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Traditional Hindu Elements in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Abstract I: Il seguente articolo offre un'interpretazione indologica del romanzo *The Inheritance of Loss* ad opera di Kiran Desai, analizzando atteggiamenti e dinamiche che risultano ancora più significativi se filtrati attraverso l'etica induista. Alcuni tra i principi induisti più evidenti che si celano nella storia sono il peccato del *samudrayana* connesso al viaggio oltreoceano; la disattenzione nei confronti del proprio *dharma*, causa questa della sventura di alcuni personaggi; l'equilibrio esistenziale degli opposti; il monte mitologico Meru simbolizzato dal monte Kanchenjunga; il velo di Maya suggerito dalla costante presenza della nebbia.

Abstract II: This paper offers an Indological interpretation of Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* analysing behaviours and dynamics that are even more meaningful in the light of Hindu ethics. Among the Hindu principles lurking behind the story, the most evident are the sin of *samudrayana* connected to the ocean voyage; the overlooking of *dharma* leading to the misfortune of some of the characters; the existential balance between opposites; the mythological Mount Meru represented by Mount Kanchenjunga; finally, the veil of Maya suggested by the constant presence of mist.

Literary criticism has hitherto focused mainly on the political and post-colonial issues crowding into Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, meanwhile highlighting the cosmopolitan context experienced by the author herself. Shands (2009), for example, considers *The Inheritance of Loss* to be a novel which goes beyond the postcolonial exploration of chaos and despair identifying a "hyperfabula" that is both local and universal – both optimistic and pessimistic; this balance of gains and losses reflects the possibility of serenity and survival through cruel and tragic events, although the centripetal attractions of home and the centrifugal flights of diaspora offer only temporary reliefs. As Thakur (2010) pointed out, Desai's novel presents a juxtaposition of two phenomena, the Gorkhas' movement in West Bengal and the experience of nomadic immigrants in New York. The characters and communities face with their history, inheritance, manner, mind, movement and culture, and the theme which characterises all the events is the phobia of loss – the loss of a dog, the loss of love, the loss of identity. Moreover, Thakur highlights the cultural slavery which affects the judge, who pretends to be a colonial master becoming a kind of "foreigner in his own country" (Desai 2006: 29)[1], the desertion of his life and humiliation of the cook being symbols of

[1] Kiran Desai (2006). All quotations are from this edition.

attempts of re-colonisation in postcolonial India. Most critics, however, concentrate on the issues that make *The Inheritance of Loss* a postcolonial novel. While Balanescu (2010) asserts that the displacement puts individuals psychologically, culturally and geographically in a position of exteriority and exile, Concilio (2010) defines Desai's writing as a 'global novel', a genre that connects the local to the global: in her opinion, the book is about a community made of single individuals with no detectable hero. She points out other postcolonial topics of the novel such as political bilingualism – the use of English characterising the middle-class Bengalis – and diaspora as a process which causes critical material conditions and dispossession. On the other hand, Jay (2010) focuses his attention on the relationship between globalization and nationalism through the story of the illegal migrant Biju, and Rizvi (2014) asserts that characters behave the way they do because they are affected by globalization, which is a cause of hardships in both the USA and India.

Thus, questions of identity, culture clash and spatio-temporal disorientation seem to be the most striking themes traceable in this work of fiction; and yet, *The Inheritance of Loss* can also be interpreted from an Indological perspective, showing how it is not only a diasporic novel dealing with the fictitious events of some characters, but also a novel which reflects the ancestral culture of its author's motherland in the form of religious beliefs and practices as well as a kind of habit and lifestyle. It is here that Hinduism surfaces through myths and legends rooted in writers and readers' deepest culture as such stories have been heard time and again since childhood. In this respect, the following analysis is consistent with the post-secular debate entailing the "deconstruction of the received opposition between the secular and the religious" (Ratti 2013: 23): in the postcolonial and diasporic era reason and faith combine, no longer representing a rejection of, or substitution for, each other. As Ratti argues, secularism declines because of political, ethnic and religious turmoil and fiction "becomes an experimental space, one where writers do not simply represent the turbulence and dilemmas of historical events, but actually structure them, or are informed by them, demonstrating the ethical potentials of imaginative fictional space" (2013: 4). Desai's diasporic novel is thus an example of how the post-secular dialogue between the secular and religious informs the writer's consciousness and, consequently, how it can be structured and represented.

