

## **Oppression as a Political Strategy: An analysis based on Kiran Desai's Works**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Oppression is used as a political weapon all over the world to undermine the voice of the majority on the basis of the caste, colour and nationality. Socialist connects it to the Marxian ideas of exploitation. Gender oppression is viewed as a connected thing to this. Kiran Desai in her work *The Inheritance of Loss* analyses this political ideology.*

**Key Words :** Socialist Feminism, Oppression, Gender, etc.

Socialist feminism<sup>2</sup> connects the oppression of women to Marxist ideas on exploitation, oppression and labour. Socialist feminists see women as being tied down as a result of their unequal standing in both the workplace and the domestic sphere. Prostitution, domestic work, childcare, and marriage are all seen as ways in which women are exploited by a patriarchal system which devalues women and the substantial amount of work that they do. Socialist feminists focus their energies on broad changes that affect society as a whole, and not just on an individual basis. They see the need to work alongside not just men, but all other groups, as they see the oppression of women as a part of a larger pattern that affects everyone involved in the capitalist system.

Marx felt that when class oppression was overcome, gender oppression would vanish as well. Some contributors to socialist feminism have criticized these traditional Marxist ideas for being largely silent on gender oppression except to subsume it underneath broader class oppression. Other socialist feminists, notably two long-lived American organizations 'Radical Women<sup>3</sup>' and the 'Freedom Socialist Party<sup>4</sup>', point to the classic Marxist writings of Frederick Engels<sup>5</sup> and August Bebel<sup>6</sup> as a powerful explanation of the link between gender oppression and class exploitation.

Second wave of feminism is a reflective of the sexist structure of power. Power is exerted on weaker sections in order to silence or suppress them. Gender/ power axis becomes responsible

for the disorder in the system. Within the gender-power axis, Bordo<sup>7</sup> discusses the effects of power relations on gender and claims that women protest against three things:

- 1) Confining role expectations
- 2) Images of women who are threatening and insatiable in physical and sexual appetites and idealistic images of the feminine.
- 3) Their own desires.

Gender has a fundamental role within these disorders. Many anorectics have reported to have an imaginary male dictator inside them who dominates and possesses them. Sandra Gilbert<sup>8</sup> observes that all women share a set of similar experiences and that male oppression or patriarchy everywhere is essentially the same. Bordo proposes this male Will or dominator to be the cause of the women's fear of the traditional female roles, social expectations and oppressions- which are associated with weakness and mental lassitude.

'Oppression' is the negative outcome experienced by people targeted by the biased exercise of power in a society or social group. The main thesis of Simone de beauvoir's<sup>9</sup> *The Second Sex* revolves around the idea that woman has been held in a relationship of long-standing 'oppression' to man through her relegation to being man's 'Other'. In agreement with Hegelian and Sartrean philosophy, Beauvoir finds that the self needs otherness in order to define itself as a subject; the category of the otherness, therefore, is necessary in the constitution of the self as a self. Oppression is both social and psychological. The attempt made here, is an analysis of the operations of gender oppressions in Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss*<sup>10</sup>. Oppression exerts its influence on Nimi and Sai respectively, the grand mother and grand child, in its unequivocal way. Gorkha insurgency<sup>11</sup>, the natural result of communal oppression and colonial oppression of the post-colonial symbol, Biju, also need some reference. But these oppressions are not attempted much in detail in this paper. Because, according to socialist feminists, the view of gender oppression as a sub-class of class oppression is naive and much of the work of socialist feminists has gone towards separating gender phenomena from class phenomena. 'Power', which is the more or less unilateral ability (real or perceived) or potential to bring about significant change in people's lives, works as a tool of oppression.

Kiran Desai, when she is asked about the nature of the book, comments: "I wouldn't really--it is a comedy and it is satiric in many ways I think, and it's fantastic. It reads very much like a folktale or a fairy tale so I think it has different sides, different words can be used to describe it. It depends on how you read it, I suppose."(Interview with Kiran Desai). This re-reading is necessitated by the different prospects of the theme. The novel begins with a teenage Indian girl, an orphan called Sai, residing with her Cambridge-educated Anglophile<sup>12</sup>grandfather, who is a

retired judge, in the town of Kalimpong on the Indian side of the Himalayas. Sai is involved romantically with her math tutor, Gyan. He is the progeny of a Nepali Gurkha mercenary. He eventually recoils from her special consideration and involves in a group of ethnic Nepalese insurgents. In a parallel narrative, we are exposed to the life of Biju, the son of Sai's grandfather's cook. He belongs to the "shadow class" of illegal immigrants in New York and spends much of his time evading the authorities, moving from one ill-paid job to another.

