

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF BALLI KAUR JASWAL'S *INHERITANCE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the causes of complex and conflicting behavior of the characters of a family placed in an alien land. The schizophrenic behavior of the father passes on to his daughter as a legacy of which he is neither proud of nor has the courage to confess it. The psychological pressures on the mind of children to adopt native culture, result differently but the underlying sameness is discerned in behavioural disorder, ultimately leading to mental illness. The paper focuses on incidents, dialogues and characters of the family and analyzes them with psychological insight. The analysis reveals the metaphorical implications of dead native culture through the character of mother who had been dead for a long time but is held on by her husband in his hallucinations. The third generation of the family declares the reason of conflict in a pronounced manner. How the generational confrontation and holding on to the dead past aggravates the whole scenario forms the principal conclusion of the research.

The complex nexus between Individual and society has been subject to vicissitudes since its inception. The evolution of society, its progress and revolutionary phases have played a crucial role in defining the relationship of individual with society and has affected its own perceptions as well. Globalization and the resultant multiculturalism has further problematized the issues of personal and social identity. The reason is not only the alienation from native culture but the mingling of diverse cultures and blurring of boundaries, leading to a confused state of identity crisis for the individual. The varied phenomenon of globalization and its impact on society can well be explained through the definition given by Chen (2012).

- Globalization is a dialectically *dynamic* process, which is caused by the pushing and pulling between the two forces of cultural identity and cultural diversity, or between local and global ;
- Globalization is universally *pervasive* as it penetrates into every aspect of human society and influences the way it lives, thinks and behaves ;
- Globalization is holistically *interconnected* as it builds a huge matrix in which all components are interconnected with networks ;
- Globalization represents a *culturally hybridized* state, which allows cultural transmission via new media to take place at a very rapid rate by permeating and dissolving human boundaries ;
- Globalization increases *individual power* in the new media society, which pluralizes the world by recognizing the ability and importance of individual components (Chen : 3).

The above mentioned features of globalized world affirm the fact that its impact on individual and social life is far more complex than it appears. This conflict deepens for the immigrants, indulged in process of acculturation but ending as alienated souls. The situation worsens for the

second generation immigrants for whom the upholders of their native culture appear no less than lost souls or misfit in the land of adoption.

Balli Kaur Jaswal's novel *Inheritance* set in Singapore between the 1970's and 1990's maps political, social and cultural milieu of Singapore through the perspective of a traditional Punjabi family. It is a quest for belongingness, leading inevitably to a mirage of conflicting identities for the children of this family. This debut novel of Jaswal has been hailed in the literary world, winning for her the Sydney Morning Herald's Best Young Australian Novelist Award in 2014. It has also been adapted into a film at the Singapore International Festival of the Arts in 2017. Her unique diasporic experiences living in countries such as Japan, Russia, Australia and the U.S. make her probe deep into the questions of racial identity and cultural alienations. Talking about culture-bound syndromes, she has remarked, "I had learned about them in high school. An illness that could be diagnosed in clinical terms as mental illness in a Western context can be explained completely different in a traditional context. It can be explained as a superstitious thing, or as a problem of the spirit". (Jaswal)

The consistent awareness of being part of a third world culture while living in different places, has made Balli a constant outsider but at the same time has helped her to develop a strong inner world. Though she had thought of a different title *When Amrit Returns* for this novel yet the revisions of the manuscript made her realize that it was not a novel about a female protagonist, Amrit, rather it emerges as a complex network of entangled lives of three siblings who seem to be chaotically captured by a deep sense of failure in an alien land.

Inheritance is a story about three siblings ; Gurdev, Narain and Amrit. Their father, Harbeer Singh is a patient of schizophrenia who could never compromise the untimely death of his wife Dalveer after giving birth to Amrit. The thought of rearing a girl child in Punjabi ethnic code has laid such a burden over Harbeer's psychology that he starts imagining Dalveer with himself, guiding him how to manage a daughter without her mother. All the complex yet particularly Punjabi expectations from Amrit as a girl, were imposed with the help of imaginary Dalveer accompanying Harbeer. Imposition of native culture on three children results in devastating their mindset to such an extent that Amrit becomes a drug addict. Narain is perplexed and coward enough to accept that he is gay and Gurdev, in his attempt to be a replica of his father, appears an outdated, foolish man to his daughters.

Narain is a submissive boy whose attempts of acculturation at America turn futile because to get assimilated in the cultural scenario at America, he transforms himself to a large extent. "*This is America*. This convenient phrase, which came to him that night, obliterated his sins over the next few months. He began smoking cigarettes, but this was America. He was not studying, but this was America. The accumulations of all his misgivings – even for acts he was preparing to commit occurred to him with an electric jolt". (Jaswal : 15).

In his attempt to Americanize himself, Narain forgets the tussle which would be ensuing at home. He would become an intruder at his own place. The power of American culture and Narain's furtive attempts to conceal his own preference in physical pleasure result in victimization of his self. He becomes a metaphor for the Western authority. As Foucault has also confirmed, "Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing or exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target ; they are

also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are like vehicles of power, not its point of applications". (Foucault : 98).

