

Relocation of the Judge and His Family in Kiran Desai's the Inheritance of Loss: A Subaltern Study

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Abstract

This essay argues the process of subalternation of some of the main characters of including the Judge, Justice Jamibhai Patel. The Judge, However, being a very prestigious post of Indian Civil Service is not the one who can be condescended to paradigm of subalternity. The very inflated ego and an affected sense of algophilia, disassociates the Judge from the Indian Community in the Kalimpong. Moreover, his service, The Cook, suffers from the same sense of fancy of British Raj. The other minor characters like Biju envisions a materialistically successful life as illegal immigrant in US, which shatters to pieces. The grand daughter Sai is also misfit to the household, distanced from her grandfather and gullibly heeds to the fabricated stories of the Cook. The Booker Winer of 2006, Kiran Desai shows the paradigm sift of the entire family cult and identifies how these people lost voices through the detachment and alienation from the broader society, and subsequently, subalternated.

Keywords: relocation, isolation, Subaltern studies.

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Introduction

Most of the major characters in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* are denigrated to an isolation in such a way that they fail to address any bigger issues concerning their lives. Their voices, like that of any ordinary subaltern, are suppressed and unheard of by the center of social vortex. Interestingly enough, they have been suffering from a self-inflated ego, which does not let them see through the spectrum of reality. In doing so, they have not only made themselves unreal, but also got deprived of the social values they deserve. Hence, all of them have a common descension into entities, whose voices are not-interacted and got suppressed. This essay argues, how the major characters are mere subalterns from the context of subaltern studies and how the major character 'The judge' and the other members of his family have been relocated from their positional superiority to a subaltern situation.

The word 'subaltern' has been attributed with different meanings in different historical phases. Originally it refers to the peasants marginalized in the society. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the word was used to refer to the soldiers with low ranks in the army. It got more radical meaning when Gramsci has used it to denote those people living in the society without being aware of their own rights and the class consciousness.

The Subaltern Study Group (SSG) was initially formed by Ranajit Guha involving a school of scholars like Gayatri Spivak, Lata Mani, Edward Said, Susie Tharu, Shahid Amin etc. David Ludden (2002), in his introduction to his edited text entitled *Reading Subaltern Studies* gives a brief instruction to the birth of the subaltern as a part of the theoretical study. According to him, subaltern studies began its "impressive career in England at the end of the 1970s" (01) when some English and Indian historians planned to publish a journal on the oppressed societies. The journal was finally published with the title *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* edited by Ranajit Guha. At first subaltern studies was attributed with its strong affiliation with India. But Ludden shows how it becomes a narrative to all the peripheral societies in different corners of the world including the South American countries. Thus, it is attributed with international acclamation but its Indianness can't be ignored. It becomes clear from Ludden's declaration-

Subaltern Studies occupies a subject position inside India, but is written for readers everywhere.

Outside India, it is often the only brand of Indian history that readers know by name, but other brands are more powerful. National narratives, orientalist images, ethnic stereotypes, and Hindu majoritarianism are vastly more influential (2).

In the postcolonial study the subalterns are not the ones voicing their right through visible actions like demonstration and revolt; they are rather the ones who bring about a change in the direction in the narrative of Marxist study of Indian history. They do not, in particular, underpin the political consciousness of the elite. On the contrary, they focus on non-elites – the subaltern, and view them as the agent of political and social change. This change sets in a society through an intellectual revolt, through a secured realization of their own position, through a solid knowledge of their own responsibilities and state of affairs.

In political implication the term subaltern connotes the people who are socially, politically and geographically situated outside the power structure of the colony and colonial mother country. Subaltern is derived from the work of Antonio Gramsci, which refers a social group excluded from a society's established structures for political representation. If there is such a cultural and intellectual suppression in representation, the

peripheral people, therefore, must have a psycho that is subdued and distorted, above all, not fundamentally original. Crehan, in his *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, shows that the subalterns are always in a subdued position, even in the time of their extreme rebels. According to him, “Gramsci’s concern here is to trace out both the power relations that maintain their subordination and the cracks and fissures that could potentially lead them to their overcoming it” (98). I have taken this idea to analyze how the characters such as Sai, the judge, Nimmi and the cook work identically as the subalterns though they are strong representatives of two historical eras—colonial and postcolonial. The judge, as the strong mouthpiece of colonial paradigm, comes to a compromising state while the cook is always under the shadow of the former for his psychological status. The judge is the true representative of that upper class he comes to know from the colonial rule. For this reason, his subalternity is to make himself subaltern in all of his activities.

