

The Reception of Re-Orientalism in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to study Re-Orientalism in Kiran Desai's Booker Prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* and the reception of such a Re-Orientalist representation. According to Lisa Lau, Re-Orientalism is not propagated by Occidentals, but quite ironically by Orientals, especially, diasporic Oriental writers. Re-Orientalism distorts the representation of the Orient, consigning it again to a position of Otherness. Desai's portrayal of a poor India using stereotyped images, shallow characters and inauthentic language amounts to Re-Orientalism which can be attributed to her diasporic identity.

Key words: Orientalism, stereotypes, diasporic writer, reception

In a seminal study titled "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals" (2009), Lisa Lau discussed the perpetration of Orientalism in contemporary South-Asian literature in English. She noted that this Orientalism, termed "Re-Orientalism" in the paper, is not propagated by Occidentals, but quite ironically by Orientals, especially, diasporic Oriental writers. Re-Orientalism dominates and to a great extent, distorts the representation of the Orient, consigning it again to a position of Otherness. Lau followed her study with an edited book with Ana Mendes titled *Re-Orientalism and South-Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other Within* (2011). According to Lau, "Where Said's Orientalism is grounded in how the West constructs the 'Orient'

and the 'Occident', re-Orientalism is based on how cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an Orientalised East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether" (p. 3)

This paper is an attempt to study Re-Orientalism in Karan Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and the reception of such a Re-Orientalist representation. Kiran Desai, the daughter of well-known Indian novelist Anita Desai, won the Booker Prize in 2006 for *The Inheritance of Loss* making her the youngest woman to win the Man Booker Prize. Desai was born in India in 1971 and lived in Delhi until the age of fourteen. She and her mother then immigrated to UK and later to America. Desai published her first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* in 1998. She took seven years to write her next novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Kiran Desai was seen as one of the promising young Indian novelists in English by *The New Yorker* as early as 1997 even when the only published work to her credit was a short piece of fiction titled "The Sermon in the Guava Tree" that appeared in the same issue of *The New Yorker*. Desai was only working on her debut novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* at that point and yet she had made it to *The New Yorker's* coveted list. Tobias Wachinger (2003) has noted that "[i]t is not an overstatement... to say that it was the *New Yorker* that turned Anita Desai's daughter into a member of the 'imagined community' of India's literary elite" (p.72). Salman Rushdie conferred further recognition to the writer when he acknowledged her in "Damme, This is the Oriental Scene For You" (1997) as "welcome proof that India's encounter with the English language, far from proving abortive, continues to give birth to new children, endowed with lavish gifts" (p. xxii). According to Rushdie, "India's writers have torn up the old map and are busily redrawing their own" (61). He saw Desai's debut as "equally impressive" in relation to Roy's *The God of Small Things*,

reading Desai's work as "a Calvinoesque fable of a misfit boy who climbs a tree and becomes a sort of pretty guru," and as "lush and intensely imagined" (p. 61). Rushdie went on to add: "Kiran Desai is the daughter of Anita; her arrival establishes the first dynasty of modern Indian fiction. But she is very much her own writer, the newest of all these voices" (61). When Desai's novel was published the following year, Rushdie's words of praise found its way to the blurb of the book. Critics like Ashwinee Pendharkar (2011) argue that although being Anita Desai's daughter doubtless helped, Kiran Desai's career took off under Rushdie's patronage. (p. 48)

Her debut novel won much critical attention, winning the Betty Trask Award of the British Society of Authors. Desai, however, was not pleased with the reception of the work. In an interview to the Columbia Magazine, she confessed

Some people called it 'magic realism,' but I saw it more as an Indian folktale or fable. Around that time, magic realism and fables became a very dirty way to work and to write about the third world. These were termed 'exotic' works about India for the Western market, and it was Indian authors providing them. They were sort of naive, magical versions of a country that made [that country] easy to destroy or not take seriously. After that, there was a desire for realism. I thought quite hard about it. (n. pag.)

