

Understanding the Intersection of Class, Culture, and Social Conflict in Sai and Gyan's Relationship in *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

India's post-independence era has been considered as a melange of different social classes, diverse ethnic communities, and assorted cultural identities, each of which drafts distinct discernment of nationhood and belonging. These differences often lead to social, political and cultural frictions. In the context of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) agitation in Darjeeling, *The Inheritance of Loss* can be treated as an attempt to speculate the repercussions of class distinctions and cultural clashes in personal relations through the unfolding romance between Sai and Gyan. Their relationship, initially, based on attraction and companionship, gradually erodes under the impact of social inequality, cultural alienation and political unrest. The study speculates that the Sai-Gyan relationship is a microcosm of the broader sociocultural fractures in postcolonial India. It emphasizes all the possible aspects in which historical traditions, class awareness, and cultural alienation affect human experiences and social interactions.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, hybridity, in-betweenness, class conflict, Sai, Gyan

The Inheritance of Loss (2006) written by Kiran Desai is set in Kalimpong, a town in the foothills of Kangchenjunga in northeastern post-independence India. It received considerable critical and buzzworthy success, demonstrating not only the individual achievement of Desai as a writer but also the literary inheritance from her mother, Anita Desai, in tradition of Indian English fiction. The novel enrolls with a wide range of postcolonial concerns, including the lingering effects of colonialism, which can be found easily in the character of the superannuated judge, Jemubhai Patel, who suffers from deep-rooted alienation and cultural self-rejection. It also explores ethnic and political conflict through the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling, alongside the diasporic experiences of Biju, a lower-class Indian migrant struggling with his precarious existence in the United States while maintaining emotional ties with his father, the cook at Patel's household. Additionally, the novel examines class and cultural tensions through the evolving relationship of Sai and her tutor Gyan, which gets strained under the pressure of social inequality and political awakening. This paper aims at exploring the Sai-Gyan relationship in an attempt to understand the conflicts of class and

culture in the postcolonial context. The novel reveals the maturity of Desai in her knowledge of Indian sensibilities and culture which was lacking in Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard. Ragini Ramachandra, considering complex structure and different aspects of the novel, points out that the novel unites and combines wide-ranging narratives, traditions, and people from various backgrounds. Through their tribulations, aspirations, and mortifications, it not only presents a comprehensive overview of society but also offers a solicitous and refined understanding of life and human experiences. (19)

In the novel, the association of Sai and Gyan is one of the central threads, which shows how innocent relationships can be marred by politics and class differences. In the beginning, we witness an emotional attachment between them in which both were seeking for security, comfort, and mutual support in each other's company. However, the reader soon finds a few cracks in their intimacy and affectionate bond. Sai comes from an erudite and privileged background, while Gyan belongs to a humble Nepali family. At first, these differences look trivial, but gradually Gyan becomes more conscious of class inequality. His thinking is immensely influenced by the Gorkhaland movement and he starts feeling that by comparison, Sai represents advantaged, entitled, and disconnected society. This growing awareness creates distance and misunderstanding between them. What once seemed like love gradually turns into misinterpretation and emotional turmoil.

Jemubhai appoints Gyan to tutor Sai when she comes to live in Darjeeling with him, and initially her relationship with Gyan is portrayed as a mutual teenage romance. Gyan is Sai's tutor, and they gradually become attracted to each other. Their first physical intimacy develops through shared affection, flirtation, and mutual consent rather than manipulation or coercion. Sai is an active participant in the relationship, and the novel presents their early romance as tender and reciprocal. Gradually, as their relationship grows, Sai becomes increasingly uncomfortable with Gyan's financial and social background. Gyan, by contrast, loathes Jemubhai's family's extravagant way of life as even in his dreams, he cannot imagine leading such a life. As Sai and Gyan's socioeconomic and cultural differences make it appear impossible to bridge the gap, their romance ends up in a soup of financial and ethnic pain before it can even properly take shape. However, as he recites Tagore, we witness Gyan's cerebral prowess, which seems to frighten even Jemubhai. His preconceived notions are challenged by the supposedly impolite Nepali boy, who demonstrated that even a boy from an underprivileged background can have more intellectual energy. Jemubhai found this to be strange because he detested people from lower socioeconomic groups.

