

Gender Issues among Class Relations: Revisiting Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*.

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Abstract—*The issues of class and gender are not new but are more prevalent than ever in the contemporary world. 'The Inheritance of Loss' deals with important contemporary issues like globalization, multiculturalism, gender biasness, racism, class struggle and economic inequality. The paper discusses the issues of class and gender in general and in particular the association between class and gender, the impact of class on gender and vice-versa. The focal point in this paper is the issue of marginalization faced as a result of one's class as well as gender in the novel and also how the gendered roles are determined by economic structures, bourgeois ideology and class status. The institutions of gender, tradition [patriarchy] etc are analysed as to how these gendered institutions perpetuate the ideology of the ruling class. The focus is also upon the patriarchal language and discourse and how it exercise dominance and power on the basis of gender and class. An attempt is also made to show how the relationship between the East and the West are linked to femininity and masculinity.*

1. Introduction

Almost all the female characters in the novel, irrespective of age, class, socio-economic status and background, fall prey to the atrocities and cruelties perpetrated by the patriarchal order. The paper pays attention to what the various characters long for, what possibilities they have and how they struggle towards freedom from male power and social/economic class. The word "Class" can be defined as a system of social and economic ranking in the social order. A class is formed when a group of people share the same characteristics among its individuals and which varies from other individuals or groups.

2. Main Body

Understanding the notion of "gender" is not that simple; it is as complex as understanding the notion of "class". What is more important is to be aware of the distinction between "sex" and "gender."

"Sex" refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women. While, "Gender" refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Briefly describing, "male" and "female" are

sex categories, while "masculine" and "feminine" are gender categories. [WHO]

Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble*, also maintains that what we call "gender" is not an inherit fact or attribute of human nature but a *performance*—a cultural performance. She argues that it is the culture which determines the gender of an individual, and that there exist a neutral body prior to its sexual signification. [1-3]

Gender may, therefore, be defined as a product of social and cultural structure that demarcates the lines of distinction between masculine and feminine. It is the social construction that recognizes the role and position of the sex and gives it an institutional form. On the basis of this very definition, this paper focuses on the gender roles and their relation to class as reflected in the novel. The paper analyzes and exposes the state of women in the contemporary period as portrayed in Kiran Desai's *The inheritance of Loss*, as a marginalized section kept in periphery by the phallogentric social-economic structure.

Many individuals in the novel can be seen occupying subaltern position just because of their socio-economic class status. Conventionally, and also in accordance with the views of the colonial period, men are associated to the characteristics of the West while, women are associated with the typical features of the East. Desai's vision in *The inheritance of Loss* captures a vast landscape of the modern social life. Nimi, the judge's wife represents marginalized, subjugated young women from the Third World. Her role as a minor subaltern character in the novel goes in harmony with her social status as in terms of class and gender. Both Sai and Nimi live a life that is controlled by the judge. Nimi is mostly seen in association with her husband, and is reduced to mere property of Jemubhai, the judge.

Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* challenges the essentialist conception of womanhood. She asserts that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" [xix]. She says that woman has no worth or identity of her own—she is defined in relation to the man—she is defined as

what man is not. Nimi belongs to a lower middle class family and is married off to a boy from the bourgeois class. She doesn't have an identity of herself and is seen in relation to patriarchs. From childhood till her death, she is known in relation to the males—as a daughter, a wife, a niece and a sister-in-law but not by her own identity. Desai narrates Nimi's story through a series of flashbacks that comes through Jemubhai's thoughts and memories. These flashbacks imply that Nimi's story is not a product of her life but rather how Jemubhai perceives her. Nimi is portrayed as a "subaltern female (who) cannot be heard or read" and she as a "subaltern cannot speak" [Spivak 308]. Spivak claims that women in India do not have a voice and, thus, they are controlled by those who can speak. Thus, without the ability to speak for herself, Nimi's account is defined by what her husband tells the readers about her. Nimi is not given an independent and autonomous identity. She is rather identified with reference to her husband; and also, her story becomes additional parenthetical information in the main story of the judge.

Jemubhai's casual mistreatment of his wife starts as soon as he is back from England. On his return, his marriage takes an abusive turn; he attacks Nimi verbally, physically and sexually. Nimi faces all this cruelty, exploitation and humiliation because she is a woman with a lower class background. Her marginalization is effected by both her gender as well as her class.

