Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*: A Study of the Postcolonialism

**Tulsi Rani Patel**
Research Scholar,
Department of English,
A.P.S. University, Rewa. (M.P.) India.

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**Abstract:**

The present paper will try to examine Kiran Desai’s Booker winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* as a narrative dealing mainly with the troubles of postcolonialism faced by the characters, their tensions and dilemmas. One of the main themes of diasporic postcolonial literature is the problem of deport, dislocation and the resulting consequences. Uprooting from one’s own home land is a distressing process that brings various material and poignant traumas in the process of re-rooting in a foreign land. The characters are often sufferers of situation and by the time they understand the problems, they are fatigued, depressed and aggravated. Even when they come back after their distressing experiences, like the judge in the novel, they often widen a sense of suspect and anger. They are in a state of uncertainty from which they find it hard to come out.

With Kiran Desai, a literary convention is reborn. As might be estimated from the rich output of her artistic background, Kiran Desai has proved her literary heritage in formidable terms. Kiran Desai, first came to literary interest when in 1997, her excerpts found a praiseworthy mention in Salman Rushdie edited anthology *Mirrorwork: Fifty Years of Indian Writing*. In 1998, came her distinguished debut, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, which was published to unanimous praise in over twenty-two countries and went on to win the Betty Trask Award. In 2006, eight years later, with *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai achieved a triumph by winning prestigious Man Booker Prize, which had frequently eluded her mother Anita Desai, teaching Creative Writing at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who had been thrice shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Kiran Desai got worldwide popularity for dealing with multidimensional concerns like alienation, identity crisis, globalization, insurgency, post colonialism and multiculturalism including quest for feminine.
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**Keywords:** Identity, Alienation, identity crisis, post colonialism, diaspora, loss, otherness, multiculturalism.

Kiran Desai is a renowned postcolonial diasporic writer and postcolonial literature is concerned with the important issues of place and displacement.

Diaspora literature often projects the consciousness of the communal or racial collective such as ‘Asian Americans’, ‘Non-Resident Indians’, and ‘Blacks’. Diaspora writing is an expression of this shared identity of being dislocated, and is a principal theme in the fiction from Caribbean, Asian American, and other countries. What this means is that national, ethnic, or communal identities are constituted in the absence of a territory. Non-Resident Indians, for instance, are Indians residing outside the politico-geographical territory of India. They retain their Indian identity—especially now with dual citizenship—despite the loss of a homeland. This is perhaps the most curious and paradoxical theme in postcolonial diasporic writing. Indians outside the territory of India claim solidarity with other similar Indians despite their differences (for Indians of the diasporas across the world do come from different linguistic, cultural, regional, caste, and class backgrounds) (Nayar 202).

The epigraph of Desai’s second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* contains Jorge Luis Borge’s poem “The Boast of Quietness”:

…I walk slowly, like one who comes from so far away he doesn’t expect to arrive.

In the light of this poem we can comprehend the procedure of evolution from the imaginary order to the symbolic order in the Lacanian sense and the love, loss, longing and desire in the lives of the main characters in the novel—Sai, Gyan, Jemubhai (judge) and Biju and also investigate the novel from psychoanalytic point of view which helps to understand the concept of postcolonialism more clearly.

The ‘postcolonial’ specifies “a transformed historical situation, and the cultural formations that have arisen in response to changed political circumstances, in the former colonial power” (Young 57).
European powers ruled over vast regions of the Asian, African, and South American continents until the mid-twentieth century. To understand the point: this rule took the form of political governance, economic exploitation, and cultural domination. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, and increasingly in the first half of the twentieth, the colonized states engaged in active political resistance to this rule. Freedom struggles erupted throughout the colonies. By the mid-twentieth century, these struggles had resulted in political independence for many states in Asia and Africa. In temporal terms they were ‘postcolonial’, suggesting ‘after the colonial’.

The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* set in 1980’s shows the story of a retired judge Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, living in Kalimkpong which is a hill station in the Himalayan region. The novel revolves around his granddaughter Sai who came from a convent school after being orphaned. The judge hired a man naming Gyan as her mathematics tutor with whom Sai involved romantically. But this romance leads to disillusionment and the realization that love could never find fulfillment. After this disappointment, Gyan who was a successor of Nepali Gurkha joined a group of ethnic Nepalese insurgents. In a parallel story we are revealed the life of Biju, the son of judge’s cook Panna Lal who goes to New York as an illegal immigrant to fulfill American dream for prosperity. But he was also suffers a lot and not fare any better than Sai and Gyan in his voyage of life. After bitter experiences of American dream of success he returns injured and heartbroken. Desai uses a kaleidoscopic method to expose their gloomy lives. The common experience of a desire for completeness/wholeness and the consequent lack, loss, impotence and humiliation binds these seemingly disparate characters.

