

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*: A Thematic Study

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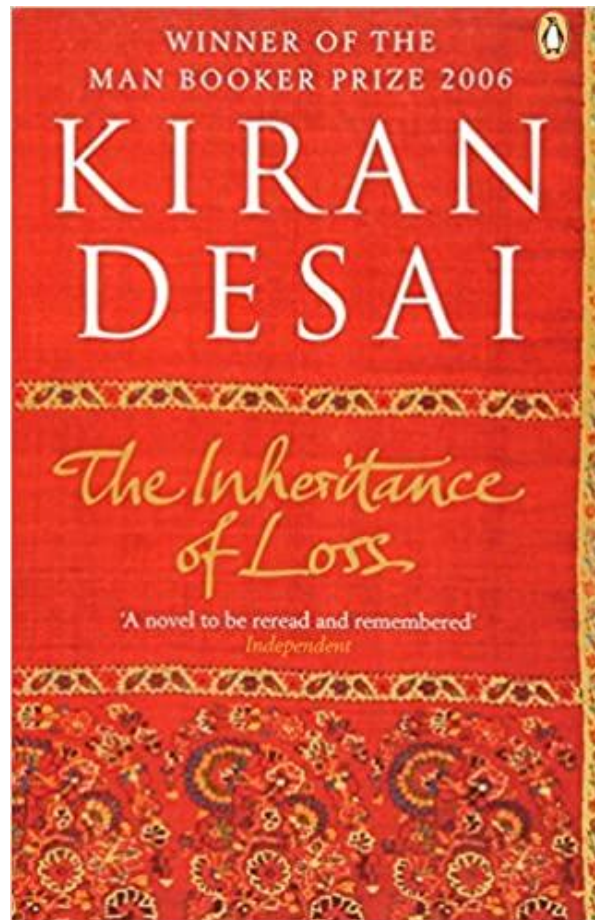
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Abstract

The author Kiran Desai paints a world full of bleak, somber, uncertain, and insecure atmosphere for the immigrants like Biju who symbolically represent the whole brood of immigrants, especially, the illegal ones, always groping in dusk of despair for something they

need but eludes their grasp. One of the major themes that the author deals with in the novel, besides multiculturalism, is globalization and its attendant disadvantages. Kiran Desai, by turns, is comical and meditative in the novel and exposes the pain of exile and the sad ambiguities of the adverse effects of post-colonialism. The story goes forth and back between Kalimpong and New York City. The characters are extremely ordinary ones struggling to maintain their sense of dignity and self-respect, in the face of the morass of Western civilization. The main theme of the novel is the multiplicity of miseries that the immigrants in general and the illegal immigrants in particular face and the irretrievable loss they sustained, namely, loss of everything they value most. And the title *The Inheritance of Loss* is highly metaphorical and richly appropriate to the novel.

Keywords: Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, postcolonial hangover, multicultural conflict, globalization, immigrants, alienation.

Kiran Desai published her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006. The theme and content of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, the Booker Prize winning novel is entirely different. Kiran Desai takes a wider canvas of her subject which touches upon various issues that have relevance to the present day life. She has created literary history by being the youngest woman ever to win the prestigious Man Booker Prize for fiction at the age of thirty five.

Kiran Desai in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* very vividly delineates her characters that pass through vicissitudes of pain and suffering. And she clearly explains the reasons for their unhappy lives.

Multiple themes surface the novel and the main themes are multiculturalism, post-colonial hangover, flagrant racism, religious biases, disparity between one class and another class of people and globalization including insurgency by a majority of ethnic group of Gorkhas, for an independent state.

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The main theme of the novel is the multiplicity of miseries that the immigrants in general and the illegal immigrants in particular face and the irretrievable loss they sustained, namely, loss of everything they value most. And the title *The Inheritance of Loss* is highly metaphorical and richly appropriate to the novel.

The theme is reflected both in the title, *The Inheritance of Loss* and the Epigraph from Jorge Luis Borges' poem entitled Boast of Quietness: "My humanity is in feeling we are all voices of the same poverty... My name is someone and anyone. I walk slowly, like one who comes from so far away he doesn't expect to arrive." (Borges)

One understands from these lines of the great poet Borges that man's only inheritance in this life is one of 'poverty' of various kinds, material and spiritual, for instance; and in the end, one can only strive for, but never actually attain, fulfillment. The Epigraph encapsulates the idea of loss. All the characters in the novel appear to suffer some kind of loss which, ultimately, becomes his/her inheritance. It may be a material loss or a spiritual one, for loss is of various kinds; man's efforts in trying to realize his objective may end half-realized and half unfulfilled and to the extent that his efforts have failed to realize his objective in full, to that extent he sustains loss. Thus a man's life, on this side of the grave, is a tale of inheritance of loss.

