

The Hills Have A Voice: Marginal Voices and the Separatist Movement as presented in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

“The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”
(Kundera 4)

Sayan Aich

When Benedict Anderson proposes that a nation is an ‘imagined community’, (Anderson 112) he also implicitly interrogates the manner in which these ‘nations’ are ‘imagined’ into being. It follows a process of selection, exclusion and marginalization, of one particular voice speaking, a particular official rhetoric being heard and the other dissident voices being suppressed and hushed up. What it does is to problematize the notion of a ‘nation- state’ being monolithic entities, exposing within the cracks and marginal voices which threaten its stability and identity. Public memory and consciousness pushes these voices to being the footnotes in the official historical chronicle of the nation, as they exist as aberrations, uprisings or unjustified claims or demands which are then ignored or sometimes violently quashed.

Since the formation of the independent India, various states/ tribes have clamoured for autonomy. Some struggles have found success, like the recent granting of the creation of a new state in Telengana, some have seen bloodshed like the demand for Khalistan and some like the Gorkhaland movement have hung in a limbo for almost 2 decades. My paper seeks to focus on Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and interrogate the cause for the genesis of this separatist movement, the plight of the ‘Nepali’ community in Eastern India/Bengal and to read between the official lines which have relegated this fraternity to its now ‘subaltern’ status and thus to the corners

The author is Lecturer in English at South Calcutta Girl's College.
E-mail : jishnuthel@gmail.com

of the country's scheme of things.

The narrative, although non-linear deals with the struggles of two apparently displaced individuals amidst a raging political turmoil. Jemu, the judge, goes back in memory to revisit his days in colonial England, a young man of nineteen only to grow more embittered with the discrimination he faces there. Cut to the present and we have Biju, the son of the cook, trying to live the American dream in the shady and the shoddy underbelly of migrant illegal labour. The times have changed, the Empire has dwindled and a new Superpower has emerged, after the Second World War but the dream and its ultimate futility remain the same. Set in the late 1980's, the juxtaposition of the two plots is drawn against the movement for selfhood of the Gorkha community. What binds the stories together and brings them into a pleasing coherence is the untidy and the frustrating aftermath of postcolonial churning and the spreading of the tentacles of globalisation.

It is in this context that we realise the full significance of Borges' poem "Boast of Quietness" which acts as the epigraph to the novel. It acts as an ode of powerlessness of the poor and speaks of those going back and forth between cultures and homeland. The displacement of these characters leads to their being alienated, at times from their motherland and at times from themselves. The first case in point being Biju, who remains totally unaware of the struggles of his community members back home when they start the agitation clamouring for self rule. And the latter is Jemu, who hankering after a recognition and success with respect to the colonial register slowly ends up being a shadow of his self, finding solace in the company of his pet dog. In the first case we find Desai's critique of the consumer driven multiculturalism of the burgeoning Western Economy and the total surrender and unapologetic participation in the New World; and in the story of the judge, it is the colonised subjects' ambivalent reaction to the colonised rule and its legacy that is highlighted.

Violence, which acts as both an abettor and critique of national consciousness and nation formation lurks like a sinister presence in the novel. Nationalist historiography tends to classify violence into "good" and "bad" - against the identifiable enemy in a war which is documented, historicised and played over and over again in print and television media, as opposed to violence stemming from riots, ethnic clashes and in the case of this novel, originating from the kernel of a separatist movement. In the case of the latter, it is somehow pushed behind the cobwebs of public memory. As Benedict

Anderson claims, a nation is imagined as horizontal comradeship and such incidents of internal “disturbance” only manage to highlight the fissures in the neat edifice of the nation and to problematise the security that the borders drawn out had once provided to its citizens. As time has gone by various states have staked their claims for autonomy—some have been violently crushed, like the Khalistan Movement, and others, like the Telengana uprising, have met with success. As a result, the idea of the nation as a self contained geographical entity has been interrogated and the futility of drawing borders, to demarcate and to define one’s “self” has been called into question. The Gorkhaland agitation seems to have been the culmination of decades of exploitation and a particular ethnic group being labelled, stereotyped and marginalised. It is thus imperative to look at the history of this separatist movement which had threatened to destabilise the political map of West Bengal. Lola, one of the characters holding on to the past glory of the Empire remarks, “This state making...biggest mistake that fool Nehru made. Under his rules any group of idiots can stand up demanding a new state and get it too” (Desai 56).