Kiran Desai published *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006, seven years after the release of her first book *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* – seven years during which she had been trying to define her own life[2]. As she stated in an interview, "I don't think I can separate my existence from my writing anymore"[3], that is why she went back to Kalimpong, to make sure that memory, reality and imagination were still consistent. Kiran Desai was born on September 3, 1971 in New Delhi and lived there until she was fourteen, when she left India to move first to England and then permanently to the US. For this reason, she can be counted among those writers belonging to the first-generation migrants, cosmopolitan in their hearts and minds, who have moved west, but are still anchored to homeland traditions through the memories, tales and habits of their parents. When Desai first thought of writing a novel about the hard

[2] Smriti, Daniel. 2007.

[3] Smriti, Daniel. 2007.

experience of migrants in New York, she realised that she had to return to India to enrich her tale with first-hand materials; but once there, she became aware that what she was seeing now was so different from her cherished memories that she decided to set her story back in the 1980s – the years when she left her mother country. Thus, most Indian elements in *The Inheritance of Loss* originate in personal recollections, creating a vivid as well as realistic work of fiction. For Kiran Desai, Indianness is a habitus and she chooses to make the most of it:

> I realise that I see everything through the lens of being Indian. It's not something that has gone away – it's something that has become stronger. As I've got older, I have realised that I can't really write without that perspective[4].

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that her novel abounds in Hindu lore woven into the narrative texture, making room for Indian characteristics that have been hitherto neglected by scholars. However, these motives should not be taken literally as traditional adhesion to Hinduism, but rather as adaptation of some tenets of traditional Hinduism to a cosmopolitan world picture. The most obvious example regards the misfortune into which the migrants of the novel fall on leaving their motherland, connected to the motive of *samudrayana*. This is a typical Hindu taboo forbidding the ocean voyage as an outright sin capable of contaminating the moral integrity of the individuals. In the *Baudhayana Sutra* (Book II. 1.2.2), one of the *Dharma Sastras*, we read that taking voyages by sea is an offence that causes the loss of caste, and atoning for this sin is possible only through a harsh penance. This ban is certainly associated with the geographical boundaries of India, because leaving the holy soil implies the desertion of daily ritual worships and, even worse, pollution through the influence of foreign religions and cultures.

In *The Inheritance of Loss* the sin of *samudrayana* lurks behind young Biju's and Judge Jemubhai's attitudes to migration, which make them both undergo a deep crisis that, in turn, undermines their identity. After leaving Bengal apparently without regret or second thought, they both seem to 'lose their caste' upon their arrival in the new world: here they are treated as though they were untouchables, with Western people literally trying to flee from them avoiding any physical contact. Moreover, both Biju and Jemubhai neglect their Hindu daily rituals, further evidencing the pollution by voyage. However, unlike the judge, Biju is conscious of this transformation as well as of the irrational alienation to which he falls victim. Sick and tired of the abuses and of the racism that make his life unbearable and almost unliveable, Biju resolves to spend all the little money he earned in New York on a plane fare in order to escape from the Western world, which was seriously endangering his identity. His reintegration into the Indian culture exacts a heavy penance: soon after his landing in India, he is robbed by a gang of thieves of all items that still connect him to America – money, objects and even thoughts. Eventually he is abandoned half-naked in the forest, where he stoically accepts the physical and moral sufferings as a penance: he thinks back to the humiliating treatments endured in New York and replaces the resentment with the happiness of being Indian again.

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[4] Barton 2006.