Nimi has become useless to Jemu like everything else in the past. He says, ". . . an Indian girl could never be as beautiful as an English one" [Desai 168]. Once his wife steals and uses his fancy powder puff which he uses on his face to get fair complexion just to match the English. This irritates him and he inexplicably abuses his wife "You filth!" [168]. He throws her down on the floor and, in a blind rage, rapes her:

Ghoushily sugared in sweet candy pigment, he clamped down on her, tussled her to the floor, and . . . in a dense frustration of lust and fury . . . he stuffed his way ungracefully into her. His civilized mask was dropped and he resorted to this 'gutter act', again and again to 'teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself. [169-170]

The judge's abhorrence, brutality and indifference in his dealings with his wife Nimi, slowly destroys her personality and turns her into a living corpse. She is humiliated and tortured daily by her husband who tries hard for her to become Anglicized as he is. His typical patriarchal nature and his lifestyle make her life miserable.

In Nimi's marital life with Jemubhai this seclusion continues, and he makes all the decisions for her. For most of the time she is left alone at their house in Kalimpong. However, even though Jemubhai leaves her alone for long periods, she is not able to benefit from freedom. She gradually becomes very dejected and indifferent to her own state. In addition, she is so used to being "locked up" [29] that the thought of leaving him never really occurs to her, ". . . she was

still unable to consider the idea of walking through the gate. The way it stood open for her to come and go—the sight filled her with loneliness. She was uncared for, her freedom useless . . ." [171]. Even in her husband's absence her life is controlled by him.

In his book *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Friedrich Engels maintains that oppression and relationship between men and women in the society is similar to the relations between proletariat and bourgeoisie. It can be therefore said that women's subordination and class oppression are the coinciding functions. In the novel, Nimi leads a lonely life within the confines of her husband's place and gradually falls out of life. He finds her a "disruptive presence" in his life and when his irritation becomes too much to bear, he resorts to physical violence. [Desai 172]

The judge sends her away to her father's place, telling her, "If I don't send you back . . . I will kill you. And I don't want to be blamed for such a crime" [336]. After six months, Jemubhai receives a telegram from Nimi's uncle about the death of her (Nimi's) father and the birth of his daughter. Jemubhai does not go to see his daughter and even refuses to accept his wife. Nimi now is disowned by her spouse and also her uncle leaves her homeless. She spends rest of her life at her sister's place. The belief in the Indian society, that responsibility of a girl's family towards the girl ends as soon as she is married off, comes to light in the novel when:

The uncle turned his niece from the door. "You are your husband's responsibility," he said angrily. "Go back. Your father gave a dowry when you married—you got your share and it is not for daughters to come claiming anything thereafter. If you have made your husband angry, go and ask for forgiveness. [314]

Fed up of the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon her by the so called patriarchs of the society, she ends her life. Desai describes the death scene very pathetically:

A woman had caught fire over a stove. Oh, this country, people exclaimed, glad to fall into the usual sentences, where human life was cheap, where standards were shoddy, where stoves were badly made and cheap saris caught fire as easily . . . without a witness, without a case . . . for the police, a case so simple, just another quick movement of the hand. . . . And in a blink of an eye you could have missed the entire thing. [307-08]

Desai through this scene especially presents the cruelty against women by the so called pillars (the patriarchs) of the society. Nimi is deliberately set on fire because she is considered as a burden and "becomes a powerless domestic slave" [Engels 22]. She is treated as an 'object'. Desai with this sensitive issue of bride-burning, questions the different institutions of society which are held responsible for its smooth running and functioning.

Jemubhai does not accept any accountability of his wife's death, nor does he accept his daughter in his life and thus shies away from his paternal responsibility. He suffers from same guilt later in life. Desai narrates: "Ashes have no weight, they tell no secrets, they rise too lightly for guilt; too lightly for gravity, they float upward and, thankfully disappear." [Desai 316]

Through Nimi's story, Desai draws a realistic picture of how woman in the Third World suffers. It is tempting to draw attention to the "silence" of Nimi. According to Spivak, women from the First World are not able to understand the situation of poor and suppressed women of the Third World.

In *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels says that the concept of monogamous marriage has risen because of the domination of men over women. In this sense, he ties communist theory to the family, arguing that the relationship between men and women is that of the capitalist and the bourgeois. The judge has dominated Nimi "just as the capitalist class has dominated workers." [154]

Sai, the granddaughter of the judge in *The Inheritance of Loss*, is a strong young woman, who takes her own decisions not being influenced by any patriarch. However, there is a significant difference between Sai and Nimi. Sai belongs to the bourgeoisie class, while Nimi to the lower middle class. Sai's social class compensates her Subalternity as a woman. She asserts the power to define herself as a self-determined free woman. Nimi, on the other hand is not able to retaliate for her own cause. Although, both of them belong to the same gender but the difference in their classes makes Nimi's life difficult.