It is very important to understand that Sai and Gyan's relationship was budding during a period when the insurgency led by the Gorkha National Liberation Front was gaining momentum through intense political protests. As a young Nepali mind, Gyan was a sympathiser with the cause of GNLF and finds people like Jemubhai the symbol of people whom the GNLF supporter abhors. So, when Gyan and Sai meet for their tuition classes, Gyan seems to be more interested in figuring out more about her family. On the other hand, because of the class status, Jemubhai had forbidden Sai from communicating with anyone except Noni or the cook of the house. So, with Gyan, Sai finds a means of sharing her

thoughts and some moments of getting out her loneliness, as she compares her loneliness and dearth with an adult giant squid, and compares the large squid situation to explore loneliness, connection and empathy in her life, “theirs was a solitude so profound they might never encounter another of their tribe. The melancholy of his situation washed over Sai. (Desai,2)

Sai was meant to grow up to be an anglicized lady and every attempt was made for the same by Jemubhai to give her convent school education and find herself comfortable with the English culture, as Jemubhai despises Indian things. But as this happens in the culture of the colonized, there is a deep sense of hybridity that one undergoes where the two cultures, both of the coloniser and colonised seem to find expression in a contrapuntal way, often being conflictual and at the same time also assimilative at times. It is in Bhabha’s words, “double, but not yet one” (1994) Sai seems to be an example of that hybrid living, for her, “Cake was better than laddoos”(30), “fork spoon knife better than hands”(30), “English was better than Hindi”(30), Sai inherits a western-oriented outlook from her parents, “they felt free and brave, part of a modern nation in a modern world.”(29)

She has lost her parents in an accident, and life in Kalimpong with Jemubhai, who seems “more lizard than human” (32), was challenging for Sai. Though Jemubhai too had some kind of a dislike for Sai, but her English ways appealed to him and he felt an affinity with her because of her accent, her behaviour and her westernized upbringing. She was an Indian too and felt a bit out of touch with her own culture, like him. Noticing this similarity, he realised that his influence had carried on into the next generation. He felt apologetic as he had shut himself off from his own daughter and realised that he had judged and rejected her without really knowing her.

But the sense of propriety of anglicized Sai finds itself under threat when she meets Gyan as she now gets interested to find out more about Gyan and his way of life. She even goes to the extent of visiting Gyan’s village to figure out what it is that made Gyan play with her romantically. But as she visits Gyan’s village and sees his dilapidated house with bad drainage system, she sympathises with his state, and considers his home as, “someone’s precious home,” (255) the front door was a bit open and from there she could see, “past its puckered veneer to a gilt clock” (255) and a poster of a bonneted golden-haired child against a moldering wall, just the kind of thing that Lola and Noni made merciless fun of. (255)

It is the difference of culture as a ‘way of life’ and their financial backgrounds which causes the distress between them. When Gyan comes to dine with the Jemubhai Patel family, it shows how he is inept with the westernised ways as he is uncomfortable eating with fork and knife. The more he looks at the life of the judge’s family, the more he wonders about how these elite classes to which just a small number of people belong are having all the privileges and the rest of the Indians, who are in the majority, live their lives in distress and financial anxiety. Apart from this, while Sai is unable to eat with her hands, Gyan finds it awkward to use a fork and knife in her westernized environment. The discrepancy draws attention to their cultural differences and makes Gyan feel inferior and alienated, which eventually causes him to become resentful and felt like betraying her. He speculates that their upbringings and

choices don't match as Sai, "could not eat with her hands," (176) "could not squat down on the ground on her haunches to wait for a bus," (176) and trying a local sweet gives her retching feeling. She never chewed a paan, and watching Bollywood movie gives her exhaustion. Moreover, she finds, "it vulgar to put oil in hair," and "used paper to clean her bottom." (176) She had a serious aversion to the Hindi names of vegetables and she was more comfortable with so called English names.

Gyan interactions with Sai and Jemubhai that makes him feel the inadequacies and the victimizations that the lower class suffers from and that makes his commitment to the cause of GNLFF more pronounced and he then decides to submit himself to "the compelling pulls of history and found his pulse leaping to something that felt entirely authentic." (160) In the context, we as readers should also be aware how it is impossible to go back to the pre-colonial days and think of the supposed unspoiled quality of Indian culture which was not influenced by the western culture and thoughts. Bill Ashcroft suggests that in postcolonial societies, cultures are always mixed and blended, so it is not possible to go back to a completely pure or original pre-colonial culture.(108) So, to merely think of the westernised and anglicised ways of Jemubhai, Sai, Noni or Lola and the likes of them to be western and not Indian is also a biased view as they are the ones who because of their closeness to the western lifestyle and culture are living a life of "in-betweenness"(Bhabha, 1994)- a kind of a mimicry of the west, and yet distinctly different from the western ways, though at the same time Jemubhai's despicable ways of hating and even doing violence of his wife when she was alive, are completely unjustified as he seems more of a victim of his westernised self than trying to justify the ways in which the post-colonial hybridity is being celebrated by the erstwhile colonized. One can be a critical insider and do 'selective assimilation' from the western culture and life a hybrid life, but to have hatred for things Indian is not just hypocritical, but also at the same time despicable and ignominious, as being represented by Kiran Desai in the novel.