On the contrary, Jemubhai accepts his social inferiority as a steady truth, and the racist abuse suffered in England only makes him hate any instance of Indianness, himself included. The reader gradually learns about his migration through his memories:

> He had first left home at the age of twenty, with a black tin trunk […] on which white letters read "Mr. J. P. Patel, *SS Strathnaver*". The year was 1939. The town he had left was his ancestral home of Piphit. From there he had journeyed to the Bombay dock and then sailed to Liverpool, and from Liverpool he had gone to Cambridge.
>
> Many years had passed, and yet the day returned to him vividly, cruelly (42).

The last two adverbs anticipate the negative outcome of his British experience which started on a platform labelled 'Indians Only' (43). Accompanied by his father, he caught the train to Bombay, the rail vehicles making his world trivial insomuch as "he felt a piercing fear, not for his future, but for his past, for the *foolish faith* with which he had lived in Piphit" (43, my italics). From now on, he would reject everything dealing with India, especially with her culture, as humiliating and embarrassing: for example, he refused to throw the coconut as a good omen and, on the ship to Liverpool, he tossed the lunch prepared by his mother into the sea – an inappropriate gesture of her, meaning "undignified love, Indian love, stinking, anaesthetic love" (45). The sin of *samudrayana* has irreparably polluted him, the foreign world has totally corrupted his mind and, after the journey, Jemubhai looks upon himself with the racist eyes of the British, taking particular care and pride in looking English and erasing any sign of his own culture: he even comes to detest his once beloved wife because she is so different from the Western stereotypes – so Indian. Yet, Jemubhai is unaware of this pollution, as the following passage implies:

> A journey once begun, has no end. The memory of his ocean trip shone between the words. Below and beyond, the monsters of his unconscious prowled, awaiting the time when they would rise and be proven real and he wondered if he'd dreamt of the drowning power of the sea before his first sight of it (118).

While reviewing some notions for the ICS competitive examination, the unconscious prevails on him suggesting that he had already known about his fate before he even disembarked in England. The journey he started on that ship would never end, something menacing sneaked into his soul – something that "would rise and be proven real" (118). Most probably, these 'monsters' refer to the pollution caused by *samudrayana*, a 'drowning power' quite impossible to resist which spares no one, as even the experience of Uncle Potty confirms – a decent man coming from wealth and a respectable family, departed to Oxford only for study purposes and come back as a drunk slacker. Hinduism bans the consumption of alcohol because it pollutes consciousness making the practice of meditation difficult; and, sure enough, Uncle Potty is far from being meditative in the Hindu way.

The political and mental chaos at the centre of *The Inheritance of Loss* could be linked to the desire of some characters to improve their social condition, overlooking their own

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dharma. According to Hindu doctrine, *dharma* is not the only universal law which regulates everyone's life, but also the law of cause and effect – *karma* – and the specific function for each *varna*, caste; in other words, all individuals have a duty towards their profession and a precise role in society, and thus the community's health depends on how well the people belonging to the four *varnas* are performing their duties. Indian society has always been characterised by a strict distinction between social classes, but the British rule produced an overlap of Indian castes and Western social classes, proving a particular encounter of East and West. Hindu culture believes that social position is congenital and depends only on the good or bad actions performed in previous lives; thus, the faithful accept their status without objection or resistance, respecting this sacred hierarchy. On the other hand, Western classes allow social mobility because they are based on affluence and lifestyle; therefore, in theory even the poorest man has the possibility to improve his status. That is why some of the Indian characters in the novel are so fascinated by the open and promising Western society which, conversely to the caste system, allows social mobility without considering it a breach of the cosmic order. It is no accident that Indians who make this experience abroad come from the lower castes, as they have nothing to lose contrary to the higher classes like the Brahmins, who would lose their *varna* if they crossed the ocean.

