

## **The Inheritance Of Loss: An Exploration Of Postcolonial Angst**

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### **Abstract**

Kiran Desai is a leading Indian English novelist. Her best work so far is *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), a Booker winning novel that depicts the multicultural ethos of India where identity plays a very important role. Her concerns in the novel are wide ranging and diverse, dealing with the issues of history, culture and postcoloniality. Racism and social exclusion are dealt with sensitively. Colonial aftermath is a major theme of the novel. The English colonial rule over India is a recurring motif in the novel. But it is not the only colonial experience that the novelist seeks to depict. Neo-colonialism in the form of big multinational capitalist ventures and the exploitative mindset of a bigger power over the smaller one is also shown. The sufferers of the colonial exploitation respond to the crisis in their own ways. Some migrate, others resist, yet others are co-opted. The major characters of the novel are the anglophile judge Jemubhai Patel, his granddaughter Sai, her Nepali tuition teacher Gyan, the judge's cook and his migrant son Biju. They live near Kalimpong, an area near the Indo-Nepal border which is facing the problem of insurgency due to the Gorkhaland movement. Their behavioural patterns are varied while their self-perception is flawed. In fact, an existential crisis is faced by almost all the major characters in the novel owing to their colonial experience. This paper intends to explore the strands of colonial experience of the major characters of the novel as well as understand the nature of angst in their response to it. *The Inheritance of Loss* is a multi-layered narrative of identity, postcoloniality and cultural shock.

**Key Words** : Postcolonial, multiculturalism, Indian English, Kiran Desai

'The Inheritance of Loss' is Kiran Desai's major work. It is one of the most powerful Indian English novels which have appeared in contemporary times. The impact of the novel has been immense. The novel won the Man Booker Prize in the year 2006 and since then it has gathered a lot of critical attention. Kiran Desai has literature in her blood. Daughter of the renowned novelist Anita Desai, she currently lives in the United States. Her work is rooted deeply in the postcolonial context and she deals with the world order of the developed First World as well as the so called underdeveloped 'Third World'

in her narrative. The novel studies human relationships and their existential dilemma. It takes into account the circumstances and politico-historical context surrounding them.

The novel deals with very important issues of social, national and global significance like gender discrimination, economic inequalities, insurgency, illegal immigration, colonial outlook in a decolonized world, globalization etc. Pankaj Mishra, in his review of the novel, goes to the extent of saying that ‘despite being set in the mid-1980s, it seems the best kind of post-9/11 novel.’ The Guardian’s review had favourable opinion for Desai’s work and saw it as

“an ambitious novel that reaches into the lives of the middle class and the very poor; an exuberantly written novel that mixes colloquial and more literary styles; and yet it communicates nothing so much as how impossible it is to live a big, ambitious, exuberant life. Everything about it dramatises the fact that although we live in this mixed-up, messy, globalised world, for many people the dominant response is fear of change, based on a deep desire for security.” [Mullen, theguardian.com]

Desai gave an interview to The Independent and has gone on record to say that she writes from an Indian perspective. However, it is her ambivalent attitude to the non-Western worldview which makes it difficult to presume as to where her sympathy lies. She says:

"I realised that I just saw everything from a very non-Western perspective, from a very Indian perspective. I felt that gulf had just opened up, more than ever. Of course, I'm lucky: I see both sides, I travel back and forth so much."  
[Tonkin, theindependent.co.uk]

It can be argued that her diaspora background enables her ambivalence and skepticism towards the issues like multiculturalism and nationalism. All the major characters in the novel feel some sort of postcolonial angst- a quest for identity and cultural deprivation where they are caught up between the East and the West- their home and a supposed heaven. The novel is a reflection of the social realities of our times. Desai’s technique is unconventional. She contrasts past with the present and shows how in fact, both are similar. Her realistic outlook is affected by the postcolonial situation, a product of history which one has to accept willy-nilly. She questions the concept of colonialism, nationalism, class and gender in a nuanced manner. This paper intends to contextualize *The Inheritance of Loss* as a sensitive tale of a bleak present affected by a shared Colonial past. The present that the protagonists have inherited has been rendered even more tragic by the class consciousness of the elitist mindset and the misplaced aspirations of the marginalized class.

*The Inheritance of Loss* is set in the backdrop of the tumultuous mid 80s. It reflects the mood of the times perfectly. Desai chooses a peculiar setting for her novel—the Indo-Nepal border area. The action is centred in and around a small village of Kalimpong- Cho Oyu. The place has a unique past and a disturbed present. The old Judge, Jemubhai Patel lives there with his granddaughter Sai. Kalimpong has been the seat of the Gorkhaland Liberation Front for a while. The local people are of Indo-Nepali origin, who have problems in identifying themselves as Indians. Their cultural ethos is distinct. Gyan, Sai’s tutor, is one of them. They see the judge and Sai as outsiders in their land. While Gyan initially does not harbour such feelings and even falls in love with Sai, it is not for long that he is able to resist his contempt for the essential outsider. What is most remarkable is the historicity that pervades the events of the novel. Everything is put into perspective, but the attempt to generalize is never made. Jemubhai Patel lives with his beloved dog Mutt and a cook. The judge actually has a lower middle class origin. In the days of the Raj he was selected for the I.C.S., but only just. We hear of the judge as an old man, alienated by the coldness of Cambridge society. His stay in England was punctuated by racial discrimination and the resulting inferiority complex.

