



# Cultural Dislocation and Politics in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

**W. M. Seenivas Leandar Bias**

*Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Maruthupandiyar College, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu  
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu*



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## Abstract

*Kiran Desai's fiction reveals a multi-dimensional analysis of the local custom, migrancy, postcolonial tensions, and diasporic life. Kiran Desai also examines how some of these interrelationships include and sometimes divide seemingly distant characters and settings. The tension in her writing comes from the struggle of colonial experience, family expectations, and the contemporary struggles of belonging that authorize and compromise the tension between assimilation and resistance in pursuit of personal and national identity. Desai manifests this tension at its full peak in *The Inheritance of Loss*. The novel generates some reflection on colonialism's legacies and the processes of globalization that shape individual lives, particularly those who live on the margins of society due to socioeconomic classics or geographies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes that this novel arguably becomes a vehicle for "letting the subaltern speak," depicting the lives of those who must forge some identities amidst the dire conditions of imposed identity through global cultural narratives. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai interrogates the neoliberal globalization and cultural imperialism that compromise her characters' fragmented identities and emotional integrity. The novel demonstrates the study of cultural dislocation and identity crisis resulting from globalization. The characters Biju and Sai symbolize people's diasporic and cross-cultural journeys today. Desai creates a narrative space where personal identity is vulnerable, contested, and altered by social and political environments. Her characters almost always seem confused and alienated, showing the psychological damage of migration and cultural dislocation.*

**Keywords:** cultural dislocation, postcolonialism resistance,

## Introduction

The story parallels Desai's diasporic journey from India to the West, which informs her empathic exploration of cultural hybridity and fragmentation of identity. While not strictly autobiographical, the novel activates Desai's heritage, revisiting her ancestral roots in Gujarat and familial ties in Kalimpong. Desai creates a link between the individual memory and broader, national, and historical recollections of Indians in the diaspora and shows how the constructs of personal and collective identities overlap. Set in India and the US, *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with relevant themes of

migration, exile, loss, and the desire for self-determination. The text illustrates the socioeconomic gap between the North and the South internationally; part of a narrative moving from the South is how, in the global North, Frances uses to define her self-worth, culture and civilization are formed through Western influence for postcolonial societies. Political independence, yes, but cultural subservience remains, maintaining characters that remain assured of no ascribed place in a changing world.

In her novel, Desai represents the psychological consequences of migration and the dichotomies between traditional native ways and the modernity of



the Western world. Her characters experience a loss of cultural authenticity while assimilating with dominant global cultures. However, no matter how much they try to adapt, they are always caught between worlds, not completely displaced from their homeland nor accepted in their adopted societies. *The Inheritance of Loss* examines multiculturalism, economic modernization, and identity conflict. The text points out how globalization can undermine traditional life in a way that individuals easily become separated from their cultures and roots. Desai's narrative gives two different perspectives on the emotions of migration, but the area of displacement does not strictly mean geographical displacement. She specifically showcases an economically developed country (like America) next to an economically developing country (like India), thus showcasing how the two worlds work disproportionately together.

The story is composed in the third-person mode, and Kiran Desai uses allusion, metaphor, imagery, and symbolism effectively to convey meaning. The novel's title, *The Inheritance of Loss*, encompasses the main idea that all characters receive some form of loss through inheritance. Jemubhai distances himself from those closest to him, his wife and granddaughter, because of his unquestioned devotion to British colonial culture. Moreover, Biju had a tumultuous experience in the United States. Biju copes without sufficient documentation or financial viability but obtains very little in return. The cook in India believes Biju is prospering in America, but in truth, it is not. The love between Gyan and Sai cannot flourish as they come from very dissimilar sociopolitical backgrounds; their relationship points to greater cultural and national issues and the discrimination associated with those.

Gyan likes Sai, but his resentment about her privileged background and the cultural and economic differences creates an abyss between them. Desai expresses the complexity of humanity by combining elements of comedy and tragedy throughout the narrative. Desai uses a discounted flashback technique that cuts between past and present, mixing her characters emotionally assigned turmoil and

relationships. The novel represents the vulnerable state of modern human relationships and how alienation from culture, place, and each other causes disconnections. The juxtaposition of India and America clearly defines the contradictions and tensions between these worlds.

