

**Economic Determinism:
A Materialist Reading of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*.**

Naseem Choudhary

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English

Central University of Jammu

India

Abstract

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is read as a Marxist novel in this paper. As a Marxist novel it represents the issues like class struggle, class consciousness, economic determinism, socio-economic hierarchy, communism, capitalism, materialism etc. This paper attempts to explore one among these issues i.e. economic determinism, as it plays an important role in the situations and lives of the characters. It is clear from the text that difference in social class exists in the society in different communities and it influences the psyche of the individuals both on individual and universal level. Economic inequality is the reason for oppression, discrimination and humiliation of the poor. The anxiety of economic inferiority in the lower class is reflected in the novel through the characters of the cook, his son—Biju, Gyan and the Gorkha people. Economic determinism can be seen not as a thing, but as an open-ended process. Desai in the novel stresses on the fact that access to money and power are the major motivations for the continuous struggle in the competitive class system. The paper also explores how various characters fight in the social hierarchy—some for survival alone, some in order to obtain better living conditions, while others aim to fall into the category of bourgeois.

Key Words: Class Conflict, Economic Determinism, Economic Superstructure, Hierarchy, Inequality, Marxism

Introduction: The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. (Marx and Engels, *Communist* 79)

Many Marxist critics like Terry Eagleton view literature as a reflection of the social institutions from which it originates. According to the Marxists, literature itself is a social

www.ijellh.com

institution and has a specific ideology or function based on the background and ideology of the author. Literature not only reflects the class struggle of its contemporary society but also is itself a mode of production. Karl Marx sees literature as a commodity and asserts that “capitalist production is hostile to certain branches of spiritual production, for example, art and poetry” (Eagleton 12). Also, an author/artist, according to Karl Marx, is a ‘productive’ or ‘unproductive’ labourer:

Milton, who did the *Paradise Lost* for five pounds, was an *unproductive labourer*. On the other hand, the writer who turns out stuff for his publisher in factory style, is a *productive labourer*. . . . The literary proletarian of Leipzig, who fabricates books . . . under the direction of his publisher, is a *productive labourer*; for his product is from the outset subsumed under capital, and comes into being only for the purpose of increasing that capital. (qtd. in Bottomore Sec. 6)

Literature and materialism are coupled together and are inseparable. All the literature from past to present, in the Marxist sense, effect the production, and is in turn effected by the economic context. For example, the Renaissance literature was materialistic and therefore reflected determined by economic contexts. Most of the literary productions were to support and show loyalty to the monarchy or the nobility which patronized the authors. Edmund Spenser, for instance, praised Queen Elizabeth in his *Fairie Queene* to get royal favour. Most of the poets and dramatists worked under the tutelage of their patrons who provided economic support to these writers; and hence, their works were supposed to be in favour of or in praise of their patron masters. Shakespeare’s oeuvre reflects the very subject of class conflict. In this context, the materialist reading of *The Inheritance of Loss* will help explore the class issues and also the economic determinism at work as reflected in the novel.

All the societal structures and ways are the products of economic relations and are governed by the interests of the ruling class. This phenomenon is named by the Marxists as ‘economic determinism.’ Economic determinism may be defined as a phenomenon wherein the social institutions and modes of production [including literature and other arts] are governed by the interests of the capitalist bourgeoisie. Karl Marx in his *Communist Manifesto* says:

Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of conditions of your bourgeois property, just as your jurisprudence is but the will of your class, made into law for all, a will whose essential character and direction are determined by the economic conditions of the existence of your class.” (72)

Economic determinism is a doctrine that states that all cultural, social, political, and intellectual activities are a product of the economic organization of society. It states that economic relationships build all other relations. Thus, the driving force behind the social structures and institutions including art and literature is the material world. One must examine the means of production and exchange to understand the basis for all historical progress. Marx explaining economic determinism further says that “With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed” (Marx and Engels, *Communist* 57). Marxists believe that history is also a product of the class struggle and is determined by the ruling class ideology.

The socio-economic and political structure determines the whole superstructure in a society which is run by self-centered capitalist and bourgeois; and the subordinate classes have no choice but to accept their status quo. In this paper, Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* is critically read as the reflection of the material conditions and class struggles in the contemporary society. It also explores material consciousness among the characters of the novel. In the very beginning of the novel, the material conditions of the characters are hinted at by the author, "Sai, sitting on the veranda, was reading an article about giant squid in an old *National Geographic* The judge sat at the far corner with his chessboard . . . inside the cavernous kitchen, was the cook, trying to light the damp wood . . . (Desai, *Inheritance* 1-2)

The judge and his granddaughter belong to the privileged stratum of the society. While on the other hand, the cook belongs to the deprived section of the society. The judge and the cook are hardly called by their names in the novel. It is obvious that the cook is the servant and the judge the master. By naming these characters by their profession, Desai wants to emphasize the social class difference between them. The relation between and among these characters is determined by the economic superstructure.