It is independence from the state that this ethnic group sought and not from the country. The complaint was of years of neglect and domination by the Bengali population and intelligentsia, in matters of jobs and opportunities in the government and the private sectors. The Gorkhas who migrated to India during and after British rule were recruited for service in the colonial army. In today’s Darjeeling however, the term Gorkha tends to be applied to all Nepali-speaking people. What unites them all is probably their common aversion to the Bengali majority. Despite their immense contribution to the country and society, the majority of the Gorkhas are still second rate citizens and live without any solid base of livelihood, educational and developmental facilities. In the main industries of the Darjeeling district, Nepalis constitute the vast majority of workforce but are almost wholly absent from the ownership or management, positions which invariably have gone to the people of the plains.

One of the possible reasons for the ambivalent reaction towards this particular community might be because of the fact they were indispensable to the British army, fighting the same people who were to become their own countrymen in the years to come. Anti- Gorkha sentiments in India arose from the use of the Gorkhas to put down the sepoy rebellion in 1857, in the Jalianwala Bagh Massacre, against the Quit India movement and even the communal riots in Calcutta in 1946. This last incident led to many Nepalis to suffer harrassment, particularly in Bengal. The very fact that

people of this ethnicity served the colonising powers problematises our representation and response towards them. In the neat binary of the coloniser and the colonised, one finds it difficult to grant them a space in the nation's becoming and the formation of a monolithic national identity. When the movement for self rule begins, Desai makes the female protagonist ruminate on the statelessness and she realises this unbelonging makes the ethnically displaced and marginalised hunger for a "country that was already theirs."

The Gorkhaland National Liberation Front led the movement, which disrupted the district with massive violence between 1986 and 1988. The issue was resolved, at least temporarily, in 1988 with the establishment of the Darjiling Gorkha Hill Council within West Bengal. The Gorkhaland movement distinguished Darjiling Gorkhas from nationals of Nepal legally resident in India, from Nepali-speaking Indian citizens from other parts of the country, and even from the majority in neighbouring Sikkim, where Nepali is the official language. The movement was emphatic that it had no desire to separate from India, only from the state of West Bengal. Gorkhaland supporters therefore preferred to call the Gorkhas' language Gorkhali rather than Nepali, although they did not attempt to claim that there is any linguistic difference from what other people call Nepali. The 1981 census of India, whether in deference to this sentiment or for some other reason, called the language Gorkhali/Nepali. However, when the Eighth Schedule of the constitution was amended in 1992 to make it a Scheduled Language, the term Nepali alone was used. It is to be remembered that in the past Subhas Ghising had argued that Nepali was a foreign language and was terribly unhappy with its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule. This can be primarily traced back to the concern of the Indian Nepalese to their sense of belonging, for their long time concern has been to search for an appropriate term which would correctly situate them in the nation's chronicles and distinguish them from the Nepalese born and originating from Nepal. "Such is the vehemence that in 1991, the GNLF activists desecrated statues of Bhanubhakta Acharya, who was the author of the first major work of modern Nepali Literature claiming that the statues honored a foreign poet" (Hutt 111).

This discrimination extends from being political to cultural, with the residents of the North East being harangued and taunted for their apparently different racial identity. A few months ago, in an interview, the noted actor Danny Dengzongpa remarked that "To feel alienated in your own land is the saddest thing. And he adds that during the Indo China War, that racism was at its zenith. That was the worst time for me. I

dreaded stepping out of the campus because people would stare, and jibes like Gurkha, Chinese, Nepalese and Chinki were openly thrown at me. I lived through hell,” he added (<http://www.bollywood.com/celebrities/danny-denzongpa/news/they-called-me-chinki-i-lived-through-hell-danny>). Even while seeking work, he admits that he was brushed aside with suggestions that with a face like that he could only garner roles of the waiter or the man in the army. Such racial prejudice only brings to focus the cracks which are glossed over while projecting a notion of homogeneity across the nation with its citizens having a semblance of shared identity. This is not merely a classification and distinguishing phenotype differences among the citizens but rather an evaluation of that difference, ranking it into a hierarchy. It seems to be one of the haunting legacies of the colonial encounter—the judge Jemubhai Patel faced this same stereotyping when in England, emanating from a pattern of white imperial superiority. In truth, Gyan reminds the judge of himself as a young man and the shame he felt when asked to deliver a poem from memory during his examination at the I.C.S at Cambridge. Both suffer from the same sense of displacement and dislocation, one in a foreign land and the other, living as a foreigner in his own. But if there were two nations involved and a chequered history of the colonial interface and politics, the case of the North East and the rest of India is surely more problematic. In an ironic visual metaphor, the map of India underlines this marginalization. The dominant national historiography has relegated the North East community to the margins of all representations - social, cultural and political. R. Radhakrishnan remarks, “This is a greater loss because the characters feel displaced at home” (Abraham 5). Another significant social marker of this marginalization would be to see the Incredible India taglines. Whereas the Madhya Pradesh tourism projects it as the heart of India, Kerala, being God’s own country, the tagline for the North East is curiously, “Paradise Unexplored,” as if by inviting the rest of India to the unlimited potentialities of this part of the country, one seeks to expiate for the years of wrongs that have been meted out to its populace. It is the denial of basic necessities and amenities and the right to self-identity and self-determination that has brought them to a point where many term them ‘secessionist’. At the same time, it is the lack of inclusiveness, dialogue, and the issue of underdevelopment that have begun to determine the stubbornness with which the Gorkhas seek identity. Desai highlights the hypocrisy and the double standards of the Indian government when she remarks that the newspapers gave a detailed account of a band performing in Bombay and how, in Delhi, a technology fair on cow dung gas

