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RESEARCH ARTICLE

MULTICULTURALISM: CONCORD AND DISCORD IN RECENT INDIAN ENGLISH NOVEL.

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Abstract

A major theme of the Indian English novel in the twenty-first century revolves around this cultural instability. In this research paper I propose to discuss the impact of multiculturalism on the marginalised as observed in the fictional world Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return* (2003) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Siddhartha Deb, hails from a second generation peasant family taking refuge in North East India during the partition. Deb in his first novel *The Point of Return*(2003) writes about the much neglected North East Indian states, the region nearest to the border of China. *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) by Kiran Desai, is a story of two generations -those who have lived in colonial India and the other who are struggling to establish a new India. The novels of the twenty-first century are a dictum on the relevance of a strong cultural bond in the world that is torn by religious disparities and ethnic violence.

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Introduction:-

The new millennium has seen the birth of a new world order largely due to the advent of a liberal economic policy across the world. The subtle changes that have occurred in the human psyche have subsequently been recognized by the creative fiction writers of our time. In this paper I propose to discuss the behaviour of the marginalised psyche within a multicultural society--the concord and discord between the minority and the dominant within India in the recent Indian English novel. The two works under consideration are *The Point of Return* (2003) by Siddhartha Deb and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2007) by Kiran Desai, both having a common background of the North Eastern states of India.

India is a multicultural country known for its diversity. While diversity means the existence of pluralism, multiculturalism is the official policy that countries undertake to legally protect that diversity, for instance, the constitutional declaration that India is a secular country is the practice of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism sounds like a great idea, but it is more of a dream that is difficult to turn to reality. It is a fact that the most painful incident in the history of our country has been the partition. Ten lakh people were displaced with a lakh killed in the violence. For those who crossed borders safely it was the beginning of a never ending struggle of adjustments and of existence. After the Partition the problems were three fold- that of the migrants, of the minority that decided to stay back as citizens of this nation and of those who suffered due to the migrants. It is in this light that I would like to discuss Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return* (2003).

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Siddhartha Deb is a non-resident journalist writer and he considers himself "a writer with some hesitation". He hails from a second generation peasant family, taking refuge in North East India during Partition in 1947 when East Bengal was in the process of framing into a nation East Pakistan catapulting numerous refugees to the Indian side, only to face uncertainty. He has seen in his father's eyes a taste of how troubling the ideas of home and belonging can be. The novel begins with a 'Prologue' and is divided into four parts 'Arrival', 'Departure' 'Terminal' and 'Travelogue'. After the 'Prologue', the story moves in the reverse gear which is therefore the point of return. Unlike other parts of India the North Eastern states are in close proximity with the border and infiltration from neighboring countries affects the life of the natives. The natives of these North Eastern states are tribals who have been marginalised due to economic and social reasons. Their efforts towards recognition and to be in the political forefront took a violent turn thereby making the life of the residents—the Bangladeshis, Bengalis and Government officials almost impossible. The story runs around the life of Dr Dam, a veterinary doctor posted at Rabilgoan and his son Babu. Dr Dam is a refugee from East Bengal whose father crossed the border in 1947 and settled his family at Silchet a small town in Assam. He struggles for existence yet the land and its people never accept him. This book opens in the year 1986 where Dr Dam with his son Babu are at the pension office. The laxities of the pension office are exposed in the first chapter where despite the recommendations from the minister, the papers of Dr Dam are not passed as he is still considered a *Dkhar*, a foreigner. Babu observes the level of corruption under which Dr Dam has managed to maintain his integrity as a public servant. Dr Dam always hopes that his contributions would lead to better governance in Assam but he now realises that his efforts were in vain.

Dr. Dam does not find a place in the heart of the natives. The tribal groups want to demarcate their homeland and expel those who contaminate their land. Dr Dam suffers with the feeling of homelessness and alienation all through his life. In the effort to settle down, he is forever trying to build his home but is frustrated at every turn. His physical constructions come to the same fate as his mental constructions. They are destroyed by either bad luck or the vicissitudes of bureaucracy and corruption. The writer says "The generations that grow up in the stability of a family home know nothing of the uncertain proceeds that went into creating that home."¹ Dr Dam only knows places where he stays for a short time. In childhood he was born in a mud hut but which was destroyed every year due to the fury of the river. He settled his family in Thikar basti at a border town in Silchet. For himself he acquires a plot in the suburbs of Gauhati near Narangi Oil Refineries. Despite warnings from his migrant friends, he decides not to have a house in Gauhati. The house near Narangi Refinery is built in parts over a long period of time. He pays regular visits to it almost once in fifteen days. Soon the state of Assam to which he owed his allegiance becomes smaller as new tribal states are formed. The relationship between the hills and the plains becomes strained and there are signs of dissent among the hill people as they believe they have been pushed to the hills and their land has been occupied by illegal owners. There are armed insurrections and kidnappings. The last time he visits Narangi, his home he finds no traces of it but bulldozers standing in its place. By the time he realises that he would not get his property it is much too late to buy a house or land in Gauhati even if he had money because according to new state laws outsiders are prohibited from owning property in Gauhati. Unlike his neighbors who have laid claim to the land through solid foundation of their houses, he still is a refugee and would always be. He decides therefore to build a house at Silchet but his project is not welcomed by his own people there soon Dr Dam suffers a stroke and on recovery he finally returns to Silchet, the place he began his journey in the host country.

