

The Margin Writes Back: Locating Desai's Loss of Inheritance in the Inheritance of Loss

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Abstract

Literature is generally taken as a non-statist discourse: a discourse that supposedly represents a counter-hegemonic canon. Kiran Desai's representation of the political and cultural aspirations of the Indian Nepalis in her much celebrated *The Inheritance of Loss*, however, makes literature a part of the dominant official narrative. By using the official developmentalist paradigm for understanding the political and cultural aspirations of the Indian Nepalis, Desai commits what may be called hermeneutical violence. Her deletion of the causes that led to the Gorkhaland movement, her systematic erasure of the history and politics of internal colonialism, her equation of the Movement with violence and arson, her polarised construction of the Indian Nepalis either as primitive idiots or failed soldiers or mercenary idealists at best leave us surprised given the fact that such hermeneutical violence was the major reason behind the Gorkhaland Movement. Moreover, Desai's use of the overarching framework of globalisation to deal with the ethnic crisis in a largely pre-globalised world of Kalimpong and Darjeeling can only make the movement look parochial and provincial. Such blurring of the epistemic gear seems to be part of her political agenda. The seemingly de-politicised innocent genre of fiction – a genre that appears ontologically disassociated from the implicated genres of official narratives – becomes an instrument for articulating a politics that is hegemonic and statist. What needs to be underlined in our engagement with the text is how Desai's attempt at fictionalisation of history has led to the fictionalisation of fact.

Keywords: Gorkhaland Movement, hermeneutical violence, statist discourse, developmentalist paradigm, globalisation, identity crisis.

According to Michel Foucault, power and knowledge are inseparable: knowledge generates power and power produces knowledge.¹ The real, material rule of the dominant is preceded by the rule of discourse that categorizes and creates the other as a negative category, the object of discourse and power. Kiran Desai's "*The Inheritance of Loss*" must be located in this paradigm of Foucault if we are to rightly appreciate the novelist's representation or rather misrepresentation of the political aspirations of the Indian Nepalis. To come back to the premise of Foucault, knowledge is not 'out there' existing outside the process of its creation. It is always 'created' and produced by people who have real interest in its creation. Therefore, the subjectivity, the location of the author must be taken into account when we discuss any production of knowledge. First, we shall discuss Desai's failure to understand the political aspirations of the Indian Nepalis in her equation of the Gorkhaland movement with violence and anarchy, with communalism and primitivism. Secondly, we shall also analyse her continuation of the

¹ Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980), 131.

legacy of stereotype even when she wants to break away from the world of stereotypes that seek to reduce Nepalis into homogenous violent stereotypes. Furthermore, we shall discuss the problematiqués of Desai's developmentalist approach to redress the political crisis of the Indian Nepalis. Finally we shall seek to understand Desai's failure by referring to her location – how her location in the ethnic as well as the national (perhaps and/or international) mainstream do not allow her the ability to understand the subjectivity of the excluded.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Desai de-legitimizes the Gorkhaland movement by equating it with 'violence and bloodshed'. The robbery of the gun in the beginning of the novel sets the tone for the cult of violence that she comes to associate the movement with. The robbery of guns becomes the novelist's exclusive lens through which she looks at the movement. Her attitude towards the 'insurgents' is condescending and patronizing at its best:

Her description of the 'insurgents':

Despite their mission and their clothes, they were unconvincing. The oldest of them looked under twenty, and one yelp from Mutt, they scrambled like a bunch of schoolgirls, retreated down the steps to cower behind the bushes blurred by mist. "Does she bite, Uncle? My God!" – shivering there in their camouflage.²

Reduces the agitators into a bunch of cowards and fools incapable of any political thinking, understanding and heroism. For the novelist, the agitators are imitating the protagonists of the latest Rambo movies. Even the real is unreal when it is done by the agitators. Such de-politicisation of what was highly political is very political: the author attempts to deny any capacity for political articulation and feeling.

To further equate the movement with violence, she focuses on the symbolic burning of Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty in Kalimpong on 27th July 1986 and the violence and bloodshed that followed it. Desai uses the brush of violence to paint the event:

On the road to the market, the trees were hung with the limbs of enemies – which side and whose enemy? This was the time to make anyone you didn't like disappear, to avenge ancient family vendettas. Screams continued from the police station though a bottle of Black Label could save your life. Injured men, their spilling guts wrapped in chicken skins to keep them fresh, were rushed on bamboo stretchers to the doctor to be stitched up; a man was found buried in the sewage tank, every inch of his body slashed with a knife, his eyes gouged out ...

But while the residents were shocked by the violence, they were also often surprised by the mundaneness of it all. Discovered the extent of perversity that the heart is capable of as they sat at home with nothing to do, and found that it was possible, faced with the stench of unimaginable evil, ...³

² Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 324

Another paragraph is worth quoting here:

The circuit house was burned, and the house of the chief minister's niece. Detonators set off landslides as negotiations went nowhere. Kalimpong was transformed into a ghost town, the wind tumbling around the melancholy streets, garbage flying by unhindered...even one man's anger, in those days, seemed enough to set the hillside alight.⁴

For Desai, the violent unfolding of the movement, to a large extent, epitomizes the loss of inheritance –thematized in the title of the novel. The following quote that brings out the legacy of loss in its gory and scary detail is dystopian in its depiction of the movement:

The mounting hysteria all around was perhaps to blame for the last group of boys at St. Xavier's disgracing themselves. When instructed to help with the preparation of dinner ...they discovered that a chicken's head was best removed by twisting and popping it like a cork – much better than sawing away with a blunt knife. An orgy of blood and feathers ensued, a great skauwauking kerfuffle, headless birds running about spilling guts and excrement. The boys screamed until they cried with disgraceful laughter, their laughs drowning and struggling in sobs, and sobs bubbling and rising with laughter...⁵

For the novelist, the movement has “drowned” “the ceremony of innocence” (The Second Coming). It would be wrong to say that such violence did not take place during the Gorkhaland movement. There are, however, many problems with the novelist's representation of the movement. In spite of the gradual violent unfolding of the movement, it would be wrong to equate the movement with violence, arson and anarchy. Secondly, her systematic, detailed textualisation of violence to the almost complete exclusion of the causes that led to the movement makes us suspicious about her politics. She decides to examine the symptoms at the expense of the causes. The political and cultural aspirations of the Indian Nepalis are pushed to the margins of the footnote in her text. What is privileged is the cult of violence. It is no secret that violence sells. The novelist's commodification of blood and history needs to be questioned, therefore.

It would be equally wrong to say that Desai does not seek to find a rationale for the political aspirations of the Indian Nepalis. For the novelist, the movement resulted because of poverty and lack of development. Her systematic exploration of Gyan's poverty-ridden life, and the politics of extortion, encroachment and loot that become part of the movement, privilege the economic and developmentalist rationale for the political aspiration of the Indian Nepali. The economic marginalisations experienced by the Indian Nepalis cannot be denied. However, this developmentalist rationale for political aspiration obscures as much as it explains. The privileging of economics to explain everything is a typical classical Marxist fallacy. The developmentalist model helps the novelist deny the fundamentally cultural and political aspiration of the agitators. The identity crisis experienced by the Indian Nepalis that formed the primary

⁴ *Ibid.*, 309.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 260.

justification for the movement does not find reasonable exploration in the text. It would be wrong to say that the movement did not lose direction: like most movements in the subcontinent, the Gorkhaland movement was used by some opportunists for monetary gains. The novelist clearly brings it out:

The patriotism was false...it was just frustration – that leaders harnessing the natural irritations and disdain of adolescence for cynical ends; for their own hope in attaining the same power as government officials held now, the same ability to award local businessmen deals in exchange for bribes, for the ability to give jobs to their relatives, places to their children in schools, cooking gas connections...⁶

Even in her treatment of Gyan's character, the focus is on his poverty: his lack of opportunity commensurate to his Anglophone education. The novelist's economic rationalisation of the movement helps her politically: it helps her de-politicize what was essentially a political movement. The issue of identity that was the most significant reason for the movement can easily be ignored and denied when economy is used as a convenient template. In spite of the dominance of the narrative of identity crisis around the movement, her creation of an alternative narrative of development raises many uncomfortable questions: why does the novelist ignore the angle of identity so strongly present in the discourse of the movement? More importantly, why does she privilege the statist and official view of the movement that similarly equated it with the problem of development?

Furthermore, the novelist fails to represent the political and cultural aspirations of Indian Nepalis as she constantly indulges in clichés and stereotypes that have historically mis-represented Indian Nepalis. For Homi Bhabha, all stereotypes are political as they seek to tame the radical otherness of the Other by seeking to freeze the other in certain categories that the dominant finds convenient for itself.⁷ The novel is replete with many negative stereotypes about the Indian Nepalis. The list of stereotypes is long. The name of the chowkidar is Buddhu; the Indian Nepalis are all "immigrants" from Nepal; Nepalis commit "crimes" in India and sneak into Nepal; Nepalis are "mercenaries" devoid of any loyalty; Nepalis are basically fit only for physical labour; the Nepali protagonist Gyan is incapable of clarity of thought; it is a community of "frauds and cheats". The list is endless. It may be rightly argued that Desai does not glorify any other community, be it Bengali or Gujarati in the novel. Valid howsoever this argument is, it cannot be denied that the representation of the marginalised section of any community requires more sensitivity, greater understanding and empathy especially when the community suffers from an acute sense of its own marginalisation in the context of the modern nation state of India. The movement for Gorkhaland is the concrete manifestation of this sense of marginalisation and ethnic othering that the Indian Nepali community has experienced in a country that has named most of its states after a particular dominant and dominating community. The author's demonization of the Gorkhaland movement and the Indian Nepali very well explains why Gorkhaland

⁶ *Ibid.*,173.

⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 70.

has continued to capture the political and cultural imagination of Indian Nepalis in 1986 and now.

This takes us back to the premise of Foucault about power and knowledge. All knowledge is situated: there is no objective knowledge; all knowledge is subjective. Here Desai's authorial subjectivity as the mainland/mainstream Indian must be taken into account in order to understand the violence of representation that marks her text. In her many interviews given after the Booker's award, Desai has thrown sufficient light on her sources: people she lived with and people she mostly interacted with while doing her research in Kalimpong. When the dominant is consulted about the marginal, the marginal becomes what the dominant thinks it is. There is no marginal outside the discursive regime of the dominant. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to say that Desai's representation of the Indian Nepalis in the novel is inaccurate; it is rather an accurate representation of the perception of the dominant. And it is this perception that will perhaps never allow the movement to die.