Textual analysis

Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* is a vast canvas in which characters from different socio-political phenomena have been portrayed with keen emphasis on the political, cultural, economic and ideological tensions deeply delved in the minds of them. It is a very remarkable thing about the characters of the novel is that all of them are somehow, explicitly or implicitly, marginalized. The marginalized phenomena of the characters lead us to the understanding of their homogenous identity as the subalterns. The subalternity of the characters are shaped by different social, political or cultural parameters but these parameters fulfill the axiom that the characters of subalterns. Individual characterization will give us authentic grounds to consider them as subaltern.

Sai:

Sai’s father was a “space pilot” (Desai 25) who was “picked from the Indian Air Force as a possible candidate for the Intercosmos Program” (Desai 25). She can be considered as the offspring of the bilateral relationship between Russia and India. Her father Mr. Mistry went to Moscow with a view to joining a team working for going to the space. He was selected for this mission for “not only because of his competence but also because of the steely determination that shone from his eyes” (Desai 27). He wanted to be “the very first Indian beyond the control of gravity” (Desai 27) but defeated in the hands of fate and killed along with his wife by being “crushed by local bus” (Desai 27) in Moscow when Sai was only six years old and living in a Christian convent in Dehra Dun. The convent authority couldn’t welcome her for long when the fund was finished deposited by her father. So, they decided to send her to her local guardian, her maternal grandfather, ex-Chief Justice, Justice Jemubhai Patel.

Justice Jemubhai Patel from Gujarat could never accept his daughter’s elopement with Mr. Mistry as elopement is considered to be disgraceful matter in India. Mr. Patel was a widowed person living in Kolimpong in a very old house called to be Cho Oye originally built by a Scotsman. The house was more than a dwelling place for him. He began to feel that “... he was entering a sensibility rather than a house” (Desai 28). It became a paradox of life to him for what the author comments, “the judge could live here, in this shell, this skill, with the solace of being a foreigner in his own country...” and for this “he never went back to the court” (Desai 29). He never accepted his daughter’s marriage as she brought disgrace to the family and so he never showed his interest for his grand daughter. When he came to know about Sai from the convent authority, he sent some money and thus performed his responsibility. But later he was compelled to bring her home as his financial condition was not good enough to provide her convent expenditure. Sai was compelled to come to this unwelcoming house as she had nowhere to go. She lost her place in the convent after her parents’ death and now she had to embrace another disgraceful situation in her grandfather’s house.

Sai’s journey from Dehra Dun to Kalingpong can be considered as the metaphorical expression of her unhappy future. The way was very mountainous. The author says-

Death whispered into Sai’s ear, life leaped in her pulse, her heart plummeted, up they twirled. There was not a streetlight anywhere in Kalimpong, and the lamps in houses were so dim you saw them only as you passed; they came up suddenly and disappeared immediately behind....and finally the car stopped in the middle of wilderness at a gate suspended between stone pillars. The sound of the engine faded; the headlights went dead. There was only the forest making *ssss tseu ts ts seuuu* sounds. (Desai 31)

After the great shock she got from the untimely death of her parents, Sai headed towards another wilderness where she won’t get anyone waiting for her with affectionate words. In this vast world, she doesn’t have any voice to utter and to be heard. She is like a puppet. Her parents decided that she must be in the convent and the convent authority did it after her parents’ death and finally her grandfather did it when he wasn’t able to provide the necessary fees to the convent. Now in all of these phenomena, Sai is none but a puppet. John Beverley has rightly observed the theme of the subaltern studies by saying that “[...]subaltern studies is about power, who has it and who doesn’t, who is gaining it and who is losing it” (01). He also points out the question of representation of the subalterns in the hegemonized phenomenon and finally points out the fact what Gayatri Spivak shows that

the subalterns can't have a voice and if he/she has a voice, he is not a subaltern anymore. Sai is a subaltern because we know nothing about her feelings and emotions. There is no record of her personal history by which she can be placed in a particular location. When she came to know about her father from the convent authority, she couldn't but say, "my parents are dead. I am an orphan" (Desai 27). She also came to know about the fact that her grandfather didn't bring her to the house out of love and affection, rather he did so because he "can't afford a convent school" (Desai 34). So Kalimpong and Cho Oyu were in no way more than the convent to her. She, from the very beginning of her life, was a peripheral agent having nobody to soothe her in the time of distress. She started her life as a cast away. Ranajit Guha advocates that anyone can be a subaltern who is not an elite.