Alienation brings immense suffering in the life of Dr Dam. He consistently lives with the feeling of being a foreigner. The indigenous natives forever repulse the migrants because they believe that it is due to the refugees that they have been pushed to the hills and have to forgo their opportunities to these migrants. Dr Dam observes and feels this rejection every day—on road, at work-place and every where he goes. The curfews, the road blocks, the kidnapping all are because of him and the fellow migrants. He remains an alien, an outsider in the new land he has come to love and hopes to call home in some fashion, but his journey of search for a home is never over. The very first killings happen outside the veterinary compound when seven men are pulled out from a bus coming from Gauhati and knifed to death. The pain of rejection, of being a stranger who could be knifed to death, troubles him.

Dr Dam is a hardworking dutiful and honest officer. It is his devotion towards his work that makes him plan and implement a scheme of supplying milk to the residents but it does not see the light of day only

because he is an outsider. Nothing that could elevate the stature of a foreigner is acceptable and therefore a lucrative scheme was thwarted. When Babu returns to Rilbong after ten years, the conditions change further. He sees a few non-tribals on the road and those who are seen walking on weekdays "have heads down, eyes averted, non-being moving from point to point along the shortest route."² The hostilities unnerve Babu. With the passage of time, the spirit of the migrants and local Bengalis die down and they accept the violence and terror without any reaction.

The society in *The Point of Return* suffers doubly - the immigrants as well as the natives. In this book, the condition of the marginalised is precarious. The intolerance and rebellious attitude of the natives results in the lack of progress and has made their land remote and unapproachable much to the loss of their over all development. The reasons of the aggressive attitude are not far to seek. The changing cartography resulted in widespread immigration first in 1947 and then in 1971 retreating to the background the cause of the natives- the Khasi, Garo and Mizo tribes. The students first became aware of their land being grabbed by the so-called foreigners-the settlers from the plains, the immigrants from East Bengal and then again from Bangladesh. There is a never ending conflict between the migrants and the natives. On the other hand since geographical boundaries determine cultural boundaries, when an immigrant enters an unfamiliar ground, after being uprooted from his native land he is uprooted from his cultural anchorage as well and is given an alternative culture where he experiences acculturation, inter-cultural adjustments, immigrant experience, cross-cultural encounters with a different mode of living. Cultural adaptation is preceded by cultural shock. There is anxiety while encountering unfamiliar signs and symbols of social intercourse. The process of acculturation becomes dramatic because assimilation is denied by the natives. New citizens are expected to embrace the culture and language of the host land. If not, they are the losers themselves. Here, ironically, the invitation is proposed by the host land government but the acceptance is denied by the local natives. This results in a sense of alienation, so much a part of marginalized psyche that ultimately results in terror and fragmentation. Acculturation seems impossible and therefore undesirable. The question of "where is home?" forever remains unanswered. There are largely political reasons for the intensely personal loss and cultural depletion. The icy and hostile environment gives rise only to cultural alienation and this pain devours the lives of thousands who cross the border and of those who are unwilling to accept them for fear of being displaced. *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai won the Man Booker prize in the year 2006. This novel is also set in the North- Eastern part of our country- Kalimpong - where insurgency has crippled life. The story revolves around three young people- Sai, the orphaned grand daughter of Jemubhai, the obstinate and arrogant ICS Officer of the British Raj settled at Kalimpong; Biju, the son of Jemubhai's cook, Nandu and Gyan, the unemployed graduate who tutors Sai. They have inherited nothing, neither from their parents nor from their land and are desperately struggling to move towards their goals.

Sai was at a convent in Dehradun and undergoes immense emotional trauma. Though her parents were away from her for quite sometime, she was always in touch with them through letters. After their death, she arrives at Cho Oyu where she is not welcomed by her only relative, her grandfather. The cook, Nandu was her only company. Her grandfather appoints Noni as her tutor and later Gyan, the young unemployed Gorkha bachelor. At the age of sixteen, she is friendless and her only young acquaintance is Gyan. He shares a strange relationship with her. In Sai's presence she means a lot to him but when away from her, he is ashamed of the relationship. It is as if he is being untrue to his friends, to his class. Gyan was often ashamed of himself remembering his tea parties with Sai. Tuition of Sai was his need, his capabilities were not acknowledged and he was rejected mercilessly at interviews in Kolkata for being a Gorkha. He joins the Gorkha National Liberation Front GNLF which aims at employing the 40,000 strong Gorkhas in their own state.³ Class conflict and hatred for the non- Gorkha, rich residents who occupy their land and treat them as a marginalized lot severs his relationship with Sai. "We must fight brothers and sisters to manage our own affairs."⁴ The Bengalis have an upper hand both in administration and business. The beauty of the place has attracted the rich class from across the country to acquire property and settle there. Over the years the Gorkhas have realised that they have been retreated to the back ground and subsequently start an organised rebellion against anyone who lays claim to their land. These Gorkhas are a hill tribe and are "treated like minority in a place where they have a majority."