This novel presents intermingling pictures of oppressions, which revolve round the life of the retired judge Jemubhai Patel. The oppressed lives of two major female characters, Nimi and Sai are associated with him. Or he assumes the role of a 'socially constructed' oppressor who imposes the authority of his professional life in private life. Jemubhai's marriage itself denotes how patriarchy subjugates women in Indian social structure. Bomanbhai Patel, the father of Bela, tries to get Jemubhai for his daughter. For that purpose, he buys him for gold. Traditional marriage system of India, where gold is worthier than girl, attracts Jemubhai. "The Bride was a polished light-reflecting hillock of jewels, barely able to walk under the gem and metal weight she carried"(91). Indian patriarchal system, which considers bride as the private property of the bridegroom intervenes to deny even the right to carry one's own name. "When she married, her name was changed into the one chosen by Jemubhai's family, and in a few hours, Bela became Nimi Patel" (91).

It is only the beginning of terror for Nimi. Jemubhai 'conquers' his wife with all his masculinity just to boast before his uncles. Nimi is forced to live in complete isolation for the next five years, when Jemubhai pursues his studies. But the reward is even worse. Jemubhai with his incompetent thoughts, "An Indian girl could never be as beautiful as an English one" (168) can only hurt her both physically and mentally. Their life at Bonda makes Nimi deaf and dumb. Jemubhai becomes the 'Gender/ power axis', which is responsible for the disorder in the system.

Nimi was left to sit alone in Bonda; three weeks out of four, she paced the house, the garden. She had spent nineteen years within the confines of her father's compound and she was still unable to contemplate the idea of walking through the gate. The way it stood open for her to come and go- the sight filled her with loneliness (171).

Nimi becomes a victim of suppression. "She had fallen out of life altogether" (172). The numbness overpowers her absolutely. She never presents herself even to the mirror "because she couldn't see herself in it" (173). Suppression breeds silence and it germinates under the shade of that forced silence. Nimi is silenced, silenced forever. Even her unknowing participation in the Nehru welcoming committee at the Cantonment Railway Station doesn't bring about any change. For retaining the domination, her husband sends her home. This imposed isolation awakens her and prompts her to protest against the oppression. She retaliates vehemently. Nimi's reaction,

according to Bordo's effect of power relation on gender, is an image of woman who is threatening and insatiable in physical and sexual appetites and idealistic images of the feminine. So the oppressor reacts furiously:

He emptied his glass over her head, sent a jug of water swinging into the face he no longer found beautiful, filled her ears with leaping soda water. Then, when this was not enough to assuage his rage, he hammered down with his fists, raising his arms to bring them down on her again and again, rhythmically, until his own hands were exhausted and his shoulders next day were strained sore as if from chopping wood. He even limped a bit, his leg hurting from kicking her.

"Stupid bitch, dirty bitch!" The more he swore, the harder he found he could hit (305).

Escaping the clutches of Jemubhai, from the agony she underwent in Bonda, comes as a relief for her, "a dark place to hide herself". But the enforcing patriarchal social system drenches her in insult. Her return only creates chaos but the uncle in the Haveli considers it as pregnancy rest as she is carrying. Jemu sends money with a letter when he comes to know about her delivery. This approval of their separation takes away the life of Nimi by a 'bursting stove'. People exclaim "where human life was cheap, where standards were shoddy, where stoves were badly made and cheap saris caught fire as easily" (307). Comparative analyses of oppressions faced by Nimi both at her uncle's home and in Bonda exculpates Gilbert's observation of male oppression or patriarchy everywhere essentially the same.

Oppression in its zenith escapes from its innate tyranny in the form of a murder. The Socialist Feminist view of oppression of women, as a part of a larger pattern that affects everyone involved in the capitalist system, also affects Sai. 'Inheriting' this 'loss' even from her grandmother, Sai is entitled to suffer two more losses- Loss of her parents and her lover. Sai, though not an orphan in the caring of her grandfather, leads the life of an orphan. She finds consolation and comfort in the cook of that house. Though she lives in the luxury of the pompous house, she is alone, frighteningly alone in her life with reveries such:

Shame on myself..."she said....Who was she...she with her self-importance, her demand for happiness, yelling it at fate, at the deaf heavens, screaming for her joy to be brought forth....? (322)

The reasons for such abandonment point to the cultural and gender affinities. Retired Judge Jemubhai Patel is a symbol of dominant (western) cultural power and patriarchy. Sai, the (third world) 'female' figure, perhaps doubly marginalized, is forced to suffer oppression even in her own home. The judge happens to be one of those "ridiculous Indians," as the novel puts it. He can't rid himself of what he has compelled his soul to learn. His Anglophobia can only turn into

self-hatred. Judge represents a group of Indians who are also an unwanted anachronism in postcolonial India, where long-suppressed peoples have begun to awaken to their failure, to unleash their anger and despair.