stoves had garnered international attention, but the disturbance in the hills finds hardly a footnote mention.

It is Gyan who seems to be caught in a no man's land when the struggle for Gorkhaland erupts. On the one hand he is aware of the suffering of his particular tribe at the hands of their own countrymen which has led to almost an internalized sense of shame and guilt at being who he is and his origins. On the other, he seems to be sucked into the insurgency, with no concrete volition of his own at first, because that gives him a sense of identity, a cause to fight for, a way, possibly to set things right. He welcomes the sudden outbreak of nationalist and racial fervour as a way of simplifying who he is. One must remember that he is of Nepalese descent whose ancestors had fought in the colonial army for the British against his own countrymen. His rejection of Sai and the Judge is based on the premise of their Western worldview and lifestyle. The feminine aesthetic world that he was slowly internalizing while tutoring Sai comes to be replaced by a more violent, masculine Gorkha warrior identity. He uses discrimination as a weapon against them just as the Indian population has discriminated against the Nepalese counterparts on the basis of their ethnicity.

The conundrum is further complicated with the presentation of the plight of people like Biju, the old cook's son, trying to find his feet in the U.S.A. As a migrant labourer, bordering on the wrong side of legal and official documents, his condition is a testimony to the millions who are forced to leave their country in search of quick money to the land of their dreams only to have those dreams turn into working condition nightmares. Biju, joining a crowd of Indians scrambling to reach the visa counter at the U.S embassy is one of the most harrowing scenes in the novel. And such is the fate of millions from the developing countries. The question that is raised is an uncomfortable one—about the future of this marginalized group. Alienated in their own land, deprived by their own people, their fight for justice has been termed as an armed insurgency and they have been forced to compromise on their demands, forced to accept a toned down settlement which does not provide them with the demands they set out their movement with. This sense of alienation and rootlessness is best captured in a poem by Auden, one that I would want to quote to end my paper with, titled, *Refugee Blues*, (Auden 45):

Say this city has ten million souls

Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:

Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,
Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.

In the village churchyard there grows an old yew,
Every spring it blossoms anew:
Old passports can't do that, my dear, old passports can't do that.

The consul banged the table and said,
"If you've got no passport you're officially dead":
But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.

Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;
Asked me politely to return next year:
But where shall we go to-day, my dear, but where shall we go to-day?

Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said;
"If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread":
He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me.

Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;
It was Hitler over Europe, saying, "They must die":
O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind.

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,
Saw a door opened and a cat let in:
But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews.

Went down the harbour and stood upon the quay,
Saw the fish swimming if they were free:
Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away.

Walked through a wood, saw birds in the trees;
They had no politicians and sang at their ease:
They weren't the human race, my dear, they weren't the human race.

Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,
A thousand windows and a thousand doors:
Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.

Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;
Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:
Looking for you and me, my dears, looking for you and me."

Works Cited :

- Abraham, Panavelil Abraham. "Uprooting and Re-rooting: Post Colonial Dilemmas in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*." *ELT Voices India*, 2:1, February 2012. Print.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. . London: Verso, 1983. Print.
- Auden, W.H. *Collected Works*. Virginia: Vintage, 1971. Print.
- Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. New York: Grove Press, 2006. Print.
- Hutt, Michael. "Being Nepali without Nepal: Reflections on a South Asian Diaspora". In David N. Gellner, Joanna Pfaff- Czarnecka and John Whelpton (ed). *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal*. Oxford: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Kundera, Milan. *The Book of laughter and Forgetting*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996. Print.