The postmodern condition manifest certain traits of attitudes and perspectives, it includes the reconfiguration of the self-other, man-society dichotomy and thereby rejecting certitudes which determine self-identity. Hence “the space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also in itself, a heterogeneous space” (Foucault 23).

The novel seeks to unravel the lives, past and present, of characters living in Kalimpong but existing as traces or residues of spaces they have inhabited evaded or yearned for. It also
shows the issues of globalization, multiculturalism, separatism, insurgency, diaspora, immigration, exile, alienation, identity and more.

The judge, Sai, Cook and Mutt (judge’s pet dog) lived in Cho Oyu. The judge is an anachronism, with his old-world ways and bizarre accent, a relic of a colonial past, resembling in this respect the house he occupies. The history of the house is also rich with the exploitation of the colonial masters, built by a Scotsman. It is appropriate that the judge, a retired ICS administrator, a cultural hybrid, ‘inherit’ this colonial heritage and seek to continue the same prototype of domination-subordination on the cook (his only subject) of which he had been both a victim and an instrument. The judge born to peasant caste in Piphit, in Gujrat, had in his boyhood grand swear as student, so that his father pinned all his expectations on him. To turn up those hopes, Jemubhai went London with an desire to join the ICS, and in this switching, he felt it is necessary to leave behind a past he was embarrassed and frightened of, the past that seemed to suffocate him in the form of mother’s thick love, the humdrum of his father, the unreality of a fourteen years old bride. He refuses to throw the coconut in the waves as an offering to bless his journey, thus denying a past that occupied a psychological space. Considerably, he has a new Oxford English Dictionary with him in his journey to London, perhaps the second ‘great book’ in English after Bible, indicating another kind of space that he seeks to slash towards. He is filled with such a sense on meagerness that can only lead to self-loathing: “he forgot how to laugh, could barely lift his lips in a smile, and if he ever did, he held his hand over his mouth, because he couldn’t bear anyone to see his gums, his teeth” (Desai 40).

The altercation of cultures instills in him a sense of incompetence he is preoccupied by a sensation of insignificance that issued from his conviction in his racial inferiority. His neurotic crackdown could not diminish the stink of curry that he feared he carried around him. Jemubhai buries himself in the library where he is reacquainted with his own country but viewed from a different lens, that of imperialist agency. He reads about Gujarat in Expedition to Goozerat, about the transfer of land and power to East India Company, about the French, Dutch, and Portugese colonizers but all from a distance, from an objective space because “He had learned to take refuge in the third person and to keep everyone at bay, to keep even himself away from himself” (111). Jemubhai survives his English experiences by becoming a cultural hybrid.
Jemubhai returns to India, with intensified detestation for Indians and a voracious desire to inculcate Englishness. The space that he inhabits is a space of mimicry and hybridity that cannot fundamentally integrate or take up the life he had left behind. So his family seems unbearable and his wife Nimi abhorrent. His powerless anger at not being able to measure up to the standards of Englishness, since Anglicized is not English, and his failure to adjust to the space (both physical and psychological) around him is routed in the tortures that he inflicts in Nimi. Jemubhai had chosen Cho Oyu as his space for isolation and segregation. Born in Gujarat, trained in England, worked in Northern India, is ironically caught in yet another struggle for space.

The judges spatial shifts can be seen in close parallel to the spatial dislocations experienced by Biju, his cook’s son. Biju, encouraged by his father undertakes a journey to the United States only to drift from one ill-paid job to another, pursuing the ever-elusive green card. Biju’s migration to New York for better opportunity, living standards and wealth shows the impact of this system of globalization. In him Kiran Desai appears to have portrayed, primarily, the impact of the politics of globalization and post colonialism on the economic structure of the once colonized nation.