Through Sai and Gyan's relationship, the novel shows how class differences and political identity can affect personal feelings and break relationships in a deeply divided society. Moreover, the conflictual relationship of the characters in the novel is due to the diversity of the issues and their multiple presence in the novel. It leads to the complexity of the narrative design and discourse of the novel. As per Neerja Arun, another important problem of the novel seems to be the ways in which the characters seem to understand others from their point of view without putting themselves in others' shoes and therefore, leading to conflictual contexts which mars relationships. She further states, "in great culture and complex situations where the level of personal and collective consciousness meets and the quality of the answer it provides to the dilemma, the conflict becomes the executor." (116)

Sai's expectations of love receive a severe jolt when she is stamped on her toes by none other than Gyan in a procession for the liberation of Nepali Indians. When Noni indicates that Gyan was among the participants in the procession, Sai deliberately conceals the truth. She considers any accusation against Gyan a slight to the dignity of the man she loves. Noni's remark intensifies Sai's dilemma, forcing her to choose between honesty and loyalty.

Although, she defends Gyan by lying, she is troubled by guilt and uncertainty. Through this incident, Kiran Desai effectively portrays Sai's psychological conflict and shows how political tensions begin to affect her relationship with Gyan.

"Isn't that your Maths tutor?" asked Noni.

"I don't think so," she said, scrabbling for dignity, scrabbling for sense. "Looked just like him, I thought it was him myself, but it wasn't..." (215)

The episode when the protesters are evacuating Uncle Booty who used to make cheese and chocolate show this mindset of the GNLF supporters who want cheese and chocolates, but would at the same time speak of things western to be foreign and want to kick people like Uncle Booty out. Therefore, Desai comments,

Just ordinary humans in ordinary opaque boiled-egg light, without grace, without revelation, composite of contradictions, easy principles, arguing about what they half believed in or even what they didn't believe in at all, desiring comfort as much as raw austerity, authenticity as much as playacting, desiring coziness of family as much as to abandon it forever. (259)

It is not that Desai is despising the ways of the demand for a separate Gorkhaland, but that the mess that is there in Darjeeling due to the unsettling political and military atmosphere there provides the ideal background to Desai to represent the class and cultural conflict which makes the budding romance of Sai and Gyan gets nipped in its bud.

The failure of Sai and Gyan's relationship stems less from Sai's attitude towards Gyan's poverty than from Gyan's growing class consciousness and political awakening, which make him view their relationship through the lens of social inequality and cultural division. Finally, Sai had to breakup with Gyan as she also finds Gyan and the motives and intensions of GNLF to be dubious as they do not in reality hate the westernized ways, but just the privileges that the English education has given to this class of people.

Thus, through the characters of Sai and Gyan and their impossible romance, Kiran Desai chooses to explore the ways by which class and cultural conflicts find manifestations in the Indian sensibilities and makes the post-colonial Indian society so complex and yet endearing. The background of the political turmoil adds another layer of complexity along with the anglicised mindset of Jemubhai and his cohorts leading to Desai painting a cultural map of conflictual post-colonial India where 'in-betweenness' (Bhabha, 2) and 'hybridity' (5) finds a different dimension of its own.

The novel demonstrates how colonization has not only left deep scars in the psyche and social fabric but also produced feelings of triviality, isolation, and cultural disorientation among people. Characters struggle with their identities in a world where western values are often considered higher-level to local traditions and practices. Gyan's mounting frustration and Sai's loneliness show how these inherited attitudes continue to influence people's lives long after subjugation was ended. Their story also highlights the main theme of "inheritance"

in the novel. They not only inherit luxuries, worldly goods, and social status, but they also inherit the historical burdens, the cultural prejudices, and the emotional losses handed down through generations. Their failed relationship proves that love and adoration is usually not enough to narrow the differences created by fundamental divisions. So, their romance is a microcosm of the novel's larger message: that people are deeply shaped by the history and society they inherit, and that these inherited conflicts often lead to disappointment, alienation, and loss. This makes their relationship one of the most important symbols of the novel's exploration of identity, class, social conflicts, and the emotional consequences of living in a postcolonial society.

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