The novel explores this theme making the characters' status explicit through accounts of their life and the contact between different castes. It is the case of Jemubhai and the cook, who appear in the first pages in the roles of master and servant, a vision that does not drift beyond reality. But the reader is gradually made aware of their specific class with flashbacks; so, though his great abode and exaggerated overconfidence, "Jemubhai Popatlal Patel had, in fact, been born to a family of the peasant caste" (63) who tried everything so their only son could study and have more opportunities in his life. His father – a poor man that trained people to become false witnesses – invested all the money he could on his education, neglecting his daughters. Of course, this behaviour is typical of low-class people who dream of a better life that, during the British Empire, was represented by the possibility of becoming English-like. Such a goal is achievable only through money; so, Jemubhai's father arranged a marriage between his son and Nimi, the daughter of the greatest supplier of the British army who succeeded in increasing his family's profit by offering prostitutes to English soldiers. Such an idea let him make so much money that "he began to acquire little fancies and foibles, to cultivate certain eccentricities that, just as he plotted, reiterated the security of his wealth and reinforced his honour all over again" (97). However, he reached the peak of his success only when "he, nothing but a tin shack shopkeeper by origin, but richer than all the Brahmins in town, hired a Brahmin cook" (97): Western materialism provided different standards of purity, no longer based on caste but on wealth and proximity to European figures, obscuring Indian traditions. Thus, Jemubhai and Nimi's father react towards the close caste system taking advantage of Western impact; they start feeling superior to all castes, even the highest, getting pleasure overpowering them. For example, this satisfaction is visible in the following passage about the judge: "the tight calendar had calmed him, as did the constant exertion of authority. How he relished his power over the classes that had kept his family pinned under their heels for centuries – like the stenographer, for example, who was a Brahmin" (68). Jemubhai rules over a Brahmin and Nimi's father did the same

employing a Brahmin cook: they gain false purity thanks to money, prestige and, surely enough, globalization.

The awareness of the apparently insuperable distance between high and low classes is underlined by the spinster Noni who, feeling disappointed about the judge's cook intimacy with Sai, thought that

> 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 then when they realized the world wasn't going to give them and their children what it gave to others, they got angry and resentful (74).

Probably for this reason, poor people going to the new world never quite achieve their goals but for paying dearly as victims of prejudice, and they are even forced to work as servants – their belonging to the lowest class cannot be changed, even abroad. In the specific case of Biju and Jemubhai, both of them expatriate because they long to make money and, consequently, to improve their lives. But they soon realise how wrong and groundless their expectations were – Biju leaving the USA and seeking refuge in the same simplicity and poverty from which he had previously run away, the latter shutting himself in an inner world with no way out, despising his own kind.

On the other hand, young Gyan suffers the contamination without leaving his home and his loved ones, thus offering an example of reverse migration in which India is no more the point of departure but the final goal. Being a Nepali migrant settled in the Darjeeling district, Gyan endeavours to improve his social condition within the Indian borders by learning a perfect English and adopting Western manners. Still the fate seems equally malevolent toward him; his decision to join the separatist Gorkhaland movement brings about only negative effects, such as the death of dozens of people and the exploitation of Bengali natives.

And yet there is a character in *The Inheritance of Loss* who persists in obeying his specific *dharma* and is not compromising to seek a better life for himself. I am referring to the nameless cook, the faithful servant of the judge Jemubhai, whose dharmic duty is to serve his masters. As Lipner remarks, Hindus tend "to be referred to by names designating family […], clan […], caste/sub-caste/hereditary social statum […], village or occupation, depending on context" (1994: 22), and it is not by chance that the cook is the only character never being called by his name – at least until the penultimate page of the novel, when the readers finally acquaint themselves with his appellation, Lal, probably symbolising the end of the interior journey towards the self-awareness made by almost every man and woman in the story. Thanks to his humbleness and dedication, the cook is certainly the most coherent and conscious Hindu figure among the others. When his master charges him with the loss of the dog Mutt, he takes all the blame on himself and he feels so exposed that he starts confessing to the judge all the sins committed against his own *dharma*:

> Sahib. I drink. I'm a bad man. Beat me. […] I've been drinking I ate the same rice as you not the servant's rice but the Dehradun rice I ate the meat and lied I ate out of the

> same pot I stole liquor from the army I made *chhang* I did the accounts differently for years I have cheated you in the accounts each and every day my money was dirty it was false sometimes I kicked Mutt I didn't take her for walks just sat by the side of the road smoked a *bidi* and came home I'm a bad man I watched out for nobody and nothing but myself – *Beat me* (327).