“Despite his attempts to hide, he merely emphasized something that unsettled others. For entire days nobody spoke to him at all...elderly ladies...moved over when he sat next to them in the bus, so he knew that whatever they had, they were secure in their conviction that it wasn’t remotely as bad as what he had.”[Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 39]

He reacts to this by mimicking the English way of life. India, his home, increasingly feels like an alien space for him. He becomes an anglophile and is ill at ease in India. When the British leave India he turns cynic and self-centred. He looks down upon his family and marriage with Nimi, a village girl of high family, turns out to be a failure. But this is not the only failure in relationship for Jemubhai. He is indifferent to his daughter who elopes with a Zoroastrian Indian Air Force pilot, Mr Mistry, mainly because he had an orphanage upbringing. However, the couple has little luck. Mr and Mrs Mistry die in a road accident in Russia.

As the narrative shifts in time and place, the contemporary saga of illegal immigration unfolds. The cook’s son, Biju illegally immigrates to the United States of America for making money. Biju has remained away for so long that his father fails to perceive his actual existence. He has become the concept of earning money for him, working in a place where even the affluent Indians wish to serve. That the cook is more than justified in his belief is proved by the arrogance of Lola and Mrs Sen over their daughters working in foreign newsgroups like the BBC and CNN. The pride of the cook is contrasted with the humiliation that Biju has to suffer in the US. Young Biju works in filthy restaurants for exploitative employers. We see him drifting from job to job and then

“..slipping out and back on the street. It was horrible what happened to Indians abroad and nobody knew but Indians abroad. It was a dirty little rodent secret.”[138]

What had happened with the judge is happening now to Biju in the US. However, there is some difference in the nature of their migrations. While the judge’s migration to England is willful, legal and conditioned by the requirements of the Colonial rule, Biju’s migration to the US is, to an extent, forced by the lack of opportunities in a Third World country and is illegal. Both face a formidable crisis of identity in the First World countries. Then there is Harish-Harry who runs the Gandhi café in New York. His case shows how making a compromise with one’s identity on the professional front is also no solution as it brings no lasting relief. The crisis is aggravated more by the fact that their lives have been affected by the phenomenon of colonialism and its aftermath. But their story is just one side of the coin. There are people like Saeed Saeed and Achootan who react differently. Saeed Saeed, A Black from Zanzibar (Africa) is also an illegal immigrant to the US. He makes the most of the opportunities he finds in the US and hence is treated with respect in his home country.

“This boy who once had dawdled on the street corner-no work, all trouble, so much so that the neighbours had all contributed to his ticket out-now this boy was miraculously worth something”[79]

On the other hand, Achootan, a dishwasher in a New York restaurant wants a Green Card as revenge. He says:-

“Your father came to my country and took my bread and now I have come to your country to get my bread back.”

This is Achootan’s own way of justifying illegal immigration through postcolonial discourse. However, his counter narrative is problematic as he overlooks the stigma associated with his identity in a foreign land. Achootan’s narrative in fact reinforces the indispensability of Western (which may also be read as Colonial) supremacy.

Thus, various characters respond differently to the bigger issues of identity crisis, postcolonial helplessness and emerging globalization. Desai’s narrative is, in fact, a critique of the colonial discourse which seeks to compartmentalize the Third World (or what Edward Said calls the ‘Orient’) as a homogeneous space and thereby stereotypes it. The rise of economic Neo-Colonialism is depicted with a lot of angst. There is an unmistakable grimness in the narrative of the novel that unsettles the ‘givens’ of the contemporary world, especially Eurocentrism. In Linda Hutcheon’s words :

“ The centre no longer completely holds. And from the decentred perspective, the marginal and....the ex-centric

(be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middle-class, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed. The concept of alienated otherness (based on binary oppositions that conceal hierarchies) gives way.... to that of differences, that is to the assertion, not of centralized sameness, but of decentralized community- another postmodern paradox”  
[Hutcheon, 277-278]

Sai, the judge’s grand-daughter has come to live with him after the death of her parents. She is a convent educated girl of sixteen who speaks English in the ‘British accent’. Though the judge treats her with the same coldness of manners, he finds himself closer to her than any other acquaintance. Sai enters into an affair with her tutor Gyan. He is the first person with whom Sai gets really intimate. In fact, it is after coming close to Gyan that she realizes it was-

“the only time when her life in Kalimpong was granted perfect sense and she could experience the peace of knowing that communication with anyone was near possible.”[Desai, 106]

However, Gyan is a Nepali. He is a slum dweller and keeps the fact concealed from Sai. The judge feels that he is ‘someone with plans’. The Nepalese are looked with suspicion in Kalimpong. Lola, Sai’s neighbour says

“...Neps can’t be trusted. And they don’t just rob. They think absolutely nothing of murdering as well.”[45]

It is not only the West that creates racist stereotypes. Stereotypes are a part of the discourse that seeks to subvert and exploit dissenting voices. Here Desai subtly but surely attacks the racist stereotyping of the Nepalese population in India. It is not a coincidence that Biju and Gyan both face discrimination due to their subaltern status.

