

ISSN: 0976-8165

# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 4 [August 2016]

*The Criterion* 

7th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Cultural Subjugation in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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### **Abstract:**

Kiran Desai through her novel "The Inheritance of Loss" renews the notions of postcolonialism. In the novel Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, the judge and his granddaughter Sai Mistry, their neighbours Lolita and Nonita; all of them are products of colonial-cultural subjugation through education. Through her satirist narration she explores how these people abhor native rituals, food, dresses and culture in favour of western literature, food outfits and ways of life. These characters live with an idealised image of themselves as educated upper-class among poor people such as the cook, his son Biju and the Nepali tutor Gyan. They are mere representations of the rotten debris of colonisation. This article details on how Desai succeeds in portraying the post-colonial independent India where the residents of Kalimpong loses belief in their own native identity. Also how the cultural violence unleashed by imperialisation erases their past, culture and language and how it forces them to identify with strange and foreign cultures is also discussed.

**Keywords:** Post colonialism, imperialism, cultural subjugation, identity, mimicry, Kiran Desai.

**"Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of Self to Other".**

**(Bhabha, 35)**

### **Introduction**

Kiran Desai, daughter of the renowned writer Anita Desai, won the Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award for her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Her first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) was a remarkable book with its theme, rustic characters and humorous treatment of the plot. It is the story of Sampath Chawla, whose father tries to realise his ambitions through his son. But he turns out to be a failure and his sense of alienation makes him climb a guava tree. He remains there as a god man and soon followers and believers throng under the tree. There ensues a curious series of exaggerated incidents involving eccentric characters. The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with the plight of illegal immigrants and the traumatic experiences of colonial racism. Desai unlike her mother goes deep into the interiors of her characters' mind and brings out the core essence which makes up their identity. She delves into every details of their life exploring and revealing how these characters evolve in to their own unique self. Through

their lives she deals with migration, colonialism and multiculturalism while shifting between different settings such as rural Gujarat, New York City and the mist-laden Kalimpong high in the Northern Himalayas. Her novel meditates on issues like diaspora, migration, colonial hegemony and the economic and cultural subjugation of the Indians by the west. Cultural subjugation in a colonized country includes suppression of traditional practices followed by colonized people. During colonial occupation people were brainwashed to consider native culture and traditions as barbaric. And instead forced or encouraged to treat the Western culture as the civilized model to emulate. Desai delves into the after-effects of such colonial cultural violence in her novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*.

### **The Cultural Bomb Dropped by Imperialism**

Cultural assimilation comes as a part of colonisation but cultural subjugation by the west in all fields is treated as detestable by Kiran Desai. She asserts the supremacy of the native mind and culture in her novel. G. S. Amur in *Encyclopaedia of Post-colonial Literatures in English* states that “Although British colonization of India which was responsible for India’s exposure to the west, formally ended in 1947, western domination in terms of ideas, attitudes, modes and structures has continued unabated”(430).

Most of the characters that have had cultural encounters with the West lose their faith in their own religion and culture. Multiculturalism and Imperialisation in its decrepit state can be viewed through the inhuman attitude of the old judge, the insurgent Nepali youths, the cook’s son Biju, and also in Sai, Nonita and Lalita who follow western culture and ideologies instead of anything native. Moreover some of them even show their servile attitude to their once colonial masters and is disgusted with their own identity as Indian. Lola says, when asked by the check point guards why she is reading Trollope, “To take my mind off all of this” gesturing vaguely and rudely at the scene in general and the guard himself. (Desai, 224)

Lola’s daughter Piyali Banerjee works for BBC in England. Whenever Lola returns from London after visiting her daughter her suitcases will be filled with Knorr soup packets, Marmite, Oxo bouillon cubes, After Eights, daffodil bulbs etc. thinking that she had brought back the ‘quintessence’ of Englishness. Sai in her own way leads her alien existence within her ‘tiny social stratum’ which includes Lola, Noni, the Judge, the cook, Uncle Potty, Father Booty etc. Gyan, her love interest and tutor thought he could easily betray her family to his fellow insurgent men since she behaved as a foreigner. He even mimics their false accent before his friends. But the Judge is only happy to realise that Sai behaves like him.

“But Sai, it had turned out, was more his kin than he had thought imaginable. There was something familiar about her; she had the same accent and manners. She was a westernised Indian living in India”. (Desai, 217)

Sai on the other hand thinks that eating with knife and fork is better than eating with bare hand, thanks to her convent education. She learnt “cake was better than ladoos, sipping the blood of Christ and consuming a wafer of his body was more civilised than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds, English was better than Hindi”(Desai,37). Sai was only happy

to be taken from the convent to Kalimpong. As a small girl she thought it as an escape from the humiliations and punishments at the hands of nuns for slight mistakes. Though she still retained the culture she learned there. When the insurgents came to take away their guns they ordered Sai to make tea. She didn't know how to make it in the Indian way; she only knew the English way.