The author states that all the characters in her novel are entirely fictional; but the continental journeys of her grandparents as well as her own, has given insight into the peculiar experience of travelling from one country to another between East and West. All these characters, both minor and major ones, are the very products of her creative imagination. But it is common knowledge that no writer can thoroughly escape or jump out of his or her own self; certain amount of autobiographical experience will be there; certain reminiscences, personal experiences and all these things go into the making of the substance of the novel; as the saying goes, all is grist that goes to the creative mill of the artist through the alchemy of the artist's imagination, the writer can create infinite variety of characters.

It is quite evident from her two successful novels that Kiran Desai is endowed with copious imagination of a highly creative nature. She is capable of satirical comedy as is evident from her debut novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), and her celebrated second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, is an eloquent testimony to her talent that she is a past master at the creation of characters, from the grotesque to the sublime. Masterly creation of characters apart, (which calls for deep understanding of human nature), Kiran Desai's x-ray insight into the character of a person is most unerring. Kiran Desai says that she has a thorough grip over the

mind-set of the migrants; she herself has been a migrant. She says that this particular life is no accident. It is her inheritance.

Kiran Desai, as a modern writer, having personally experienced cultural clashes, displacement and dislocation in three countries—her native country of India, then England and lastly the United States - sustains a clear vision of the sad condition of the immigrants and what they inherit and what they lose in this process; and all this has been most realistically presented in her prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. Actually, the mixed experiences of the immigrants are explored against the backdrop of India.

The main characters of the novel, namely, the retired judge, Jemubhai Patel, the cook, Sai, Gyan and Biju belong to India. Kiran Desai explores the experiences of each of these five characters and in so doing she deals with various issues like the political agitation of GNLF during 1980's fighting for their own country or state and the cultural confrontation between Jemubhai Patel before he left for England and Jemubhai Patel during the stay in England and after coming back to India.

And most importantly, Kiran Desai deals with the theme of immigration and the unexpected and the undreamed of struggle for the survival in the United States. Incidentally, she describes the conflict between the group of people belonging to one class and others who belong to a different castes especially, as it is found in India, causing so much of disharmony among the different castes. The United States appears in the novel not as an active agent since it does not have any direct impact on India or its people; it is in the background as a place that exercises an irresistible fascination on the minds of the majority of Indians who see it as a kind of El Dorado or a land of riches.

Kiran Desai very vividly describes the diverse reactions of Indians to the influences of the West. She illustrates this through two major characters of the novel, namely, Jemubhai Patel in England and Biju in New York City. Jemubhai Patel leaves for England at the age of twenty for the study of I.C.S. and stays there for five years and returns to India as an I.C.S. and serves as a judge; and now, as a retired judge, chooses to live in a semi-dilapidated house in Kalimpong situated at the foothills of Kanchenjunga of the Himalayas in the north-eastern region and close to Darjeeling. During his stay in England for five study-years, he has unpleasant experiences of humiliating nature; he experiences the flagrant racism of the imperial British brand. He is treated almost like a pariah, his dark brown skin, his un-British accent and his want of good manners have kept him aloof and isolated from the English society; and this annoyed him at being rejected by the Whites in England. He withdrew himself into the shell of his solitude.

The novel very deftly unfolds this aspect of Jemubhai, in the form of hatred that he directs against himself.

With sympathy and compassion, Kiran Desai delineates all the characters that are quite true to life. She creates every character with a sympathetic touch; even when she depicts the character of Jemubhai Patel, the retired judge, who is presented as being grotesque, nowhere does she portray him as a buffoon, but it borders on caricature. Kiran Desai does it with the total detachment of an artist. He has certain expectations and if a man fails to rise to his expectations, he grows impatient to the point of being cruel to others. The Judge becomes a thorough going Anglophile and starts hating everything that is not English. The judge has drunk deep to the core of his being the spirit of colonialism that he has psychologically metamorphosed into an Englishman, though no one accepts him as one. But the racial and cultural forces vehemently negate his ditch efforts to look like an English gentleman. The judge can at best be an Anglicized Indian, but he can never be an English man. And this gross failure on his part makes him perverse and so he behaves as he does.

As an Indian born, with all the Indian traits ingrained in him, madly wishes both in thought and appearance to be an English gentleman. In other words, Jemubhai Patel wants to bring about a thorough psychological metamorphosis into an image of perfect English gentleman. His Quixotic struggle in this direction has left him a caricature of his original self.