Thus was born her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. Desai's novel tells the story of Sai, an orphan; Jemubhai Patel, her Cambridge-educated Anglophile grandfather, and Biju, the son of Jemubhai Patel's cook. Sai lives with her grandfather in Kalimpong, an Indian town at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas. Sai is in a relationship with her Nepali math tutor, Gyan who gets involved with a group of Nepalese insurgents demanding an independent Gorkhaland. Biju is one of the many illegal immigrants in New York moving from one ill-paid job to another. Tired of living a worthless rat-like life in

another country and culture, he returns to India. The novel thus juxtaposes many stories.

Despite the success of her first book, Desai struggled for a year to find publishers for this work. Desai recalls: "A lot of people said it was the most perverse, horrible book they'd ever read" (as cited in Allington, p. 128). A famous female editor from the New Yorker magazine apparently described the novel "the worst book [she] ha[d] ever read in [her] life" (as cited in Allington, p. 128). However, once the book was published the book received positive reviews in Britain and America. Desai's book was praised for its attempt to mirror the truth of contemporary times. Will Self in *The Evening Standard* observed that that the Booker has tended to celebrate books that represent "the creative collision of English-language fiction with an explosive, post-colonial world" (as cited in Mendes, p. 44). According to him, "Desai's victory seemed like a mainstream choice," and that the novel, "for all its individual sparkle and originality, is nothing if not a post-Rushdie novel" (as cited in Mendes, p. 44).

Pendharkar notes that comparisons with Rushdie have helped the author to be simultaneously marketed as the exotic other and as the recognisable exotic. The novel has been praised for continuing in the fine tradition of Booker winners set in India. Pendharkar notes that the novel shares many common elements with Rushdie and Roy's novels:

an Indian child protagonist's eye-view, autobiographical elements from the author's life, the English – Oxbridge educated, anglophile Indian elite characters grounded in the English literary canon, the relics of Raj in the form of sahibs gone native or natives gone sahib, and parents who pass on to their children a legacy of loss of self-esteem and identity. These texts portray a present that is haunted, colonised and taken over by its past and share a storyline with the backdrop of politics and history of nation to the 'micro-narratives' of individual lives and destinies in addition to an ahistorical, personal take on a particular, violent moment of

crisis in the nation's history. But more significantly, they all present a certain image of India: chaotic, fragmented, disintegrating and reeling from the effects of colonisation. (p. 75)

Though Desai won accolades for her work from the West, the most significant of it in the form of the Booker, she met with mixed reception in India. Given Desai's diasporic background, questions about the authenticity of her works were bound to rise. Namita Gokhale's view on the emergence of Kiran Desai as a writer is a pointer to this fact:

The daughter of a famous Indo-Anglian novelist, she makes a cushioned landing into the world of people-like-us literati, with a fat advance from Faber and fleeting visits to the fatherland. ... Kiran Desai typifies a tendency of contemporary Indo-Anglian writing, of the author as a glib tourist guide of an alien sensibility rather than an introspective insider chronicling the life and times he or she lives in. (as cited in Mendes, p. 41)

Desai's representation of the Nepali community and the Gorkhaland movement in *The Inheritance of Novel* came under severe criticism. Namrata Chaturvedi (2006) criticised Desai's portrayal of the movement as a superficial one, serving only the purpose of making the hills a site of violence and torture and thereby justifying Orientalist notions of cultural superiority. (n. pag.). Satish Shroff in "Kathmandu Blues: The Inheritance of Loss and Intercultural Competence" (2007) criticised Desai severely and remarked: "Her knowledge of Kalimpong and Darjeeling sounds theoretical and her characters don't speak Nepali. She lets them speak Hindi, because she herself didn't bother to learn Nepali during her stay in Kalimpong" (n. pag.).