Like Lola, another female character who is oppressed and insulted by Pradhan, the insurgent leader of Kalimpong. Sai is forced to meet colliding interests in her love affair. Sai's affair itself justifies Bordo's claims of protest of women against confining role expectations. But, Gyan, her math tutor and lover, has to protest against the oppression towards his community. This necessitates the suppression of interests of Sai. She is destroyed and negated even against all her protests. She is shocked when she sees him in a GNLFF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) rally. "(W)hy would he be in a GNLFF rally rallying on behalf of independence for Nepali-Indians?" (215)...His warning look answers her but she pretends to be ignorant of his presence. Her visit to his home made things clear in a violent way. He despises her completely in the presence of his sister. His home "was a small, slime-slicked cube; the walls must have been made with cement corrupted by sand, because it came spilling forth from pock marks as if from a punctured bag" (255). The dilapidated condition of his home justifies revolutionary spirit of Gyan. The only defining conclusion is that Sai is oppressed beyond mention first by her grand father and then by her lover.

Oppressive instinct in the Judge is decreased after the loss of Mutt, his pet dog. He is agonized at the loss of Mutt, than all the human sufferings around him. Like any oppressor, he is deaf to the outside sufferings. The dog was a reflection of his own vanity and pride. The Judge's life, a tale of the exploitations of weaknesses of Nimi and Sai, exonerates Bordo's proposals regarding the association of oppression with weakness and mental lassitude.

Sai experiences absolute desolation in the tempestuous night when the Judge and the cook quarrels. She stands in the dark and is unable to decide where to go. She is always longing to escape from the oppression of her home. Tyranny encompasses her in such a way that it becomes impossible to escape. She loses direction and purpose and stares into the world outside with unsure wishes:

Her crying, enough for all the sadness in the world, was only for herself. Life wasn't single in its purpose....or even in its direction...The simplicity of what she had been taught wouldn't hold. (322-23)

Nimi, the grandmother and Sai, her grand daughter are two links in the same chain of inheritance, an inherent fate of every 'female'. But that inheritance is an inheritance of nothing, but oppression and loss. They are losing their life, freedom, wishes and even their own identities

as two human beings. They are losing themselves as victims of oppression. This chain of inheritance, of nothing but loss, entails to the future.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Aeschylus (525-456 BC) was an ancient Greek playwright. He is often recognized as the father or the founder of tragedy, and is the earliest of the three Greek tragedians whose plays survive, the others being Sophocles and Euripides.

<sup>2</sup> Socialist feminism is a branch of feminism that focuses upon both the public and private spheres of a woman's life and argues that liberation can only be achieved by working to end both the economic and cultural sources of women's oppression.

<sup>3</sup> Radical feminism is a "current" within feminism that focuses on patriarchy as a system of power that organizes society into a complex of relationships producing a "male supremacy" that oppresses women.

<sup>4</sup> The Freedom Socialist Party is a socialist political party with a unique program of revolutionary feminism that emerged from a split in the United States Socialist Workers Party in 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Engels (1820 – 1895) was a German social scientist and philosopher, who developed communist theory alongside his better-known collaborator, Karl Marx, co-authoring *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Engels also edited the second and third volumes of *Das Kapital* after Marx's death.

<sup>6</sup> August Ferdinand Bebel (1840 –1913) was a German social democrat and one of the founders of the Social Democratic Party of Germany.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Bordo (born 1947), a modern feminist philosopher, is well known for her contributions to the field of contemporary cultural studies, particularly in the area of "body studies."

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Sandra M. Gilbert (born 1936) is an influential literary critic and poet who has published widely in the fields of feminist literary criticism, feminist theory. She is perhaps best known for her collaborative critical work with Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), a landmark in 1970s American feminism.

<sup>9</sup> Simone de Beauvoir was one of the most preeminent French existentialist philosophers and writers. Her most famous and influential philosophical work, *The Second Sex*, heralded a feminist revolution and remains to this day a central text in the investigation of women's oppression and liberation.

<sup>10</sup> Kiran Desai's second book, *The Inheritance of Loss*, (2006) has been widely praised by critics throughout Asia, Europe and the United States and won the 2006 Man Booker Prize as well as the 2006 National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award.

<sup>11</sup> A Gurkha movement in the Himalayan foothills of eastern India in 1987 for a separate state.

<sup>12</sup> Anglophilia represents an individual's preference for English culture over their own; or the belief that English culture is superior, or an appreciation of English history.

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