As Jemubhai is about to leave his home to go to Cambridge, his father gives him a coconut to throw into the ocean as it is customary in Indian tradition for the blessing of the gods for a safe and successful passage. Once on the ship, Jemubhai's father yells at him to throw the coconut in to complete the ceremony before they take off. When Jemubhai's father makes this loud proclamation, there is a flurry of activity as eager onlookers pay attention to him, and soon, they find themselves under the same scrutiny as the father, who is the 'figure of shame'. Jemubhai feels the weightiness of being shamed and realizes this is a critical moment in his life. He starts to recognize on some subconscious level that he will have to go through a cultural and psychological transformation into an identity that prepares him for the Indian Civil Service, which is intimately connected to the institutions of the British Empire in India. Kiran Desai expressed, "Jemubhai looked at his father, a barely educated man venturing where he should not be, and the love in Jemubhai's heart mingled with pity, the pity with shame" (TIL 48).

Jemubhai's internalized colonial mentality comes into conflict with his familial ties. He understands that to advance in a colonial world, he must cut himself loose from the cultural aspects and people of his roots. The scene gently indicates that there is a stigma attached to being poor. While the judge's father yells and breaks the social order, the humiliation is compounded by the silent gaze of the upper class. These British and colonial observers can't help but disdain the public outburst. At that moment, Jemubhai resolves to abandon his ties with the past, convinced that being poor will hold him back in the colonial hierarchy. "This habit of hate had accompanied Biju, and he found that he possessed an awe of white people, who arguably had done India great harm, and a lack of generosity



regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India” (92).

While at the Queen of Tarts Bakery, Biju meets Saeed Saeed, a Muslim man from Tanzania. As Biju watches Saeed navigate the American system and succeed, he begins to admire Saeed’s actions, and this moment encourages Biju to reconsider aspects of his long-held prejudices against Muslims and other marginalized and oppressed populations. A very positive experience at the bakery, this episode illustrates the lasting and pernicious effects of colonialism and globalization. Just as with the judge, Biju has absorbed colonial stereotypes from the past, not only stereotypes that contributed to the oppression of Indians but also those that supported the oppression of other minorities.

Globalization exacerbates these same dynamics by putting people-of-colour minorities in direct competition for low-wage jobs and often upholding stereotypes. Biju becomes increasingly conscious that the biases held against him by some in his category have influenced his self-concept and thinking about others. Personal direct experiences with individuals from another culture can help dissolve prejudices and cultivate empathy. Biju’s opportunity to share such experiences comes from his working-class status. For others, especially white Americans, such opportunities tend to be obstructed by social and class divides. As a result, even more than Biju, they must work harder to overcome their inherited biases. “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” (TIL 190).

Gyan approaches Sai after the GNLF march, trying to express what frustrates him. He cannot fully explain his logic, and although Sai is in no way responsible for Gyan’s anger, Gyan’s doubts and frustrations have some valid reasoning. Colonialism has created two significant systemic problems affecting today’s political struggle. First, the borders drawn by the British were arbitrary and poorly executed, leaving many Nepali people in India with no sense of national belonging, even though they make up a significant majority in some geographic

regions. Second, colonial hierarchies endure, with the colonial alchemists persisting long after India’s independence. Whether it is a judge or an elite person like Lola, Noni or Sai (both Westernized by the British and/or wealthy enough to imitate the West), the systems of privilege persist at the cost of the poor. Gyan also attempts to express to Sai a despair about the Western mirroring of today’s culture. He criticizes the need to chase Western ideals, indicating that when people imitate the West, they abandon their culture and hurt the people in their community. Gyan believes this is a larger loss of individual and social identity and justice in postcolonial India. “He felt everything shifting and clicking into place around him, felt himself slowly shrink back to size, the enormous anxiety of being a foreigner ebbing that unbearable arrogance and shame of the immigrant” (TIL 348).

After a long journey from the region now known as the United States, Biju finds himself in Calcutta, and while his most pressing plan is to see his father, just stepping on Indian soil gives him a sense of release and belonging. Even though family contributes to the meaning of home, Biju can see that the role of culture, religion, customs, food, language, and even colour is paramount. These identifiers resonate with Biju’s relationships and the larger community he sees in Calcutta. Biju makes it complicated to think of home only in terms of relationships; he identifies the intimate relationship between people and place, at least for him. In many respects, home is about belonging, an experience Biju refers to as simply “shrinking down to size,” or being able to blend in. In extreme contrast to the alienation and dehumanization he felt in America, where his invisibility indicated marginality, his invisibility in India allows him comfort and enables him to disappear into a cultural landscape with which he is familiar and where he becomes accepted again, whole and solid.