Desai's story revolves around Cho Oyu, a house that had been built by a retiring army officer of the British empire in English fashion. The present inhabitants of the house are Jemubai Patel and Sai. Jemubhai Patel had been a judge in the Indian Civil Service during the colonial period. He had faced humiliation and alienation in England as a student. But when he got back to India, he fervently tried to be like the English in

appearance and manners. He develops a sense of affinity towards his granddaughter Sai only because her convent education had Anglicized her enough to gain acceptance in the judge's mind. The convent teaches Sai that "cake was better than laddoos, fork spoon knife better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ and consuming a wafer of his body was more civilised than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds. English was better than Hindi" (p. 33). The few people with whom the family has any social ties are either Westerners or Anglophiles with Western connections. Their neighbour Uncle Potty is from England, and his friend Father Booty from Switzerland. Sai's only friends, the sisters Noni and Lola are proud of Lola's daughter, Pixie, a BBC reporter in England. Lola visited England now and then and came back with suitcases stuffed with Knorr soup packets, After Eights, Boots cucumber lotion and Marks and Spencer underwear. It is significant to note that Desai's portrayal of Anglicized Indians in the novel be it the Judge or Sai, Lola or Noni, is in no way positive. Desai's narrator describes these characters, who are caught between two worlds, in a mocking tone.

The Anglicized characters in the novel serve two contrasting functions in the novel: On the one hand, they create a background of familiarity for the western readers by acting as a linking thread between the exotic and incomprehensible East and the familiar West, on the other hand these characters also act as a foil to the impoverished Indians thereby constituting them as the global "other". Saibaba (2011) observes that such a "backdrop creates an Anglicised world of words while at the same time pretending to be critical of it thus taking an ambivalent attitude masquerading the real ideological underpinnings of the narrative" (154).

These westernized characters, Desai's novel seems to suggest, are exceptions and not the norm in the country. Desai's India is the same old backward and corrupt nation that will not

change for the better. Pendharkar identifies three stereotyped images of India that stand out in the novel: the “Incredible India”, the “Eternal India” and the “Cracking India” (p. 57-59). Desai begins her novel by describing the landscape of the hilly town of Kalimpong using images that remind one of photos in a tourist brochure of the “Incredible India”:

All day, the colors had been those of dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains possessed of ocean shadows and depths. Briefly visible above the vapor, Kanchenjunga was a far peak whittled out of ice, gathering the last of light, a plume of snow blown high by the storms at its summit... Every now and then she looked up at Kanchenjunga, observed its wizard phosphorescence with a shiver...The forest was old and thick at the edge of the lawn; the bamboo thickets rose thirty feet into the gloom; the trees were moss-slung giants, bunioned and misshapen, tentacled with the roots of orchids. (p. 1-2)

The beauty of Kalimpong’s landscape is marred by images of economic and cultural underdevelopment. Kalimpong is part of an “Eternal India” that is stagnant, unchanging and backward. During Sai’s journey to Cho-oyu after the death of her parents, the nun and Sai travelling from Dehra Dun to Siliguri see an India that “looked as old as ever”, with its women too poor to wear blouses under their saris, rows of people defecating on railway tracks in plain view of the passing train (p. 34). When the wife of the drunkard wrongly accused and brutalised by the police for the gun theft in Cho-oyu comes to the judge for help, the Judge thinks “This was why he had retired. India was too messy for justice; it ended only in humiliation for the person in authority” (p. 289). Biju’s hesitation in working in restaurant kitchens where beef is cooked and his inability to change and adapt to the conditions of life in America also shows a picture of India where tradition is strictly adhered to and any change to it is met with resistance. India is depicted not just as a stagnant nation in terms of development, it is also presented as a nation cracking and disintegrating under the incompetent governance

of native Indians, beginning right from the time of Jawaharlal Nehru: "This state making, the biggest mistake that fool Nehru made. Under his rules any group of idiots can stand up demanding a new state and get it, too. How many new ones keep appearing? From fifteen we went to sixteen, sixteen to seventeen, seventeen to twenty-two" (p. 142).