And there are others like Gyan, a Nepali and Father Booty, a Swiss who unknowingly is fond of Indian ways and culture. While Lola and Judge live respectively at 'Mon Ami' and 'Cho Yu', Father Booty named his home 'Sukhtara'- Star of Happiness. Gyan can't forgive Sai for celebrating Christmas and he is always critical of her foreign ways of behaviour. It is really interesting that Desai takes the pains to reveal the past of the characters through their colonised minds. "A normal Negro child having grown up within a normal family will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world". (Fanon, 111)

So when Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a normal man who reaches England to study he becomes abnormal and return as a total stranger to his friends and relatives. Subjected to the colonial racism in England Jemubhai becomes conscious of his odd-coloured skin and his peculiar accent. Even elderly ladies moved away when he sat next to them in the bus. He rarely laughed and whenever a smile came to his face he held his hand over his mouth so that no one observes his gums and teeth. He powdered his face white, covered his legs in shoes and socks- even if it was a sunny day. He worked hard for twelve hours at a stretch and solitude became a habit for him "the habit became the man". He didn't feel human at all and avoided all acquaintances. The Judge came back to India to live like a foreigner in his own country. He is inhuman in many ways. He finds a strange pleasure in wife-beating. And he rapes her to punish for stealing his powder- puff on the very first day he comes back from England. He rejects any help to the man's family who is tortured by the police under his complaint even though he knows that he is innocent. Even Sai when the very first time sees her Grandpa thinks that he is "more lizard than human" (Desai, 39). Jemubhai

To be part of the Western culture, the Judge rejects even his father and wife. Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks* states that an Antillean black man "tends to reject his family-black and savage" to be part of the European society (115). He hates his wife since she never tries to learn English. She stays away from his attempts to modernise her as an English lady. He throws away her hair oil bottles and beats her for squatting on the toilet seat. Her rural ways and behaviour breeds contempt in him. As time passes Nimi becomes depressed and even the servants mistreat her. They even feed her with their left-overs. And when the Judge becomes sure that if she stays on, one day he will kill her. To avoid that he send her back to the village. When she delivers a baby girl at her sister's home Jemubhai's father, out of humiliation approaches him to plead for his daughter-in-law. His father regrets having educated him when he refuses to take back his wife. Even though he provides for her and pays for his daughter's education he never keeps any contact with them after he sends her home. Nimi, his wife later dies under some mysterious circumstances at her sister's home. And he blames himself for her death.

Jemubhai was accompanied by his father to Bombay at his departure to London. When he waited on the deck of the ship to be taken to England, his father shouted at him to throw the

decorated coconut as an offering into the waves for god's blessings. What he felt then was only pity and shame. He didn't throw the coconut and didn't cry either. He was angry that his mother packed puris, pickle and banana for his journey. He returned from abroad only to hate his own existence and those of around him. After long years he cried only when he lost his pet dog Mutt. The judge failed by his own complexes and colonialist racism lives on the periphery of the society which he inhabits. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* states,

“It is not the colonialist Self or the colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness – the white man's artifice inscribed on the black man's body. It is in relation to this impossible object that the liminal problem of colonial identity and its vicissitudes emerges”. (45)

An inferiority complex is created in the mind of every colonised person and they adopt the language and culture of the colonizer. The Judge and Sai are the victims of colonialism. The Judge who is constantly reminded of his own brown complexion, covers his face with white powder and talks with a mock accent as if trying to concealing his real identity. This cultural hybridity invokes the concept of mimicry. Bhabha details that mimicry occurs when the colonized tries to imitate the colonizer by adopting the colonizer's language, dress or cultural attitude. “Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power”. (Bhabha, 86) That is how they try to suppress their own status as the cultural other; a group of people “Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” as conceived by Macaulay.

Even the destitute cook thinks that “since his son was cooking English food” in America, he had a higher position than if he were cooking Indian”. But still, his son Biju hold on to traditions and beliefs. Biju, a cook living a shadow life being an illegal immigrant, leaves the hotel which serves meat and joins Harish – Harry's Gandhi Café which serves only vegetarian food.

## Conclusion

The characters' growth is stunted with their cultural encounter with the West. Thus Judge and Sai, Lola and Noni are further removed from their own self and live with an identity that is created by the imperialist forces. The inferiority complex produced in the minds of these colonised Indians forces them to embrace the culture of the coloniser. The psychology of racism and dehumanisation inherent in colonisation and the rotten state of globalisation gives this book the title “The Inheritance of Loss”. It is the loss of once own culture self and identity.

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