The way that Kiran Desai describes Jemubhai Patel in his unceasing efforts to look like an English man, is very funny and not without a touch of sarcasm. In so describing him, the comic vein inherent in it borders on grotesquely farcical. The Judge, during his five years of stay in England, has developed certain complexes that left him an eccentric, possessing all the idiosyncrasies of one. 'Hate' has become one of the most prominent traits of his character. The Judge, once a man with a good standing in society, leads a secluded life away from city life, hoping for a peaceful life amidst the beauty of nature; but he finds it, to his dismay, that there are the tensions of a hidden hatred. Ironically enough Jemubhai, with his heart full of hatred, wishes to lead a peaceful existence and settles down in Kalimpong, a quiet and serene place at the foot of the Himalayas and very close to Darjeeling.

It is apt to quote Anila A. Pillai in this context:

The predominant traits of existentialism are alienation, quest and conflict. Aspects of alienation and conflict are epitomized in the lives of the protagonists. The retired judge, Sai, Gyan and Biju are a study in alienation and existential angst. (Pillai-172)

But here, suddenly and unexpectedly, the GNLFF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) insurgents resort to violence of every description in order to create Gorkhasthan—with the slogan “Gorkhaland for Gorkhas”. Their insurgency creates great havoc in the region and leaves no one in peace.

Moreover, there is an accumulated amount of hatred deposited at the bottom of the Judge’s heart as a result of his hating everything that is not English. And the pity of it is, he has come to hate himself. Jemubhai Patel has that amount of intellect and intelligence to have passed the ICS and become a judge professionally. But the tragic flaw in his character is that he is absolutely devoid of matured discretion which comes to a man as he advances in age. But, Jemubhai Patel is not a proper Judge of men and matters in real life. The great irony in his life is that while being a judge professionally, misjudges everything and everyone including himself in real life. That is the very tragic flaw in his character. A modicum of common sense will tell anyone that ‘hate’ is a powerful negation of life and, as such, hate and peace can never co-exist.

Kiran Desai, in the final analysis, suggests that these negative complexes, which are responsible for the disintegration of his personality and consequently the loss of his identity, are at the root of the whole problem that the Judge is beset with. But, when he comes to England where he stays for a period of five years to prosecute his ICS studies, he comes in contact with the reality of things in England. He has become completely disillusioned.

Jemubhai Patel, for instance, is unbelievably surprised when an English porter carries his luggage when he gets down from the train in England (Lancashire). The England of his illusion evaporates giving way to the England of reality. For the first time, he experiences the cultural conflict or confrontation when his presence is avoided by the white people because of the colour of his brown skin and his un-English accent. Jemubhai Patel feels that he is wantonly estranged by the white society and this gradually drives him into a shell of his own solitude. A sense of self-loathing begins to take place in him and with this he starts hating everything.

Kiran Desai points out that colonialism is at the root of Jemubhai Patel’s problem and his thoughtless internalization of the white man’s values. If one critically analyses the character of Jemubhai Patel, one discovers that these are at the root of Jemubhai Patel’s eccentric behaviour towards himself and towards society. Throughout the novel the reader perceives that the multiple cultural conflict which is at the base of the lives of the major characters, as one of the major themes in the novel.

As Chandramani puts it,

Jemubhai Patel is the sad symbol of the debris of India's colonial history. The novel traces the process of the judge's displacement from centers of power to its ignominious periphery in a well-structured combination of stories from his past and the present experiences in India and England. (80)

This passive acceptance of Jemubhai Patel well contrasts with the active resistance offered by Biju in America, since he is sensitively conscious of his native culture which he holds in high esteem. Biju would never mortgage it or exchange it for the whole world. Biju, the cook's son, has inherited all the traditional virtues of a strong sense of rootedness, innocence and faithfulness. In a sense, he is a man of integrity and has a great respect for his native culture and, in no circumstances, he would deviate from it or exchange it for any alien culture in order to have temporary gains. Biju preserves his identity to the last in spite of many odds in an alien country.

The multi-cultural clash, which is one of the major themes of the novel, has been very vividly dealt with and well revealed through Biju's hard and miserable life in New York. That Indians going to the States is not an uncommon experience; but there are various reasons that compel Indians to immigrate to the United States. A good number of young men and young women go to the States with a view to prosecuting the higher studies and some go to the States for better job opportunities that command very high emoluments so that they can financially support their families in their native country. Biju leaves for the States with a view to leading a more comfortable life and earning more dollars. It is the colourful dream of every Indian that prompted to go to the States by hook or crook.