The colonial discourse keeps on recurring throughout the novel. Its relation with Desai’s ‘realism’ can be explained with reference to Homi K. Bhabha’s argument in his paper entitled ‘*The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse*’ :

“...colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible. It resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism.” [Bhabha, 295]

The issue of identity is foregrounded in the novel. The Western Countries like the UK and the US are shown as guilty of being imperialistic. But the Indians are not spared either. The attitude of people like the Judge and Lola towards the Nepalese shows that issues of hegemony and colonization are pretty much universal in nature. The weaker group is exploited everywhere. It is here that the novelist deconstructs the notion of deterministic nationalism.

The Sai-Gyan affair is short lived as Gyan joins the Gorkha National Liberation Front to retaliate against the ‘outsiders’. He begins to ignore her. After joining the GNLF, he begins to notice ‘that bright silliness he had not noticed in her before’ [163]. He accuses her of being a copycat of the West:

“You are like slaves, that’s what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself. It’s because of people like you we never get anywhere.”[163]

History and circumstances dog him to abandon his love, though his own intolerance has a lot to answer for this. Sai tries to forget him once she discovers his pauperism and his impatience with the ‘outsiders’.

Meanwhile the GNLF movement is stepped up in Kalimpong. The GNLF men intrude the Judge’s house and take away his vintage guns. The formalities of investigation are done by the police when they catch an innocent drunkard and beat him to blindness. The man’s father and wife plead innocence before the judge but he declines to help. Under desperate circumstances they steal Mutt and sell her off. The immense love of the judge for Mutt is symbolic of his wish to undo the past which, for him, is devoid of love and full of failed relationships. The theft of Mutt and her quest becomes the symbol of grief and regret over the past for the judge, the cook, Sai and even Gyan. The judge realizes his guilt of being self centred. The cook sees the futility of relegating Biju to the US, a deed that has benumbed the relation between them. For Sai, the search becomes the reason to shed tears over a non-existent romance. Gyan repents his rudeness towards Sai and wants her back when he tells the cook that he would definitely find Mutt.

Biju is not satisfied with his life in the United States as it has long to return to his home. He is warned by the travel agent Mr. Kakkar :

“America is in the process of buying up the world. Go back, you will find they own the businesses. One day you will be working for an American company there or here. Think of your children. If you stay here, your son will earn a hundred thousand dollars for the same company he would be working for in India but making one thousand dollars. How, then, can you send your children to the best international college? You are making a big mistake. Still a

world my friend where one side travels to be a servant and the other side travels to be treated like a king. You want your son to be on this side or that side?" [269]

However, being driven by the love for his father on one hand and the exasperation of being in an alien land, Biju returns to India. In Calcutta, he feels 'sweet drabness of home.' The Gorkha agitation is going on in Kalimpong. Biju is robbed by GNLFF men on his way to Kalimpong. It is now that he seriously rethinks his decision.

" Biju sat there in terror of what he'd done, of being alone in the forest, and of the men coming after him again. He couldn't stop thinking of all that he'd bought and lost. Of the money he'd hidden under fake soles in his shoes. Of his wallet. Suddenly he felt an old throbbing of the knee that he had hurt slipping on Harish-Harry's floor." [318]

He feels that strange sense of 'unhomeliness'. There is no place which he can call his own, his home. He is as much an outsider in Kalimpong as he is in the United States. His hopes for a meaningful and fulfilling life have already started crumbling. The only compensation for him is that he is going to meet his father.

The cook confesses that he has been dishonest to his master in the quotidian affairs and begs a sound beating from him, to which the judge readily agrees. His act of beating the cook is more out of his wish to punish himself for not discharging his personal and professional duties properly. It is at once an act of repenting and a wish for salvation. This wish is as real as his earlier escapism and callousness. Sai is still hopeful of meeting the same Gyan who had come to tutor her the first day. Gyan himself is confused as to what his real self is and whether violent collective action for assertion of one's identity is desirable. The novelist seems to be making a case for a hybrid culture where the difference between the elite and the subjugated disappear. In the end Biju is seen meeting with the cook and clouds clearing over the five peaks of Kanchenjunga. The feeling of familial bondage rejuvenates itself amidst the realization of the truth of their love and futility of every other consideration.

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