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Collapse of the American Dream : An Appraisal of Kiran Desai's Inheritance of Loss

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Abstract

Kiran Desai is a widely acclaimed Indian author. Her name effulgence as bright as that of her mother Anita Desai in the realm of Indian Writing in English. She is the winner of the coveted Man Booker Prize in 2006. She stormed into popularity with the publication of her *Inheritance of Loss* in 2006. This novel was taken into account by critics throughout Asia, Europe and The United States. The novel exposes contemporary political, social, economic, cultural and moral issues. It also portrays the inexorable reality about militancy. The novel is not a very happy one because we see a lot of unrest, topsy-turvyness, violence and so on. The backdrop of the novel is the movement for Gorkhaland in the North Eastern hill just like the Nagaland movement for independence. This paper is a humble endeavor to critically examine the novel in terms of the collapse of the American Dream. It also unearths the unbearable and excruciating pain and suffering of immigrants, their diasporic experience with fragmented and mutilated identity and then their ceaseless struggle for survival in the alien world.

Keywords: Indian, reality, militancy, unrest, topsy-turvyness, violence, collapse, American Dream, immigrants, diasporic, struggle, survival.

Dreams are very basal in human life. Everyone has a dream to accomplish something or to acquire something in his/her life. There are some people who dream of becoming renowned, some popular and some wealthy and some others are there who want to make others' lives beautiful by helping them. It is the dreams which makes life beautiful and which inject in man a desire to live in this hub bub world. It is the dream which relieves a man from the unendurable pain and suffering of the harsh real world. Dreams bestow courage and hope to human life to go through the varied drudgery of life. Dreams can bring happiness and pleasure in one's life as he/she forgets his /her difficult times and hopes for the best.

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But the notion of ‘The American Dream’ is entirely different from the above mentioned dream. The American Dream was a sort of universal dream. It was a definite goal for everyone means it is a dream which is sought by all. The term ‘American Dream’ dates back to 1931, at which point James Truslow Adams mentions about it in his well known book namely, The Epic of America. According to Truslow, "The American Dream, which dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement." (Adams, 404)

Everybody desires to go to America and settle down there. It was a dream of money, wealth, prosperity as well as the need to get rich fast. Hence, the American Dream was based purely upon materialistic things. What lies at the heart of the American Dream is the desire to attain power and pelf. The basic idea behind the "American Dream" is the belief that if people have an ambition and worked wholeheartedly for it they will accomplish their dreams. Therefore, when one thinks of the American Dream, thoughts of success usually come to mind. The American Dream is different for everyone, though it is most commonly connected with success, freedom, and happiness. So we can say that the American Dream is what everyone wants to land up with; a family, a house, a luxurious car and a well paying job. The problem is that not everyone fulfills these things.

The novel by the name of The Great Gatsby (1925) is a prominent example of the American Dream, by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The novel exemplifies the infatuation one man had toward his ‘American Dream’, his aspiration to accomplish it, the limitations America set on his dreams, and the disappointment and frustration of losing his dream. Likewise, Kiran Desai’s magnificent novel is also all about some characters, mainly Biju, who desires to accomplish this American Dream. Biju, the central character was such an individual who fought hard to earn his place in America. He dreamt of transforming himself from a hapless boy into a wealthy man of high esteem. He starts with a minimal job, but in the end he seems to be reduced to the state of nothingness.

The immigrant issue was placed in the first place in the novel. There are certain reasons behind people’s migration. Everybody have this longing for going to America. Most of us want to go to America and also be a part of it. Kiran Desai felt that especially Indians want to migrate mostly to America because of fascination for the white people, crazed for Western values, manners, language and glamorous life style. Kiran Desai wants to reflect this in the novel.

The example of this immigrant issue is seen in the character of Biju, the main protagonist of the novel. Biju moves to America with the American Dream embedded in his head, he joins a crowd of Indians struggling to reach the visa counter at the United States Embassy in New Delhi: Biggest pusher, first place; how self-contested and smiling he was; he dusted himself off, presenting himself with the exquisite manners of a cat. I’m civilized, sir, ready for the U.S., I’m

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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. (Desai,190)

Biju's fascination with the move to overseas in hope of a better as well as healthier life represents for the Indian obsession. In the novel there are many characters who desires to go abroad believing that the life elsewhere could be more safe, more secure, better and well-off in comparison to their mother land.