The judge:

On the other hand, Justice Jamubhai Patel can also be paralleled with Sai regarding the questions of power and representation. He was born in a "family of the peasant caste" (Desai 56) whose father, though was a peasant, ran his family by "procuring false witnesses to appear in court" (Desai 57). The idea of making his son a judge came from his idea of visiting the courts for his professional purpose. So, he sent his son to a mission school. He was able to transmit his desire of making Jemubhai a judge so authentically that his son got it as his only mission of life. But this brought a paradoxical life for him. he had to be embarrassed in different areas for his Indian identity. Though he became the Chief Justice of the country, he could never attain the homogeneity with his white counterparts.

But Jemubhai Patel became a typical Anglophile who fumbles for his space in two ethnocentric ideas – his own nativism and his anglophile attitude. He was from a common Indian family hoping to reach the zenith of success in the Imperial British India. From the very beginning of life, he has been with his fixed aim- success. For this reason, he consented to get married with Nimmi, an uneducated girl. He wanted to be one of the popular cultures in the British India so that he could be away from whatever was Indian. His Anglophile attitude didn't leave him as a man with strong affiliation with the English rather it made him none but a subaltern. The colonial reality, as Said observes in his *Orientalism*, confirmed his position on the other side of the binary colonizer/colonized. This becomes apparent from the day of his journey to Liverpool on the ship and it becomes more apparent during his life there. After getting down in the harbor, when his cabinmate "hailed a porter to help with his luggage-a white person to pick up brown person's bags!" (Desai 38), he couldn't but be surprised. He didn't dare to call an English porter and carried his own bags. His subalternity becomes clear from here. The colonial legacy was very deep delved in his mind and he couldn't get rid of this easily. He, after reaching at Cambridge, was shockingly discovered that nobody was interested to rent him a room because of his color and Indian identity. He went to twenty-two houses with the hope of getting a room but failed. In most of the cases, he was humiliated severely. At last, he got one from Mrs. Rice who "needed the money" (Desai 39) very badly. At Fitzwilliam College in which he got admitted, he couldn't create any substantiate relationship with anyone. The author expresses it very authentically by telling-

for entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things, and elderly ladies, even the hapless- blued- haired, spotted, faces like collapsing pumpkins-moved over when he sat next to them in the bus, so he knew that whatever they had, they were secure in their conviction that it wasn't even remotely as bad as what he had. (Desai 39)

So, he gradually "retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day" (Desai 39) which "crushed him into a shadow" (Desai 39).

In the line of his relationship with the English, the colonial masters, the judge felt an unrealized anger in him which he was never able to perceive in his life. This inability becomes apparent when we discover his failure of establishing substantial relationship with anyone of his family. His wife was the most defenseless to his repressed anger. Desai gives a graphic detail of such an incident by telling, "One day he found footprints on the toilet seat—she was squatting on it, she was squatting on it! —he could barely contain his outrage, took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl ..." (173). He simply cannot put up with the sight and his rage grew unreasonable hefty and his humanitarian side deems.

He does to her what his experience in England did to him. She becomes his suppressed Indian self, though her presence constantly reminds the judge of his failure to suppress her fully. He sends her away, telling her that otherwise he will kill her, and refuses to accept her back. Ultimately, he has her murdered and gets away with it by bribing the police. To avoid feeling guilty for her death, he convinces himself that it was an accident. (Spielman 4)

The judge, being the subject of such Anglophilia, remains a hymen in the spectrum of the novel. Derrida's reference to hymen has an anatomical implication where male sexuality is brought to the context of discussion. Nevertheless, in cultural discourse, the term is used for 'in-betweenness' of the subject – exactly the way the judge represents himself in the novel. Desai discovers his subalternity very authentically by telling, "he envied the English, he loathed worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he

would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians both” (119).

The judge’s Anglophilia makes him a distinctive postcolonial subject, “a self-hating Indian, a would-be Englishman, a foreigner to everyone including himself. He supports assimilation fully and believes in the superiority of the English” (Spielman 4). Does Desai’s subject, the judge, bear the very traits of such ambivalence?

