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Race and Ethnicity in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* span continents, projecting with ease and felicity, the generations, religions, races and classes. The psychological explorations exhibit the sensitive issues of race and gender and the ensuing discrimination experienced by the characters against the backdrop of religious constraints, cultural encounters and collisions and the lingering effects of colonialism. People like Gyan, the cook and his son Biju in Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Chanu in Ali's *Brick Lane* find the vestiges of colonialism still existing in this globalized world. They find it difficult to break free from this vicious circle of their poverty, the unbreachable power imbalance and the prejudice of race that haunts them. The current paper analyses these texts from postcolonial perspective and focus on the struggle against racism presented through the two parallel narratives that shift between Third World and the powerful West. The paper explores the contest for political and social authority in the novels which is directly linked with race and gender. Through a close examining of the three characters, the Judge, Biju and Chanu, the paper reveals how racism leaves indelible drastic impressions on the psyche of these characters and change the course of their future life.

To begin with, the subtle difference between the terms: Race, Racism, ethnicity and ethnocentrism need close scrutiny. Carolyn Fluehr Lobban, an Anthropologist defines race as "...a social construct that is primarily recognized by physical appearance or phenotype. Features can be person's skin colour, hair colour, facial features such as shape of nose, lips, eye form and height." Race describes, distinguishes, and classifies racial or phenotypic differences among humans; racism evaluates that difference ranking them into superior or inferior types (Fluehr Lobban 20).

The same classification exists for ethnicity and ethnocentrism. Ethnicity is about culture and ethnocentrism is the ideology that one's culture or ethnic group is at the centre of ones worldview. Race is a biological term whereas ethnicity is the sociological expression of culture. It is derived from socially ascribed identity as well as self-identity (Fluehr Lobban

17). Racism exists sometimes in intangible ways and at other occasions it is quite apparent and obvious. The latter exists when certain conditions are set to intentionally keep out a smaller or a minority group.

Desai describes her book as one that 'tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant,' and goes on to say that it also explores at a deeper level, 'what happens when a Western element is introduced into a country that is not of the West' - which happened during the British colonial days in India, and is happening again 'with India's new relationship with the States.' Her third aim was to write about, 'What happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one. How does the imbalance between these two worlds change a person's thinking and feeling? How do these changes manifest themselves in a personal sphere, a political sphere, over time?' As she says, 'These are old themes that continue to be relevant in today's world, the past informing the present, the present revealing the past.'

Hopscotching from New York's one grimy kitchen to another, exploited, humiliated and eking out an existence as an illegal immigrant, Biju in *The Inheritance of Loss*, has firsthand experience of racism in a country which promised a better life. From other kitchens, he was learning what world thought of Indians.

In Tanzania, if they could, they would throw them out like they did in Uganda.

In Madagascar, if they could, they would throw them out.

In Nigeria, if they could, they would throw them out.

In Fiji, if they could, they would throw them out.

In China, they hate them.

In Hong Kong

In Germany

In Italy

In Japan

In Guam

In Singapore

Burma

South Africa

They don't like them.

In Guadeloupe- they love us there?

No. (77)

Biju is condemned to become the 'Shadow Class' who disappeared without any trace. He is victimized at the hands of his Italian restaurant owner's wife who can't tolerate his Indian smell. She prefers workers from poorer parts of Europe rather than workers from Third World countries. At least she shares with them her colour and religion. Only problem was they weren't coming in numbers great enough or they weren't coming desperate enough. (148)

Biju is unable to lead a dignified, respectable life, remaining under a constant threat of being caught. He is unable to improve upon his situation. To get a Green Card becomes a passion for Biju. But he can't apply. "Indians were not able to apply...The line would be stopped up for years, the quota was full, overfull, spilling over." (81)

There exists a hierarchy based on races and ethnicity. This discrimination percolates down to the bottom of the social ladder. All men are discriminated against and in turn discriminate people under them. The art of keeping oneself up in the hierarchy is the art of suppressing someone down. This racism isn't restricted only to the whites. Who so ever is at the power centre oppresses and subjugates others irrespective of his colour. Biju is made fun off by the three Indian girls for whom he serves soup and eggs in the restaurant. Again, when Biju is badly hurt during work, he rightfully asks for medical help which is unsympathetically denied by his Indian owner. The owner, Indian by descent is keen on making more profits while offering the least to the illegal migrants. This oppression by his own race reveals how power corrupts.