Finally, he moves to New York and quest for a better social standing. Now what ensues after he reaches New York is a very different story altogether. He little realizes that New York, a luxurious big city with cars and building, with sufficient food for everyone has little room for the immigrants. Because we know that when Indians or other South Asian countries go to America to earn their livelihood or try to be a American men we see that mostly they start as waiters. They start from menial jobs. So this is also what happens to Biju. He has to struggle his way in New York. So that is quite a very grim picture of the real immigrant issues that has been projected here. Because not everybody can live the American Dream. But it is only some who can succeed. Biju sadly is somebody who cannot fulfill the American Dream. He lives a very bitter life in America. He is deprived of his basic rights as a worker as he stays there illegally. Biju finds himself cast in an alien land, a land where sympathy, fellow feeling and peaceful co-existence thrown to the air. He spends his time in changing jobs, tolerating worst conditions. As he is an illegal immigrant, he is forced to work for meager wages. If he didn't have gone to America to earn his livelihood, instead of struggling there doing very minimal jobs being living in extreme poverty in very dilapidated conditions maybe he would have been better off where he was with his parents. But it was also to fulfill his father's dream. Because especially the old generation, they think that going off abroad means that they will accumulate lots of money and return. But that is not the case. So his father wanted him to go to America and he had been saving all his life earnings so that his son can go to America and earn a better place in society.

The second important example that we see is the character of Jemubhai. He is the retired judge as depicted in the novel. He did his education in England and moved to England for the same reason that he was fascinated with everything that was British. Jemubhai has lost almost everything and his identity.

Then we come to know that Sai, the third important character in the novel. She is the granddaughter of Jemubhai. Her parents also moved to Russia and the tragedy was that both of them died, leaving Sai behind as an orphan. So if they had not moved to Russia, maybe they would not have mate with such a horrific incident.

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There are other minor characters like Mrs James daughter is also somebody who is working in America and Lola's daughter namely Pixie works with the BBC. So we see a lot of character here in the novel. But most of the characters in the novel seem to have this longing to leave their motherland and go abroad.

There is a graphic portrayal of the stark realism of the immigrant issue here in the novel. Biju, the central character exposes this dark side of the immigrant issue. He confronts so many problems in the novel. The first is that he goes to the pain and ache of exile or displacement. This is a familiar feeling with everybody who leaves their homeland behind and goes to another country. This feeling of displacement when somebody is living well or not living well is a real issue that is connected with the immigrant issue. They might try to observe themselves, they might try to merge themselves with the new culture but the longing, the earning for their homeland, the feeling of exile and displacement will always be there. So this is what also happens with Biju. Quite often in the course of the novel we see that he struggles to come back to his motherland India. But he doesn't want to disappoint his father. So he continues to live in poverty so that he can make his father proud.

Biju's father had a high hope from him. His father thought that he would come back a very rich man with lots and lots of money. But this does not happen. Towards the end of the novel, we see that he doesn't fulfill his father's dream. Because he comes home empty handed after struggling so much in America, after being disgrace in America. The worst thing is that on reaching in India he is again being robbed of everything that he had earned. He is almost reduced to a state of nothingness. His father had very high hope of him in coming in a suit and coming with lots of money, reaching home almost naked. That is the kind of sad experiences that Biju undergoes. Biju is symbolic representation of the young crazy men of the Third World, who dream of going to West for money making; unflinchingly, they sacrifice their own culture and social convention. Through the character of Biju, Desai explores the pain of the immigrants, the experiences of the Third World country.

While staying in America, he goes to the problem of maintaining self respect. Self respect is an important issue in everybody's life. We struggle to have this self respect in our life. We live in a society and we can't isolate ourselves from society. We need to have a very good social standing in society. That is one aspect of how an individual can get self respect. If we look at Biju, he is nobody in America. Instead he lives in a very shady place. Hardly even he has the money to feed his stomach. When somebody is going to live in such extreme poor conditions, it is quite sure that he/she must have struggled even to maintain his/her self respect. So he struggles

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for that. People from every corner of the world move to America to pursue their dreams of a better and comfortable living. Kiran Desai depicts how a section of Indians demean themselves for a chance to escape to America. They falsify documents and behave like anything to acquire a tourist visa. They are ready to risk death and suffer all kinds of humiliation but what they really get from their painful migration is the loss of human dignity and freedom.