The judge’s becoming a subaltern: Mutt the catalyst

In the beginning of the essay, I mentioned that in the post-colonial studies, the word subaltern is tempered with ambivalence. The subalterns are, therefore, not always the ones who would always remain at the third space. They would at last pursue a self-knowledge driven by the conscious that comes from within. This knowledge is solid – closer to the knowledge of self identification. Whereas the cook represents a typical subaltern who is cajoled by the fancies of the empire, the judge does not remain the same. He comes out of the so-called elitism through his loss of colonial identity – the dog Mutt. As he loses her, he becomes almost insane. He goes to the police station to file a complaint where he becomes a subject of ridicule. The police laugh heavily, “Ha, ha, ha. Come about his dog! Dog? Ha, ha, ha...*Madman!*” (Desai 291) He, so far, avoids human contact at all cost. As he comes to interact the people, he now realizes that he has been reduced to an object of ridicule, and feels unreal about his acts. He goes from place to place frantically and asks about the whereabouts.

In an act of desperation, “*The judge got down on his knees*, and he prayed to God, he, Jemubhai Poptlal, the agnostic, who had made a long hard journey to jettison his family’s prayer...” (Desai 301). Thus, the very Anglophilia of being very much a part of their pet receives a tremendous shock. It is as if a terrible loss of his English identities that he fosters with so much of care and attention. But this loss, for the first time comes to “undoing of his education, retreating to the superstitious man making bargains, offering sacrifices, gambling with fate, cajoling daring whatever was out there” (Desai 301). This disillusionments him into thinking about the false ideals that he is living with. It tells him how cruelly he wanted to cut off from his past, from everyone around him including his father, family, wife and a daughter. “He thought of his father, whose strength and hope and love he had fed on, only to turn around to spit on his face. Then he thought of how he had returned his wife, Nimi” (Desai 302). The taunting sets in him and starts consuming him thoroughly, leaving a feeling that “if he had killed his wife for the sake of false ideals. Stolen her dignity, shamed his family, shamed hers, turned her into the embodiment of their humiliation”(Desai 308).

My argument regarding Justice Jemubhai Patel is that though he was the chief justice, he was a subaltern as, in the colonial paradigm, he was always placed on the other side of the binary with all the attributes of the colonized people as perceived by Said in his *Orientalism* such as “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different” (40). The way he distances from his own wife Nimmi and, at a later stage, rears a girl Sai, who mostly grew up in a convent, makes him an enigmatic character. His treatment to his wife Nimmi proves his subalternity very vividly.

Nimmi, for him was a shadow which “drifted away like everything in his past (166)”. She represents a typical silly Indian girl who is not surely worthy of being his wife. He grew detested of her so much so that, he felt it oppressive for him to stay with her. He distances himself deliberately on the excuse of her being an uncouth, silly, detestable being. He-

felt concerned the skin disease would infect him as well. He instructed the servants to wipe everything with dettol to kill germs. He powered himself extra carefully with his new puff, each time remembering the one that had been cushioned between his wife’s obscene, clown-nosed breasts. (173)

Being a subject to such abuse, she keeps herself aloof from everything and mutes into a marginalized being whose existence is merely felt.

The cook:

Another important character in the Judge’s family is the cook who has spent almost all of his life serving the family and constantly cursing himself for his poverty. He has his only son Biju who somehow manages to go to America but fails to fulfill his ambition. The cook is a character who indulges himself in myth making. He takes strange delight in telling the utopian stories about the past of his master Justice Jemubhai Patel. As he tells the stories to Sai, he takes a romantic escape into the golden past that exists in his imagination. He tells her about the judge’s journeys during his different official tours in different places of India by telling-

We would put up tents all over the district: a big bedroom tent like a top of your grand-father, with an attached tent bathroom, dressing room, drawing room, and dining room. The tents were very grand, Kashmiri carpets, silver dishes, and your grandfather dressed for the dinner even in the jungle, in black dinner jacket and a bow tie. (Desai, 60)

In spite of the fact that the cook tells all the fanciful stories about the judge, thus magnifying his position in the servitude of a gracefully elegant man, he still has some dissatisfaction deep down. He imagines Jemubhai in a mirror image of a person who would adopt all the gates of a typical Englishman appointed in Royal service.