Butler in her *Gender Trouble* says, ". . . body is not a being but a surface, a signifying practice within a field of gender hierarchy . . . there is no essence of gender; it is repeated acts that create the notion of gender, which is a stylized repetition of acts" [140]. Butler argues that every gender is constructed through the process of cultural signification. In case of Sai, her gender is signified in relation to her upper middle class status. Thus, the females are signified as weak, dependent, submissive etc. and males as strong, bold, independent etc. which holds true of the novel also. But Butler also argues that these signified gender roles can be subverted by some outside forces for example economy and power. Sai's class subverts her signified gender roles to strong, bold and independent individual. Butler further adds to it saying that if gender is created by signification than through re-signification we can subvert gender roles. She calls this strategy a "subversive repetition" [145-46]. She, thus, concludes that gender roles can be subverted since they are culturally constructed. [149]

With westernized influence she grows up as an educated philosophical child of nature, enjoying money, position and class of her grandfather. She seems balanced in almost every relationship and situation. During the robbery at Cho Oyu—

judge's home, Sai appears capable, calm and brave compared to the judge and the cook. When the cook hides under the table and the robbers drag him out, Sai exclaims, "He hasn't done anything, leave him" [Desai 5]. She hates to see him getting tortured. Thus, in this situation the gender roles are switched, and Sai seems to be the one with control and not the domestic help. In Sai one can hear a subaltern speak for herself and assert her independence.

Sai's strength is further exemplified through her relationship with Gyan, in which she completely proves to be his equal, rather a step higher. Throughout their arguments, Sai appears more authentic to her opinions than him, and she does not give in due to love or soft feelings. In this respect, Sai proves to be different from her grandmother Nimi, who is suppressed in her relationship with men. Sai breaks off with Gyan; they insult each other equally. She goes to Gyan's home and abuses him in front of his entire family. They quarrel over their different social class and values. Sai's assertion of self, independent of the male dominated society, is possible because of her bourgeois class and status. Her courageous character can be justified by Judith Butler's argument regarding signification process.

Lola and Noni are two Bengali sisters, living a diasporic life in Kanchenjunga. They belong to the middle class family, having an aspiration for the privileged class. They often take opportunity to mock at those who are low in status and those who are underprivileged. However, they are publically humiliated by Pradhan of the GNLF who violates the dignity of genteel women while both the sisters go to complain to him against encroachment by Nepalese men in Mon Ami. When she complains to the Pradhan, he replies to her saying, "my men must be accommodated" [249]. He says that he is the king of Kalimpong and he will do whatever he wants to. He makes fun of Lola when he says:

I am the raja of Kalimpong. A raja must have many queens. He jerked his head back to the sounds of the kitchen that came through the curtained door. "I have four, but would you," he looked Lola up and down, tipped his chair back, head at a comical angle, a coy naughty expression catching his face, "dear Aunty, would you like to be the fifth?" [244]

Lola for a moment is rendered spellbound and is reminded of her subaltern role as a woman. At this point she curses herself for being a woman of lower middle class. She could hear their laugh while they were making fun of her. The Pradhan further says to her, "And you know, you won't be bearing me any sons at your age so I will expect a big dowry. And you're not much to look at, nothing up." [244]

Had Lola been a woman from the bourgeoisie or the capitalist class, she would not have been made fun of like this. She has to face all their nonsensical jokes just because she is a female, and that too of lower middle class.

The male characters are in lime light in *The Inheritance of Loss*. Their perspective on the society and especially women is

explored and analysed in the novel. It is interesting to note how the defined roles of “male” and “female” look at each other, and how these effect gender problems in the novel. Sai and the Bengali sisters have, in different ways, challenged and subverted the roles assigned to the women. Their role, as reflected in the novel is, much more than what is supposed to be “feminine.” They assert individuality and endeavour to break away from the male dominated social structures. Lola and her sister Noni live alone; they don’t have any male member in their house. They live independent lives. While Noni has chosen to live a bachelor life, an act that suggests her rejection of the gendered roles assigned to the weaker sex. These women are parallel to their governing opposite sex.

On the other hand, characters like the judge and Gyan are more masculine than the other characters of the same sex. They represent strong, powerful males, and their masculinity is proven through their daring actions of “changing the world” by taking up judicial services and by joining political groups. In contrast Biju and Panna Lal, the cook, represent the “weak feminine” males who are “less masculine” and therefore marginalized in the powerful patriarchal world.

3. Conclusion

Desai criticizes the conventional constructs of gender; and also, she critically highlights the impact of class as well as gender in the lives of various women in *The Inheritance of Loss*. Through the characters of Noni, Lola and Sai, Desai attempts to give voice to subaltern women who have been silenced through history and through the novel as well. Desai also aspire to give voice to the subaltern—either male or female, discriminated on the basis of their economic status and social class. The power dynamics between the privileged and

the unprivileged reflects one of the contemporary debatable issues of the present times.

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