Among his sins, the very first he mentions are alcohol consumption and eating the same food of his master; this is very bizarre, since the judge is not interested in his servant's moral transgression as he is devoid of Hindu faith. In an analysis of Keśavdās' *Vijñānagītā*, Cavaliere pointed out that:

> […] food, which is symbolically considered as the cause of binding to the *samsara*, becomes the instrument to train one's moral strength. If the appeasement of one's own appetites, and metaphorically the fulfilment of one's own desires, is ruled only through the stomach it becomes deleterious. On the contrary, if it is filtered through judgement, it is sublimated into a practice (*sadhana*) that releases the self from its own desires and achieves the highest bliss (2016: 226).

Thus, the cook needs to confess everything in order to reduce the weight of his faults, regardless of Jemubhai's attitude; it is about his own salvation and, maybe, he is convinced that everything is being ruined due to his misbehaviour, consciously taking a universal blame. In order to not destroy his own moral integrity, he does not adapt to foreign cultures and opposes any external interference upon his interests – he has no name and represents a category of people focused on achieving their own goals in the struggle for *moksha*, the liberation from the *samsara* cycle rather than achieving success in the eyes of the world. Symbolically, the novel ends with a heavy rain, a sort of purifying downpour capable of erasing the characters' sins. This is a clear reference to the universal symbolism of water which is shared also by Hinduism, as the *Atharva Veda Samihita* state saying "from any evil we have done, act of impurity or sin, let waters purge me and from all that comes from Agni breaker-up" (Griffith 1895-1896: Book XII: 40).

Another Hindu principle that offers a particular perspective of Kiran Desai's narrative is the existential balance – the universe existing thanks to the perennial balance between opposites, which alternate to make the world go on without collapsing. More particularly, the love story between Sai and Gyan may dramatise the Hindu archetype of all the oppositions – the relationship between Shiva and Devi. In order to actuate the world, the divine couple continuously needs to separate and conciliate, thus avoiding the excessive increase of such a power capable of destroying the entire universe. Similarly, Sai and Gyan's relation is unstable, it goes through an initial approach and the subsequent estrangement. At the beginning of the affair their love is uncontrollable, occupying their minds and hearts; yet, despite the noble sentiment, this condition has negative effects as it distracts attention from 'mundane' duties. Therefore, Gyan leaves her beloved to join the Gorkhas in order to give a historical and social dignity to his Nepalese ancestors. While discussing with the rioters for the first time, he feels "a moment of shame remembering his tea parties with Sai on the

veranda […] and even worse, the small warm space they inhabited together" (168), as this distracted him from the common cause – like Shiva, Gyan separates himself from Sai to help the world. During the disunion, however, political turmoil becomes more and more dangerous, plundering properties and killing innocent people; the situation is collapsing and it is no coincidence that Gyan longs for a reconciliation with Sai. Symbolically, during his absence the latter meditates upon the love for her companion, like a perfect Parvati, the only difference being the outcome: while the girl concludes that her life and interests are too different from Gyan's, the divine counterpart's meditation is focused on gathering as *tapas* (spiritual purity achieved through penance) as possible in order to appropriately meet her lover again. However, towards the end of the story, Gyan seems prepared to make every effort to please Sai, hoping for reconciliation. The novel leaves the door open to every possible development, appeasement included.