The cook, who is seen working in the kitchen amidst the thick smoke, is a poor worker who cannot sell his labour on his own choice. He is treated by the judge as a slave and

a productive labour; the judge gets maximum labour from him by giving him the minimum wages. His hard labour is paid back by the judge in the form of humiliation and oppression. Despite of working hard day and night, his social position instead of rising shows a constant deterioration in the socio-economic structure. The Marxist belief that “poverty is the result of exploitation, not of scarcity” (Priya 1) can be best understood by the position of the cook.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, there is an obvious working of hegemony and ideology by which the subjects are kept under control in terms of their social position. The judge has direct control over the life of his servant. For example; the cook when asked the judge to hike his salary the judge at once refuses saying that he pays off all his expenses at his own. Desai writes, “. . . his salary had hardly been changed in years. His last raise had been twenty-five rupees. ‘But sahib,’ he had begged, ‘how can I live on this?’ ‘All your expenses are paid for—housing, clothing, food, medicines. This is extra, growled the judge.’” (54)

The cook accepts his salary without any further requests because he is aware of his economic status. All the characters are aware of their limits in the society and because of the ideology in the form of moral and religious teachings working in them; every class accepts its *status quo* without any question. Not only is the cook in the novel supposed to accept his position in the social structure without any complaint, but also his position is directly or indirectly shaped by the economic structure as well. Desai has quite intelligently hinted upon the vices of hierarchical society and has challenged the social status of different hierarchical positions in the society. The differences between the cook and the judge are more complex than externally apparent in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

The novel also depicts the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots in the Global North of India. The economic condition of Gorkhas— the proletariat class forces them to wage violence against the systems (capitalist) and to protest against them. They suffer deaths in their protest against the bourgeois class but are somehow saved from the age old torture and suffering. They follow a Marxist agenda of attaining freedom, liberation, equality and progress. The uneven social and economic structures are responsible for their sufferings.

Sai and Gyan and their relationship can also be seen through the lens of the emergent class-issues debate. As Charusheela Patil in her paper says,

Sai also fits into the discussion of class in *The Inheritance of Loss*. In the same way as Sai lives between two different cultures, the East and the West, her

class identity is ambiguous. Being the granddaughter of the judge she is able to enjoy what is left of his wealth and his high position in society.” (6)

The relationship between Sai and Gyan illustrates contrast and difference in social positions. Sai is among the financially privileged while Gyan and his family are struggling to survive. Reviving the age-old fiction of the romance between the rich girl and the poor boy, Sai’s relationship with Gyan would lead her to discover Gyan’s real class genesis and be introduced to a world entirely different from her own. Desai writes, “He eats with his hands and she with a spoon; she uses brands like Lux and Sunsilk, and he, homemade brown soap. Noticing this difference, they had become embarrassed and put the observation aside.” (Desai, *Inheritance* 140).

Gyan was not off the mark. Sai would assume a condescending attitude when after their serious fight she searches his house and sees the regular poor man’s house found in slums all over the world, which is “quiet foreign to her” (254). Sai is surprised to find Gyan’s house, “the house didn’t match Gyan’s talk, his English, his looks, his clothes, or his schooling. It didn’t match his future” (256). Sai sees how oppression due to economic factors and class can influence the human mind. Through the description of Gyan’s betrayal of Sai, Desai emphasizes what poverty, financial and economic inequality and discrimination can lead to differences in relationships. Thus, their relationship could not work because of class and economic differences.

