emotional turmoil in the lives of the peace loving Anglophile neighbors.

On the contrary gushing praise from the west has poured in describing it as novel of wisdom and insight. Kiran Desai's work was hailed by the judges as "magnificent novel of human breathe and wisdom, comic tenderness and powerful political acuteness."

It appears that Kiran Desai has not taken either an ethical or moral stand on the issue of the Gorkhaland. It has been used as a mere back drop for her narrative. Although she attempted to speak for the Gorkhas, she finished telling more about how the insurgency and how it disrupted the lives of the elite cluster of her characters.

Nevertheless, she does manage to bring forth the details, even of the common persons who are brutally killed by the police at the time of insurgency, while the leaders who instigated the movement remain safe. The description of massacre of the innocent following a big rally organized on 27th July 1986, says it all. Kiran Desai did not want to take a political stand or rather her identity and socio-political beliefs are

camouflaged, her sympathies particularly for the Indo-Nepalese community are undefined and, to them, her stand has been annoyingly distanced and she has wrapped herself in the comfort mantle of humanistic purview of issues.

The fact that among her major characters in 'The Inheritance of Loss', Gyan is the only Nepalese character, and this defines the inability of the narrator, that she could not bring out their pathos through character representation from that community.

Her comments in one of her interviews conveys it all "I think I did not want to emphasize the movement in particular. It could have been any movement. It is the only way I could think writing a book. The book does not take an ethical stand (about the movement) I wanted to see how people deal with it, how they survive, who goes under, who comes out alive, who pays the price for what is happening. Becoming an immigrant and moving around forces a certain kind of personality on you, it forces a certain distance from any subject and you are placed a bit as an outsider". (The Gaurdian,2006).

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