The book opens with a confrontation between the men of GNLF and the aristocratic class, between the rebellious GNLF men who have retreated to a marginalised status in their own land, and the aristocratic

rudiment of the colonial past. The GNLFF men symbolically overthrow the established class and the terrorist activities are out and out to dismantle the established social structure. The impact of the incident looms large over the whole novel. The Gorkhas feel that they are marginalised and thwarted over centuries in a land which they have protected. If they have given their lives fighting for India then they too have the right over a piece of land where they are in a majority but are treated like minorities. "In our own country we fight for, we are treated like laves. Every day the lorries leave bearing away our forests, sold by foreigners to fill the pockets of the foreigners Everyday our stones are carried from the riverbed of the Teesta to build their houses and cities. We are labourers working"⁶.

The cook's son, Biju, has a minority status in the U.S. He is unable to establish himself and feels alienated. His struggle in the foreign land moves side by side with the story of Sai and Gyan. In search of better prospects, his father eagerly sends him to America. But he soon becomes conscious of his marginalised status as he is "abandoned among foreigners" The conditions of the marginalised across the globe is the same. Every where he goes he faces the same apathy and indifference that his father faces in his home land. The same is the plight of the innumerable unskilled immigrants like him coming from other third world countries, sharing the same fate. The alienation and emotional sanctity that he confronts in the U.S. forces him to come back to India. But here too he falls prey to the merciless hands of the GNLFF men who strip him off of all his possessions. Biju loses everything except the warmth in the old arms of his father that make up for his material loss. There is still hope - the Kunchenjunga beckons Sai to march ahead. The light from beyond the horizon instills hope in her life. Her determination to move away from there could be possible only through her efforts and that would lead her towards success.

The lifestyle of Gorkhas is very different from that of the other residents, the privileged upper class .In contrast to the lavish bungalows, the homes of the Gorkhas are cramped and wet, the smoke thick enough to choke the inhabitants eating meagerly in the candlelight too dim to see. The rain collects down below and makes the earth floor muddy.⁷ The youth are well educated and aware. These houses somehow do not match Gyan's appearance .Sai's state of shock at seeing these conditions are even greater than others because she has never been exposed to such adverse conditions and this is beyond her imagination. This exposes the breach in the society - the major cause of conflict.

A study of both the novels clearly shows that while multiculturalism sounds like a great idea, but it is more of a dream that is difficult to turn to reality. Multicultural societies have come into being, not in a span of years but through the passage of time. The problem of assimilation of different cultures has taken a turn. Religious intolerance has always been a cause of conflict. There has been a recent trend, of the original natives uprooting the traditional system of administration, of governance. There is a latent insecurity that finds its way out through the innumerable '*bandhs*' strikes, bomb blasts on railway tracks. There is strong resistance against migrants. The natives are now suffering from the fear of loss of opportunities. Everybody who comes to or migrates to their land for avenues are considered aliens and are not welcomed. The history of N.E. is not alone in this distorted ideology .It is natural to react against lack of opportunities. It is as if what they deserve is being given to someone else.

North -East India is ethnically, linguistically and culturally very distinct from other states. It has a high concentration of tribal population. The economy of these states remains under developed and primarily agrarian. Geographical remoteness from the mainland of India has been a prime factor behind the region remaining underdeveloped. Partition of the country during independence closed access of the region to the natural markets and today the region is landlocked and remains primarily dependent on the financial grants from New Delhi. The economic backwardness of the region has generated dissent in the region which on occasions is translated into armed insurgencies against Indian state. Tribal majority demography underwent a sea change as a result of unhindered migration from East Bengal and subsequently from Bangladesh. This reduced the indigenous tribal population to a position of minority. They were pushed to the hills and the politics and administration in the state was dominated by the Bengali speaking locals and migrants. Insurgency started as a protest move against this phenomenon. It was a reaction to the settling down of non-tribal refugees in the tribal reserve forest area. The people of the plains have a rosy vision about the tribal folk that they are innocent people living off the earth, singing and dancing all the time, and the migrants as blood suckers exploiters. The irony is that the tribal do not realise that the growth of the area is possible only when they welcome others to invest in industries and provide employment. As a

result, they are still dependent on the grants from New Delhi. Higher and technical education of the area is growing at a much slower pace than in other parts of the country. The natives are, therefore, themselves responsible for this. *The Point of Return* and *The Inheritance of Loss* both are eye-openers and unfold the reality of the North Eastern States.

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