His feelings are echoed sometimes. “The cook had been disappointed to be working for Jemubhai. A severe comedown, he thought, from his father, who had served white man only (Desai, 63).” Thus, he projects himself as an embodiment of typical subaltern paying indirect tribute to the empire. The idea of an Englishmen is, nevertheless, an illusion for him which he would never catch. So, he takes a flight – a worthy escape into an ideal world, fed by his own ideas.

The cook’s subalternity

Working under the “Jedge”, the cook feels like reducing to a mere name. Living in a remote space between between Nepal and India, in an area breeding political violence between Gurkhas and local administration, the cook discovers him out of the metropolis, sometimes, out of time and place, far away from the world he fancies. He thinks that he has the capacity to do something greater than the one he is doing. He is found in fanning lies mostly about the past for two definite reasons: He meticulously chooses his subject, Sai who is young and on the speculation that, she may not have either much interest, or any connection to the past glory he is talking about. He is a very cunning story teller. He understands that by magnifying the status of judge, he magnifies his own. He must tell megalomaniac stories about his patron to lift his own values. This is a deliberate trial of compensating his present plight with past glories.

The cook even lies about the judge’s birth. “You cannot believe, He was born a rich man” (Desai 56). When asked by Sai, where he was born, the cook replied, “into one of the top families of Gujrat. Ahmedabad. Or was it Baroda? Huge *haveli* like a palace” (Desai 56). Sai insisted on asking question as she enjoys the kind of apparently incredible stories fancied by the cook. The cook transports her in a world of his own romantic imagination. He would find a pleasure in invention as he observes Sai, seems to be appreciating his fancies. Being encouraged by Sai, the cook crosses all limit as he describes the judge’s Departure to England by saying “they sent him to England and ten thousand people saw him off at the station. He went on top of an elephant! He had won, you see, a scholarship from the Maharaja...” (Desai 56). By contrast, Desai gives a very vivid portrayal of the Judge’s background in the same page. Desai illustrates it by telling “Jemubhai Popatlal Patel had, in fact, been born to a family of the peasant caste, in a tentative structure under a palm roof scuffling with rats, at the outskirts of Piphit where the town on the aspect of a village again” (56 – 57). There again, we find his personal struggles to ascend the social ladder. It is a very hard-earned position that the Judge has climbed so far.

The cook’s resistance as a subaltern:

Does he invent those out of his own insecurities? His awareness of marginalization in the society and his identity as one of the oppressed, a subaltern, forces him into weaving fancies – thus creating a space for himself where he can dwell upon. In his personal space he tries to find a sort of comfort from a world full of misery and uncertainty. The continuous awareness of his marginalization cannot bring him a sense of happiness in the world he lives in. So, there is a necessity for something that would make life easy for him – a breathing space where he can have some comfort. We cannot, therefore, blame him for all the lying he practices. Out of a feeling of deprivation and discontent, imagination is the only option that would bring some peace, imaginary though.

Subaltern resistance:

Subaltern resistance has been a burning question from the inception of the term in the theoretical paradigm. Gramsci advocates for the creation of the class by the subalterns so that a unified state can be possible. In the Indian historiography, the society as an organization is so complicated that the creation of unified subaltern consciousness by the subalterns irrespective to race and caste is quite impossible. So, the subaltern revolution ultimately goes through a sense of “disillusionment” (Scott 01). All the characters in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* end with disillusionment. They are unable to get anything substantial in their lives. They are unable to create any substantial relationship with each other. All of them end with individual with having any class consciousness.

Conclusion

This article aims at relocating the central characters of the novel in a paradigm called to be subaltern who belong to the same family directly or indirectly. The members of the family can’t be put under an umbrella term concerning their social and ideological stance as every member is gloriously individual. After analyzing their activities, the author of this article establishes the fact that all of them are subalterns sharing some common traits of the subalterns. The author also shows that these characters, as the inevitable characteristic of the subalterns as perceived by Spivak, can’t speak. They don’t have voices to build up necessary resistance for creating their collective consciousness for their rights. They are somehow repressed either it be from the colonial masters or the natives. The most interesting finding of this article is that the native masters like Jemubhai Patel becomes subalterns to their colonial masters. Thus, the author of this article has relocated the Jemubhai’s Family in a new theoretical paradigm.

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