Marx dreamt of a classless society. A classless society is totally a utopian concept which cannot be achieved. Marx said that the state will eventually wither away as it becomes obsolete in a classless society in which nobody owns anything but everybody owns everything and each individual contributes according to his ability and receives according to his needs. As a dedicated writer with social consciousness and being influenced by Marxist ideology, Desai perceives that mutual understanding between different classes will certainly pave the way for permanent peace and universal harmony. *The Inheritance of Loss* is concerned with the subtle background of an ideology that believes in struggle for the achievement of equality at different levels. Desai succeeds in locating her novel against the political ideology of “communism”. The success of communism, as the writer sees it, cannot be measured by its political presence but the actual condition of persons whose lives it professes to change. Desai in her novel presents a concept that attempts to void and

undermine the social hierarchy that exists in the world; the irrelevance of the social structure depicted in the novel is a reflection of the structure that the readers live in.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, the characters like Lola and Noni deliberately impose the class divide based on economic conditions between Sai and the cook. They prohibit Sai to get closer to the cook and also order the cook to mind the portion of task that he is meant for. Noni says to Sai:

It was important to draw the lines properly between classes or it harmed everyone on both sides of the great divide. Servants got all sorts of ideas, and when they realized the world wasn't going to give them and their children what it gave to others, they got angry and resentful". Noni thinks that without herself and Lola, "Sai would have long ago fallen to the level of the servant class herself." (67)

Lola and Noni discriminate with their maid Kesang also just because she belongs to a class socially and economically lower than theirs. Whenever the maid tries to be friendly with the sisters, they always interrupt her saying, "Before one knew it one could slide into areas of the heart that should be referred to only between social equals" (67). Thus, class always stands first when it comes to relationships and society for most of the individuals in the novel. Every character in the novel has the sense of "economic determinism" and "class consciousness." As Beteille says, this economic based inequality cannot be eradicated permanently but can be reduced. The communists he says, ". . . point to the capitalist class, the bureaucracy, the elites and now, of course, the multinationals as the irremovable obstacles to the advance of equality" (Beteille 156). The Bengali sisters Lola and Noni are typical upper class girls. Their sense of superiority and consciousness of their class is ingrained deeper in them. They also hate the lower class GNLFF men and all those who are lower in economic rank.

Biju is exploited in the capitalist West that leads to his 'alienation'. A worker from the Third World like Biju is a victim of exploitation at the hands of the capitalists. Biju works day and night for the higher economic class producing everything not for himself and his family, but for those in power who exploits him, the colonial empire or the bourgeoisie. The more he produces the more he loses himself in the capitalist colonial exploitative system. Biju, his father, and Nimi face alienation in the true sense in the novel. What Karl Marx says of 'alienation' is of great relevance to this discussion:

Labour is external to the worker, i.e. it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not feel content but unhappy . . . it is forced labour External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification . . . that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another . . . it is the loss of his self.” (Marx, *Writings* 110)

Self-alienation is the worst type of alienation; it takes the form of dehumanization in hits economic, social and sensuous spheres of life. For Marx, a man is self-alienated if his true nature is something unknown to him.

Andre Beteille has argued in *Ideology and Social Science* that there used to be times when the society was divided on the basis of caste. Now the time has changed and the caste system has shown a reasonable decline and discrimination on the basis of caste is disappearing gradually. But now a more serious threat has emerged in the society and that is class discrimination. In the words of Andre Beteille:

The regime of cast has been seriously shaken by a new legal and economic order While the divisions of caste are in decline, new forms of inequality based on wealth, income, occupation and education have begun to acquire prominence in society....It is also highly diverse, being divided first on the basis of occupation and education and next on the basis of language, religion and caste. . . . In a large, complex and dynamic society such as ours, inequality cannot be abolished but it can certainly be regulated and moderated (152)

Conclusion

Thus, social structure and other institutions like relationship, kinship and family in the novel are reflected as purely economically determined. Class struggles, class consciousness and economic determinism push the plot of the novel forward and present before the readers the questions of social inequality. Kiran Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss* points out that difference in social class does not only exist between the East and the West, but also within every small unit in the society.

Works Cited and Consulted:

- Béteille, André. *Ideology and Social Science*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2006. Print.
- Bottomore, Tom. Ed. *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983. Print.
- Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. London: The Penguin Group, 2006. Print.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. New York: Routledge, 1976. *Google Books Search*. Google, 20 Dec. 2006. Web. 26 Aug. 2016.
- Marx, Karl. *Early Writings*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964. 12 Jan. 2015. Web. 16 Mar. 2016.
- Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Chicago: C. H. Kerr, 1906. *Google Books Search*. Google, n.d Web. 21 Sept. 2016.
- Patil, Charusheela. "Marxism and Social Class in *The Inheritance of Loss*." *Research Spectrum*, 3.1 (2012): 44-50. n.d Web. 20 Jun. 2016.
- Priya, Rashmi. "Major Aspects of the Marxian Theory of Class Struggle," *Sociology*. YourArticleLibrary.com, n.d. Web. 02 Jul. 2016.