Kiran Desai presents a vivid picture of the difficulties and the miserable conditions which Biju is confronted with. His life there in the States is a ceaseless struggle for survival and the beautiful dreams of living a very comfortable life on this side of the Atlantic, vanish like mist before the heat of reality. Biju may be taken as the representative of those young men or women who entertain these tantalizing dreams. Kiran Desai very subtly presents the cultural clashes and the class conflicts between different races of people. Kiran Desai's intention is to show the worries of immigrants in an alien land where they lead lonely lives separated from their families and cannot visit them as often as they wish. These immigrants cannot live there with supreme self-confidence because they do not have a healthy sense of belonging in spite of their being very opulent. A feeling of homesickness nags them at the back of their minds. They always live in between thoughts of uneasy state of living in an alien country and the soothing thought that they are able to support their families in their native country financially. Thus these immigrants live on the horns of a dilemma.

For instance, Biju, finds it very difficult to cope with his life in New York since he refuses to conform to the norms of that society instead of compromising with the way of living there. And, therefore, Biju retreats to his native country without realizing the fulfillment of the objective for which he has left for New York. In New York, Biju's position as a worker has not been stabilized. He goes from pillar to post in search of a new job. And he finds no ease of mind and no comforts of body wherever he is and whatever be the job. As an illegal immigrant, Biju is always haunted by the fear that he might be detected by the American cops at any moment. Their life is a constant game of "Hide and Seek"! A sense of guilt pursues them, and it leaves them no room for peace of mind. It is, according to Kiran Desai, the kind of miserable life an immigrant leads in the U.S.A. At last Biju finds a job at Le Colonial which promises "The authentic colonial experience." Biju lives there along with workers like him belonging to different nationalities "In the basement kitchens of New York." Biju is hardly in a position to question his difficult situation, as he lives in America as an illegal immigrant. At first, he is loyal to the illegitimate system in which he is employed, and he is forced to accept his humiliating conditions in practical terms. However, as time goes by, he gets a better knowledge about his own condition. Thus, even though, it is challenging to get a job, Biju makes the decision to leave one of the restaurants in which he is working because they have 'meat' on the menu. From then on, he rejects any employment where 'meat' is served. Quite some time after he arrives in New York, he starts working for an Indian restaurant. Biju seems happier now, "No meat, No Pakistanis, no Bangladeshis." (TIOL-139)

This emphasizes the importance of being able to stay loyal to one's own culture, religion and customs. Consequently, Biju finds a way to cope with his cross cultural environment, without losing his pride for his Indian culture and religion. However, this example also shows that differences in religious and cultural beliefs are hard to deal with without prejudice and discrimination. In some cases, segregation seems to be the only alternative.

Biju, passing through difficult and unpleasant vicissitudes, feels that he is now in "good" working conditions. But it turns out to be not so good as he imagines it to be. One day Biju hurts his knee badly at work, and in great pain, he asks his owner to send for a doctor. Biju also tells him that he holds him responsible, as the injury is caused by his slipping on some rotten spinach in the kitchen. Biju's relevant questions make the owner furious; and Biju understands that his Indian boss, in spite of his friendliness to all outward appearances, is just like any owner he has met. He is only interested in keeping the costs down through hiring illegal immigrants. 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 for our green cards? (TIOL-188)

As a response to this his owner replies, “Know how easily I can replace you? Know how lucky you are!” (TIOL, 188 PE) This incident makes Biju depressed; he feels trapped. He knows that a return to India is almost impossible, as his father has asked him not to come back, but to stay in order to earn money to secure them both. However, in spite of this, from now on, his thoughts keep circling around the question of returning. He, therefore, decides to return to his home country in the end. He finds the humiliation he is exposed to and the working conditions which are too much for him to cope with unbearable there; so he feels that he will rather try to survive in India as best as he can. It is apt to quote Pankaj Mishra’s argument that: “Desai takes a skeptical view of the West’s consumer-driven multiculturalism” and that the novel reveals an “invisible emotional reality” felt by “people fated to experience modern life as a continuous affront to their notions of order, dignity and justice.”

Biju, like most people in India, has had a beautiful dream of going to the States and leading a colourful comfortable life. That now, in retrospect, appears to be an illusion. The reality is at home and now Biju, after chasing a tantalizing illusion in an alien soil returns home, joins his father and kith and kin, although he meets with a very unpleasant and near tragic incident when he has been robbed off all the money he earned in New York besides other belongings by some Nepali rebels. This incident specifically throws light on the chaotic political condition created by the insurgents of pro-Gorkhaland. Kiran Desai vehemently condemns any kind of violence, whatever be the cause for the realization of which that men fight. Biju returns Biju’s miserable life after his return from the States is a representative example of clash of cultures. However, Biju’s life may be taken as an example/warning that the wealth of America lures the masses of the third World and, in reality, it turns out to be an illusion.