The episode where Biju skids on rotten spinach in the kitchen of Gandhi Café is really one of the remarkably drawn pictures in the novel. Biju gets injured and requests Harish-Harry, the representative of the agency which hires Biju and other workers from the post-colonial world, to send for a doctor. Harish-Harry immediately and cruelly rejects the idea telling it is too costly to bear the medical expenses in America. Biju’s reactions them gives us idea about the hard living of the poor people and thus exposes the consumer culture as well as immoral business competition in the developed world. The following words show Biju’s anguish and resentment:

“Without us living like pigs, said Biju, “what business would you have? This is how you make your money, paying us nothing because you know we can’t do anything, making us work day and night because we are illegal. Why don’t you sponsor us our green cards?” (188).

Thus, Biju and people like him are exploited. They suffer actually a postmodern form of subjugation. Biju’s struggle for survival while working in the grimy restaurants of New York and final retreat from America reveal the abject failure of the economic globalization and the forces
of modernization. His journey can be called a saga of disappointment and disillusionment. He passes through intense and agonizing self-exploration and chooses to come back to his country to identify himself. The feeling of alienation is manifest in the ‘lived space’ or the ‘third space’. Essentially the facade of polyethnicity of the space he inhabits, augmented by effects of globalization, the hierarchies and divisions are kept intact and further modified:

Biju at the Baby Bistro

Above the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian…

Biju at Le colonial for the authentic colonial experience

On top, rich colonial, and down below, poor native,

Colombian, Tunisian, Ecuadorian, Gambian (21).

This division system of ‘above’ and ‘below’ gives an interpretative structure of the intensely rooted internal colonization. This spatial arrangement also produces contradictions and paradoxes, which are legacies of the space that are ethnically and sensitively carried within. Thus Biju is always on the edge, verge, a spectator to the ambiguities and in betweens of identities set aside and those made by expediencies.

Sai lived with his grandfather Jemubhai in Cho Oyu, educated initially in a convent, later continuing her studies under the aegis of Lola and Noni in Kalimpong, she is a typical bleached, distorted, image of a colonial aftermath “a westernized Indian brought up by English nuns, an estranged Indian being in India” (210). When Lola was unable to poke with the studies of Sai then Jemu hires Gyan a Nepali descendent as a mathematics tutor to Sai with whom she romantically involved. But Sai’s love for Gyan cannot resolve to the reality of his genteel poverty, his ‘otherness’ as constructed in cultural and social terms. Gyan frantically involved in Gorkhaland Movement and ideologically implicated in the struggle. Hence both (Sai and Gyan) caught, entangled and hedged in their own spatial restrictions.

Lola and Noni, the Bengali sisters who live in a Bunglow with a French name (Mon Ami) and reads Mahasweta Devi’s works in translation by Spivak, who had lost their homeland settled in Kalimpong. Uncle Potty, living off old money from his family in Lucknow, Father Booty, a
swiss missionary who had lost the recommend to renew his visa, making an alien land his home, Mrs. Sen who tries firm to keep up with the elitist circle that surround her, all marked doubleness of consciousness. The encroachment of the possessions by the GNLF boys is most ruthlessly felt by the sisters. They are condensed to ridiculous and extraneous presence in their life led in a simulacrum world of Trollope, Whitman, CNN, BBC, Christmas revelries, cheese toasts obviate the estrangement and rift in their identities. All characters marked with doubleness of consciousness. Hence “one recognizes oneself through an intersubjective relationship with the other, the other is the negative space of misrecognition” (Lacan 51).

*The Inheritance of Loss* is about the Kinds of losses the characters endure. Sai, the orphaned granddaughter of the judge is returned to his care from the convent school. Hiding from his own life and at a loss to provide the love and warmth she yearns for, the judge turns her care over to the cook. The cook’s hopes are on his son Biju, who had the good fortune to get a tourist visa for the USA and left to make his fortune. Instead he found only illegal, underpaid work in the kitchens of a succession of New York restaurants. Lola and Noni lost their property and their genteel life. Father Booty was prohibited to live in India. The judges world is a lonely one, with his tragic marriage, and his inability to belong anywhere, whether in England or in his own country.

**Conclusion:**

So Kiran Desai through her intertwined narrative presents the inner mindscape of her every character which is a darker territory. With a wide range of relations, she has presented the tense, chaotic, antagonistic and shifting locations and also the precarious, disgraced and displaced lives, existence and identities of the Diaspora. In her novel every space collides with each other where every space is competing with others. It illumines the reader regarding the problem of local which becomes global and places the reader in front of the unresolved question of identity, both individual and national.

**Works Cited:**


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