It is also worth considering the Hindu symbolism behind the appearance/disappearance of Mount Kanchenjunga in the novel. This mountain can be easily connected to Mount Meru, the mythical abide of god Brahma, who is actually the personification of the supreme *Brahman* – the cosmic unity and supreme force of the universe, not an anthropomorphic god in fact. Between Mount Meru and the secular mountains there is a relationship that is at once symbolic and hierarchical, since the latter are reflections of the Cosmic Mountain on earth. Therefore, Mount Kanchenjunga is one of the representations of the mythological mass, too: its five peaks, for example, could symbolise the five divine forms through which the cosmic unity Brahman reveals itself, namely Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, Surya and Ganesha. Furthermore, the analogy between the two mountains is even more evident if we compare the description of Mount Meru in the *Mahabharata* with the portrayal of Mount Kanchenjunga in *The Inheritance of Loss*. In the *Mahabharata* we read: "[the] globular mountain called Meru [is] made of gold. Effulgent as the morning sun, it is like fire without smoke" (Ganguli 1883-1896, Book VI: 331). Similarly, the following words are taken from the very last page of Desai's novel: "The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent" (331).

These two passages seem to refer to the same mountain, so golden because enlightened by the sun. Yet, throughout the novel Mount Kanchenjunga is always referred to as surrounded by clouds and fog, its clear view being quite impossible for the characters. The *Mahabharata* teaches that the mountain is "the abode of persons who have achieved the merit of righteousness" (Ganguli 1883-1896, Book VI: 14), and since almost all the characters of the novel feel guilty for their own sins, they cannot relish the view of the mount. Only at the end of the narrative events all the five peaks of Kanchenjunga succeed in peeping out from the clouds, glowing in all their splendour and becoming a suitable background for the reconciliation between the cook and his son Biju – as well as they and their Indianness. Undoubtedly the boy's choice of coming back home and embracing his Hindu identity again has led him to a renewed moral integrity.

The constant presence of the mist in *The Inheritance of Loss* suggests a connection to yet another typical Hindu element. The mist, in fact, could be the novelistic equivalent for the Veil of Maya, that is the illusion which prevents mortals from facing the truth. All the

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characters of the novel believe that they own the truth but actually they are incapable of discerning right from wrong: not only the Veil of Maya physically obscures their sight but also spiritually obnubilates their moral rectitude, confusing them with false principles.

The previous paragraphs deal more or less with a common theme, that is, the unity of opposites. This idea expresses the dualistic nature of the universe which includes both the consciousness and the matter, thus implying the soul is the absolute reality, indivisible and eternal – the *Brahaman*. In order to see the truth behind appearances, human beings have to control and overcome their mind which is capable of deluding the consciousness and make one believe that the visible world is the only possible reality – the veil of Maya will disappear thanks to an intellectual process made up of deep meditations capable of transcending the tangible part of the individual, mind included.

Desai's migration to the USA can be compared to that of her characters, her novel about Bengal thus being a sort of homecoming. Like Biju, she accepts her origins, including Hindu ethics and symbols in her story – after all, writing a novel responding only to Western standards would have been an act of treason like the ones she decries. What we know for sure is that these cultural themes are treated by the author with exceptional spontaneity, becoming a basic and integral part of the development of the story: she merges Indian and Western traditions seamlessly, resulting in a harmonious fusion consistent with the 7-year process of maturation she underwent while writing her novel. Accordingly, this novel especially depicts people born in India who come in contact with Western culture and appear incapable of – sometimes willingly – forgetting or hiding their roots: however hard they try, their Indianness is always evident because it comes out through each garment worn, each word pronounced, each action performed, each mental association. Consequently, *The Inheritance of Loss* could be defined as a meditative novel which makes visible how people turn their immaterial thoughts into material actions, that is how the personal store of ethos, culture and tradition cannot be buried in so far it comes out subconsciously at any time. In other words, Desai's novel – as other diasporic and postcolonial novels – "thematize[s] the challenge of how the 'west' can understand the 'east'" (Ratti 2013: 4) following the post-secular theory: this is not about a return to religion, but a recovery of the 'visceral' and the 'ancestral' that overcomes the rationalistic and enlightened view brought and supported by the West.

The heritage of Hindu values is something innate and personal: each individual decides whether to repudiate its own origins or become world citizens without hiding its ancestral background. Feuerbach once said that a man is what he eats; in this case a man is rather what he writes and the *The Inheritance of Loss* is an original and compelling demonstration.

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