Ronit Frenkel (2008) claims that *The Inheritance of Loss* was selected for the Booker because of a certain portrayal of India in it. According to Frenkel, the Booker is mediated by a politics of loss that can be termed "post-colonial pathos". Frenkel notes:

India is represented in terms of constant suffering where people are connected across barriers through "an inheritance of loss" rather than via positive engagement. Everybody, from the judge to his dog, it seems, may expect betrayal and hardship in a world where the weight of history crushes possibilities and resigns post-colonial India to perpetual victimhood. (p. 83)

Nivedita Majumdar (2014) also rightly observes that the development of characters in the novel lacks depth. Desai's novel, according to her, "offers very little in terms of an interiority in its characters' lives; while there is a depiction of indigent distress, the portrayals remain distant and disengaged. It provides instead a strongly stated but ultimately unexceptionable authorial focus on capitalist modernity" (p. 74). Majumdar sees this portrayal of 'Dark India' as a variation of the exotic.

It is interesting to note that Desai seems to possess the awareness that as a diasporic writer, the authenticity of her writing will stand questioned in India. This awareness finds reflection in her depiction of the reading habits of Lola and Noni. The sisters read books written by both Indian and English authors, but they prefer writers who write about the places they inhabited: "they didn't like English writers writing about India;... it didn't correspond to the truth. English writers writing of England was what was nice" (p. 217). With regard to V.S.

Naipaul, Loli believes that he has “colonial neurosis” and Noni wonders, “After all, why isn’t he writing of where he lives now? Why isn’t he taking up, say, race riots in Manchester?” (p. 52). Lola and Noni can be viewed as representatives of Desai’s Indian readers who are on a quest for authentic representations of cultures and who believe that diasporic writers cannot write authentically about India.

It can be argued that Desai anticipates such allegations from her readers and tries to avoid them by telling her story in fragments. Desai has pointed out how her novel is made up “of half-stories, or quarter-stories” (as cited in Allington, p. 135) and not complete ones because as a diasporic writer she is not in a position to provide complete ones. However, as a diasporic writer, Desai cannot let go off her anxiety to sound authentic. Lau points out that diasporic writers are under pressure to prove their authenticity and they do so by overemphasizing recognisably South Asian characteristics. (p. 582). Desai’s use of italicised Hindi words in the text is a case in point. Unfortunately, Desai fails to include Nepali or Gujarati words even though the novel’s central characters are from the said community. Desai’s attempt thus leads to distortion and not verisimilitude. Lau also points out that diasporic writers have a tendency to make use of generalisations and totalisations that serve to reinforce stereotypes. (p. 584). Desai’s depiction of the poverty of Nepali community is a case in point. As Chaturvedi points out, “There are students, teachers, professors, photographers, poets, critics, novelists, artists. For an outsider who reads the novel, it is not difficult to construe an image of the Nepalis of India as unsophisticated and hopelessly vulnerable” (n. pag.). Lau also identifies a third problem, that of making truth claims about their work. “This closeness of personal experience is made known to the reader, who is given enough information to easily notice the resemblance between the author’s biography and the fiction” (586). This is very evident in the case of Desai who claims that she spent her childhood in

Kalimpong and that she went back to the place and lived there for six weeks when she was writing the book.

Desai's Re-Orientalism, therefore, seems to originate in her anxiety to sound as authentic as possible. An interesting parallel can be found between Desai and the Indian students briefly mentioned in her work. The Indian students in America would come with their white girlfriends and order hot Indian food "invariably, showing off, informing their date they were unadulterated exotic product" (p. 164), but would start whimpering for yoghurt after biting into the hot vindaloo. Desai also seems to be doing just that, perhaps, unconsciously, as she tries to come off to her readers as an authentic writer from India, using a mix of English and Hindi to portray Indians in stereotyped images by situating them within conditions of poverty, hostility and failure. However, as a diasporic writer, she is out of touch with the reality of Indian experience and therefore cannot connect with it in a deep or positive way, just as the student characters in her novel who can only claim a shallow connection to Indian food by means of ancestry, but cannot relish true Indian food.

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