"Without us living like pigs", said Biju "what business would you have? This is how you make your money, paying us nothing because you know we can't do anything, making us

work day and night because we are illegal. Why don't you sponsor us for our Green cards?" (188). The reply divulges the superiority that engulfs these Indians who are placed better on the social hierarchy.

"Know how easily I can replace you? Know how lucky you are!!!" (188).

Biju doesn't empathise with others of his kind despite a victim himself. He is prejudiced against people of other races, nationalities, ethnicities and religions. He distrusts and despises people from Pakistan. After a while when he finds employment in an Indian restaurant, "he seems happier- no meat, no Pakistanis and no Bangladeshis" (134).

Jhemubhai is a typical example of how racism destroys a young mind. Judge's reminiscences of the past reveal why his life turned out to be the way it did. He is forced to accept the superiority of the white race so much so that he despises his own identity rendering him a misfit, an alien in his own country and people for the rest of his life. He doesn't want to offend them with brown skin (204). His adoption of English ways and lifestyle raises larger questions of identity crisis. The racial rejection makes him withdraw into a cocoon, a shell shutting out himself from everyone else. "He retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow" (39). He begins to justify his own discrimination.

The hatred he is subjected to during his years at Cambridge is later directed towards other human beings including his wife Nimmi. He wanted to "teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself" (170). He even tries to change Nimmi's identity. He forces her to learn English and western manners. Her refusal to act accordingly maddens him and he lets lose his wrath on her by abusing her verbally, mentally and physically.

Chanu in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* feels that the Whites see the migrants from the Third World countries through the prism of stereotypes. They are unable to see the difference between the University educated man and the illiterate, close-minded peasants who continue to throng the shores of England. "...To a white person, we are all the same, all in the same monkey class" (28). He doesn't have very high regard for the Sylhet community. Chanu migrates to London in order to make it big there and overcome the poverty and hopelessness

that enclosed them back home. His perpetual wait for the planned promotion continues. His hard work and sincerity pass into insignificance in the face of racial prejudice. Nazneen says: “My husband says they are racist, particularly Mr. Dalloway. He thinks he will get the promotion, but it will take him longer than any white man. He said if he painted his skin pink and white, then there would be no problem...he says that racism is built into the system.” (72)

Though the locale for both novels is different in terms of geography, history, culture, yet both represent the powerful and dominating ‘West.’ England has been the classical example of imperialism and America is an epitome of neo-imperialism – the world wide control of economy and the markets which also involves political control. (Scherr Conversation). Regardless of the difference between the power structure, the impact is similar. Biju’s fellow dishwasher Achootan who has had the opportunity to experience both the imperialistic worlds points out:

“But this country is better than England. At least they have some hypocrisy here. They believe that they are good people and you get some relief. There they shout at you openly on the street, ‘Go back to where you came from’.” (134-135)

Conclusion:

The bias and the evident racism that exists in England is thus revealed. But the intolerance is practically the same in both the countries and at any point of time in the recent history. Thus both in Brick Lane and The Inheritance Of loss racism extends to different aspects of life embodying colour, culture and even religion in varying degrees. With their dreams thwarted and their inability to cope with the racial prejudice, both Biju and Chanu decide to return to their ‘Home.’ The racial discrimination leaves the judge a psychological wreck for the rest of his life. The paper analysis that Racism exists from the top of the social ladder to the lowest. The light skinned people always felt superior to the dark skinned ones. The whites show their despise for the Indians and the Blacks. In turn, the Indians and the Bangladeshis exhibit the same contempt towards the Blacks. Thus, this tradition of silence remains inexorable.

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