## Conclusion

Desai’s critiques of society’s obsession with power, status, and materialism demonstrate how the Robert days of conquest affected the loss of identity and



alienation of cultures. Her examples of identity loss in *The Inheritance of Loss* comment profoundly on the cost of globalization, colonial legacy, and the emotional consequences of living on the cusp of two cultures. The author V.S. Naipaul has had a notable literary effect on Desai, especially in his novel *A Bend in the River*. Desai made allusions to Naipaul's novel at the beginning of *The Inheritance of Loss* when her characters critiqued Naipaul for focusing primarily on colonial legacies and being unable to move on from a "colonial neurosis." Desai's novel attempts to move beyond these limitations by showing how colonial oppression continues to produce postcolonial bias and economic exploitation of former colonies today, particularly the latter regarding globalization.

The Third-person omniscient narrator narrates *The Inheritance of Loss*. Anita Desai, a noted Indian writer short-listed for the Man Booker Prize three times but did not win, is the mother of Kiran Desai, who became the youngest woman at 35 to win the prestigious award for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. Much of the book is based on her and her family's experiences, incidentally. According to reports, the retired judge's character was based on Kiran Desai's paternal grandfather, who fled India in financial difficulties to attend Cambridge and finally became a judge. Kiran Desai's history is similar to that of Sai's, as she also attended a Kalimpong convent school and had a close relationship with the family chef when she was young.

Biju, the cook's son, is an undocumented resident of New York City. Once he begins to work at Gray's Papaya, the business is raided by immigration, and he must leave. Biju struggles under the constant weight of employment uncertainty and racial oppression, bouncing from restaurant to restaurant. Still, when he gets to work at a French restaurant, he gets fired because diners complained that the food smelled bad! It's disappointing, not because he did not try, but because it continues to end in disappointment. His precarious situation is a lesson to him as an example of the realities of undocumented immigrants and the conditions they must work under in today's globalized labour

market. Biju follows his erratic route in New York. He finds temporary work as a delivery boy for a Chinese restaurant after being fired for his body odour from the Italian restaurant, and he gets fired again because he takes too long to deliver. The work is physically exhausting, especially in the cold weather. He returns to Harlem, where he shares a tiny basement with other undocumented workers. Biju finally finds work at the Queen of Tarts Bakery but still faces a life shaped by cultural alienation, exploitation, and precarity.

*The Inheritance of Loss* looks at the psychological, cultural, and emotional consequences of colonialism and the brutalities of globalization. Every character exemplifies a different reaction to that colonial legacy: the judge hides in bitterness, Sai attempts to understand, and Biju hopes to reclaim. In her multi-faceted narrative, Desai shows us how individual histories are always connected to greater societal and political movements. Ultimately, all characters inherit a loss of identity, belonging, relationships, and home. *The Inheritance of Loss* reveals how remnants of British coloniality today are intimately tied to globalized modernity. In Desai's narrative, characters of all social classes share experiences of cultural dislocation, economic hierarchy, and internalized racism. The judge, who was bestowed the privileges of a colonial education, is deeply embarrassed of his legacy. Sai, raised in a Westernized institution, unknowingly consumes the message that Western ideas of tradition are superior.

*The Inheritance of Loss* engages with themes of exile, cultural struggle, love, desire, and colonialism's painful remnants. Desai's characters are lively and diverse, each with their unique relationship to identity and displacement. Her narrative style is accessible and yet elegant, using standard English so that the story can engage readers from many different backgrounds. The novel thoughtfully addresses the question of Indian identity in a postcolonial and globalized world; it grapples with the notions of immigrant identity and the psychological costs of assimilation. India, a land of vast languages, religions, and social structures, has been home to extraordinary figures in literature, art,



and culture, the most significant of which is the written word language.

In language, writers express both complex realities and personal truths. Male voices have traditionally populated the Indian literary ecosystem, but women writers, such as Anita and Kiran Desai, developed powerful and unique perspectives. Their writing is populated with issues of “Indianness”, but each woman writes in her distinct voice. Desai’s writing unites the experiences of persons attached to India but creating identities abroad. She explores the struggles between inherited traditions and external influences while showing one little-regarded aspect of wealthy Western societies, a marginalized “third world”. Her analysis of layered class, national identity, and personal grief deeply enriches conversations on postcolonial life.

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