Another significant problem that he faces is assimilation. Assimilation is the opposite side of an immigrant or migration problem. When somebody moves to another country, he tries to assimilate all those that define himself in a particular country when it comes to maintain one's identity. For example, the food, the culture, the music of the host country. But at the same time if somebody doesn't try to assimilate with the other country that he/she is living in, then it will be very difficult. Because he will be an outcast for one thing. So he struggles for that.

Then the next is he undergoes the problem of extreme poverty or squalor. He lives in an almost slum-like area. He lives in the basement with no proper electricity. The following excerpt shows their miserable living condition.

“...in the eyes of their families, they are the heroes, but in reality, they sleep with mice on the kitchen floors of restaurants or in squalid suburbs of big cities”. (Sinha and Reynolds, xxi).

The next is he undergoes the problem of low and discrimination. Discrimination is something that nobody can escape in a foreign country. Especially if he/she is from South Asian countries. Because the white people always look down upon the South Asian countries as being inferior to them. They regarded the people from these countries as inferior, uncivilized, barbaric and so on. They discriminate against people. What we see quite often in the novel is that even though it is not their fault Biju and his roommate are caught in law charges and taken to prison. But of course they are being set free. But this is the kind of harassment that is made out to them to the Asian in general.

These people would then usually suffer in their attempt to achieve this dream but would fail, leading them into a life with a crappy job with very poor work conditions and minimum wage like Biju and his kindred , or in some cases no job, and they would live a life of poverty. A lot of these people with the dream of owning their own house ended up homeless and others aiming to be wealthy and rich, or even just enough money to live comfortably in an apartment with a few

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luxuries would end up broke eating out of trash cans, and if someone is black, he/she would be discriminated against. Biju is being disgraced over and over again by the white people around him who consider them to be very superior.

Most of the characters introduced in the novel are displaced individuals who strive hard to invent a life out of place, away from their ancestral homes and homelands. We see that Biju and his kindred, they all live this empty and desolate life. Empty in the sense that in their head of heart what they go through is that they are always plagued by this feeling of being alienated from the host country. Biju is always torn between this old and his new experience.

The following statement exhibits the superiority complex of the white people.

“He was illegal, his taxi was illegal, the yellow paint was illegal”. (Desai. 106)

This is regarding another character who drives a taxi for his earnings, for his survival. We see how in most of the foreign countries Asian people will always be taxi drivers mostly. So this is regarding how everything that the Indians do is seen as illegal. This is the kind of legal issue that they face.

When somebody is living such a harsh and unpleasant life then he will always have this feeling of being alienated. And they are also seen as illegal immigrants. They have to live quite a certain number of years in order to get a Green Card in the US. if they want to continue to stay. And sometimes we see how foreigners even if they don't love the person they end up marrying the white people so that they have the permanent green card. So those are all issues that are constantly dealt with in the novel. The following excerpt from the novel shows how the American's exploited the workers who lacked Green Card:

“Without us living like pigs,” said Biju, “what business would you have? This is how you make your money, paying us nothing because of you know we can't do anything, making us work day and night because we are illegal. Why don't you sponsor us for our green cards?” (Desai, 195).

Biju is also not provided with medical insurance. So these are very explicit examples that are given in the novel to try to explicate how the Indians are being exploited in the novel. But there is another level of exploitation in the novel which is very ironic. Among the immigrants and even among the Indian themselves. So we see that Biju is being harassed time and again not by the white people but mostly by his own so-called brother, those who have stayed there for quite some years. So he is exploited by his own Indian businessman.

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So the novel shows how everybody wants to achieve this American Dream despite all the problems that they go through, despite all the hatred that is being given to them by their host country. Yet they continue to live in America.

“ Millions risked death, were humiliated, hated, lost their families - YET there were so many here.” (Desai,196)

The novel is also an example of the collapse of the American Dream especially among the Third World countries. Thus, *The Inheritance of Loss* is a sincere projection of human imagination and experience; and a genuine exhibition of tragic awareness of modern life. Dr. Bhatt’s compilation sums up the novel thus:

In a generous vision, sometimes funny, sometimes sad, Desai presents the human quandaries facing a panoply of characters. This majestic novel of a busy, grasping time – every moment holding out the possibility of hope or betrayal – illumines the consequences of colonialism and global conflicts of religion, race and nationality. (Bhatt,161)

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