Sai, the orphan, the judge’s grand-daughter, was seventeen years old when she came from the St. Augustine’s convent her grandfather’s house, Cho Oyu in Kalimpong. Her grandfather leads a voluntary life of solitude with his cook, Pannalal and his pet dog Mutt. With the arrival of Sai, the inhabitants of the house become three besides Mutt. There is nothing common between the grandfather and the grand-daughter except that they are of Anglicized culture by force of circumstances. Sai closely associates herself with the cook although there is a wide gulf class-wise between them. Sai spends a good portion of her time with the cook while sharply conscious of the gap in their social status. They are always conscious of it which is the result of multicultural conflict between them. Since they speak to each other not in the same language, there is little emotional affinity between them, for language has the efficacy to create emotional identity between the speakers. And both of them are well aware of the cultural hiatus that exists between them. Kiran Desai brings this aspect of multi-cultural conflict out as often as the situation gives rise to it.

One perceives that there are two strands of the narrative. One strand deals elaborately with the life of Biju in New York and the other is the love episode between Sai, the Anglicized-seventeen years old girl, the granddaughter of the retired judge Jemubhai Popatlal Patel and Gyan, a young Nepali mathematics tutor. But unfortunately their love affair has been nipped in the bud stage partly because of the hiatus existing between their cultures and partly because of the insurgency for a separate Gorkhaland. Having listened to a speech delivered by one of the GNLf leaders, Gyan is overwhelmed by patriotic passion for Gorkhaland, becomes inspired and joins the insurgents, totally identifying himself with their ideology; he goes to a place called Mahakaldara to take an oath that they must fight to the end until they realize their goal. And this sudden turn in Gyan's life is also the end of the brief love affair between them—Sai and Gyan; and this abrupt end is also due to multi-cultural conflict between them. B.K. Sharma explains that Sai and Gyan are different and “what binds, the seemingly disparate characters of the novel, is a shared historical legacy and a common experience of impotence and humiliation. Half-educated, uprooted men like Gyan gravitate to the first available political cause in their search for a better way. He joins what appears like an ethnic nationalist movement largely as an opportunity to vent his rage and frustration” (22-23). Underneath the fight for belonging is the historical consequence of migration and colonialism. Who belongs is ultimately an expression of identity. While both Sai and Gyan are navigating their identity, they are desperately asserting that they belong.

Gyan joins ‘Gorkha National Liberation Front’, he admits to “the compelling pull of history and found his pulse leaping to something that felt entirely authentic” (TIOL-160), and recovers a sense of recognition by mocking at the judge's mimicry of the western lifestyle but such attempts are nothing than illusions. As Ashcroft observes, “within the syncretic reality of a post-colonial society it is difficult to return to an idealized pure pre-colonial cultural condition” (Ashcroft-108). The fact that today the whole world is toward a ‘Global Village’ makes cross-cultural exchanges and influences inevitable. Grown up in a convent school, Sai is influenced by western culture and impressed by her grandfather's use of better English than other people but the idea that the Indian culture is inferior is intolerable to her.

Kiran Desai brings this aspect of multi-cultural conflict out as often as the situation gives rise to it. Jemubhai Patel's brief stay in England for studies is another illustration of the multi-cultural conflict that appears as an undercurrent throughout giving rise to Jemubhai's fumbling efforts to conform to the English manners which only results in the total loss of his cultural identity. Biju, in New York, as a worker in different restaurants, experiences the multi-cultural conflict. For instance, the culture in which Biju was brought up as a Hindu comes in conflict with the cosmopolitan practices especially in the matter of food in New York. The brief love affair between Sai and Gyan which comes to a sudden end is also due to multi-cultural conflict between them. Gyan is sharply conscious of the difference in respect of their class status as he

feels that Sai and her grandfather, the retired judge's behaviour in a condescending manner towards him.

The multi-cultural conflict describes the political situation in Desai's novel. If one delves a little deeper into this kind of political problem, one understands that basically the multiple cultural conflict is at the root of the whole problem. And once the community of people that totally identifies itself with its cultural roots, will form into a formidable force and tries to separate themselves from any other group with a different culture that dominates the community that has a specific and well defined culture; and it fights for its own cultural identity. Kiran Desai, with her keen perceptiveness, points out that a problem of this nature of cultural conflict needs to be resolved through amicable means before the problem, if unsolved, assumes the character of violence.

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