Narain never found fault with his preference in sexual matters yet he did not have the courage to accept it before his father. He could not accept that he had been involved with men. "Men always thought they could motivate Narain by citing his previous brushes with rebellion. They appealed to his history and told his tales as if they had been there themselves. Before Dennis, Narain had been with Alex, a German expatriate who ridiculed Narain for believing he could maintain this double life". (Jaswal : 154-55) The psychological ailment of Narain deepens within because he finds himself in conflict with two diverse cultural standpoints. His father had always used his Sikh identity as a matter of pride. He wanted Narain to make a mark in his life so that the Singaporeans should value the ethnicity of the Sikh but Narain on the other side, found his Sikh identity as the biggest hurdle in his attempt to acculturate. He was not proud of his turban and got haircut with great difficulty. His plight went unnoticed by his family members when he had been struggling to understand himself. After his mother's death, he had unconsciously taken the role of mother for his sister, Amrit. He would cradle the weeping child (Amrit) in his arms and would put her to sleep. He had found himself more inclined towards men after his unsuccessful affair with a girl in America.

Narain's homosexuality hits his father like a blow. His dreams of making his son an ideal Sikh have dashed to the ground. He said, "I cannot even shout or scream because that won't take it out of you. This is not the behavior of a Sikh man". (Jaswal:173) Narain is involved in a struggle for equality to the homosexuals in Singapore. But he fails to calm his agitated mind.

The traumatic experience of Narain is further accentuated by Amrit's impulsive behavior. Amrit falls into bad company and spoils her career by being "impulsive, overly excited and incredibly moody". (Jaswal:230) Narain has always found himself bound to Amrit and felt guilty conscious for her behavior. But he was, actually, trying to justify himself for all the things lacking in himself. They exchange their culturally assigned roles. Amrit becomes a drug addict, remains absent from long times and abruptly breaks out in fits of anger. Narain plays the role of counselor for her but fails because he is not sure of himself. Both of them confirm the devastating effect of cultural alienation. They might have tried to justify their actions from the Western standpoint but once they enter the orbit of their native culture, they appear aliens to their own selves. In a letter to the Director of the Social Development Unit, Narain unravels the pain in lives of the immigrants where he and Amrit appear as mere representatives of the same traffic fate.

Giving all the details of his life as well as that of Amrit's, he writes in the end, "I worry about Amrit. Frankly, I don't know how anybody can survive in a society so eager to place each person into a category and close their file, without sacrificing their fundamental humanness. It is now my job to make sure Amrit does not believe she is only worthy of marginal things. Of course, this means that I have taken on another impossible responsibility but I can't live my life any other way". (Jaswal:235). Amrit receives another shock when she finds her father suffering from mental illness, keeps talking to himself but feels as if her mother is listening. Narain has known it a long time ago but has kept it a secret. Amrit holds father responsible for her irrational and impulsive behavior as she feels it has been a genetically transmitted disease.

Besides Narain and Amrit, Gurdev the eldest of the three siblings is involved in his own struggle. He tries to dominate his three daughters like a Punjabi father, with the help of his wife, Bano

who schools them in all the necessary Punjabi ways of life. The elder daughters Simran and Kiran are intelligent and win scholarships in their studies but the youngest one, Rani, has some other leanings. The gap of communication between parents and the children is highlighted when the elder girls have to kidnap Rani to make their parents realize the need of listening to what she wanted to say. When Gurdev realizes the seriousness of the problem, he tries to ignore it telling his daughter Kiran that it was not part of their culture (Sikh culture) to debate with your parents. He had never done the same in his tune. Kiran speaks, like a consolation, like the chapter of a sermon, "It is not your time anymore" (Jaswal:225). Gurdev realizes the generational confrontation as an essential part of upbringing on an alien land. Though he and his wife had tried their best to make their daughters follow their past selectively yet they failed because the cultural imprints they had been trying to trace in their daughters was alien to them.

The three siblings struggle to find a balance in their lives and at the same, they fail to acknowledge the need of companies in life of their father. Towards the end of novel, Amrit, after getting cured of her illness, tries to persuade her father for treatment. She tells him that seeing her mother is not a normal sign as their mother had been dead for a long time. The terms of hallucination, delusion and mental illness are not understood by Harbeer. He has split his own personality into two parts to feel complete. Harbeer and Dalveer has been same though they appeared different to others. Harbeer has been trying hard to keep Dalveer alive in his life only because he did not want his children to adopt an alien culture. He had firm faith that only a mother could school her children in a desirous and authentic way. The root cause of all problems in the novel appears to be clinging to one's native culture. Aijaz Ahmed's discussion of words of Jameson appears so authentic here. He says, "All third world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way : they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel". (Ahmad: 109).

Dalveer's death, after giving birth to Amrit points towards one more metaphorical implication. She is the Sikh Punjabi culture which stops existing for the children or it makes an exit from their life, the moment they are involved in their struggle of shaping their lives. It never leaves Harbeer and in the end, he is left along with the silhouettes of Dalveer and all the children move to their own worlds. Dalveer never dies in the novel rather she lives more significantly after her death in the life of Harbeer. It is much like the Sikh ethnicity living in the mind of Harbeer with whom Narain sympathizes for some time but later, he leaves his father to his fate.

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