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### A Post-colonial Identity shift of the protagonists in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai

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#### Abstract

Kiran Desai is the brightest young writer in Indian diasporic literature today. She is the daughter of Anita Desai, who also writes diaspora in Indian English. She has focused primarily on her second influential novel entitled „*The inheritance of Loss*,“ which won the highest-ranked Man Booker award in 2006, which included *Fifty Years of Indian Writing* anthology with Salman Rushdie. She was the third Indian to have won Booker awards along with Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. Critics from across Asia, Europe, and the United States have universally praised, reviewed, and read this novel. Kiran Desai unfolded a love story about Sai and Gyan in the background of the insurgency movement, commenting on several globalization issues with great mercy and intimacy. In the Third World countries, marginalization has caused many issues for self-awareness. Here, loss of self and restoration is the narrative's main question. This paper examines the failure of the main characters and its change in identity in the global post-colonial world.

#### 1. Background of the study

Kiran Desai, daughter of a famous Indian writer, has been awarded the 2006 Booker Awards. She was born in Chandigarh on the 3rd of September 1971. She spent the early years of her life in Pune and Mumbai. She studied at the School of the Cathedral and John Cannon, where her family moved to Delhi when she was

about nine years old. When she was 14, the family then moved to England, where one year later, they moved to the United States. In Massachusetts, Kiran successfully completed her schooling. She graduated from the University of Hollins and University of Columbia. She then took a two-year break to write her first book entitled "*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*," published in the year 1998.

It was an outstanding work for which Kiran was honoured. Her second influential book, "*The Inheritance of Loss*," has been well acknowledged as well. She has also won the Man Booker Prize as well as the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award in 2006. Reviewers mostly praised the novel and Desai's technique. Ann Harleman writes that Desai's rich and often wry descriptions are lapped with rueful post-modern ambivalence by Dickens's depth and resonance [Harleman 39]. Also, the book is described by Marjorie Kehe as "a work full of colour and humour, even as it forces everyone to answer the same heart-wrenching issues that threaten immigrants: Who am I? Where should I belong?" [Kehe 13]. Moreover, Pankaj Mishra claimed that "Desai takes a skeptical view of Western consumer-driven multiculturalism" and that the novel shows an "invisible emotional truth" sensed by "people doomed to experience modern life as a continuous affront to their notions of order, integrity, and justice" [Mishra 194]. These reviews only reflect, however, the post-colonial issues discussed in the novel. In addition, Carmen Wickramagamage recently claimed that "most people think that relocation is a tough decision between assimilation (betrayal) and nativism (loyalty)" [Wickramagamage 195]. In view of this distinction, which divides most post-colonial literary criticism, the meaning of this book becomes evident. Few critics view assimilation favourably, while others argue that disparities between cultures must be preserved and upheld. I shall suggest that whether or not the characters can accept cultural adaptability or remain in a dilemma regarding their identity is of vital importance to the novel. Desai explores both sides and ultimately challenges the desire to assimilate and the wisdom to maintain differences, to dwell at the margins, and to prevent "full and unapologetic involvement in the new world."

## 2. Post-colonial Theory

The authors tried to establish a new type of fiction in the English language by introducing new images, especially new rhythms, since the Post-Colonial literature began to exist. The concern for location and displacement, location shifting, and the consequent crisis of identity into being are among the main characteristics of post-colonial texts []. The protagonist of a post-colonial piece is frequently faced with an identity battle, feeling conflicted between two cultures – one with his own culture, and another with a foreign culture. The change of the native into some other than itself, a Westernised native, or at least one who is in a crisis of his/her own cultural identities is, therefore, a central theme in postcolonial writing. There is always a conflict here between the desire to belong to a new society and still want to preserve the culture of the old society. These dilemmas are the characters in Desai's novel entitled "*The Inheritance of Failure*." Clearly and poignantly, the novel tackles these

problems. It is not just about adjusting to a new climate, adapting to new traditions, or learning a new language, but is much more significant and a far-reaching displacement. It is an agonizing process of separation and displacement that can build an imbalance, which may deeply affect the emotions, knowledge, and opinions of a person.

Writing Booker's award-winning novel "*The Inheritance of Loss*" with humour and perception, Kiran Desai makes an exquisite and insightful study of families, the sacrifices each member has to face alone, and the myths each tells us to get memories of the past more tolerable.

In the educational minute of 1835, Macaulay warned the British government about Indian education "at current we have to do our greatest to form a class [in India] that could describe us and the millions we rule, an Indian class of people of blood and colour, but English of taste, opinion, the moral, and intellectual value"[Gauri 58]. His words guided the British Government's educational and cultural policies in India and made English the medium of instruction in certain schools and universities in 1850. It was the baseline for the influence of Western culture on the minds of the Indian class, which re-stratified the Indian culture. The Indians were hired into the British rule „in blood and colour, but English in taste“ and thus enjoyed a respectable social status.

### 3. Findings

Desai's influential novel „*The Inheritance of Loss*‘ focuses not on an individual's story but on how several people make sense of them. They view the world around them and deal with the difficulties they have with contradictions and multiple allegiances. The book is full of colour and comedy, even as it challenges all to face the same heart-wrenching questions that haunt the character: „Who I am?“ „Where do I belong?“. The entire narrative unveils the efforts of the various characters to attain a better understanding and meaning of their „self.“

The current novel deals with the life of Jemubhai Patel, a retired judge who lived in Kalimpong, along with his cook. Sai, the granddaughter of the judge, came to Kalimpong to continue her studies. Gyan has been chosen as her tutor to teach science subjects. On the other hand, the cook's son Biju was in America searching for new heights in his life. Unfortunately, he returns to India, leaving behind the great empire of New York. The main focus of the novel is, according to Pankaj Mishra, on the "fate of few powerless individuals, it manages to explore, with intimacy and sight, just about every contemporary international issue, such as globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, and terrorist violence."

(P:1).

The novel deals with the emotional and intellectual losses of the main characters, as the title of the novel reflects. Almost all the characters in the novel lost something, seeking money or emancipation from exploitation in the nationstate. They were longing for love, home, and acceptance. They lost their background, history, and family for the obsession of western values, manners, language, and

lifestyle. Though many characters in the novel lose, the novel ends on a promising note of hope and desire. The most touching theme of the novel is „Loss“; loss of culture, identity, human relations, and above all, the loss of faith. The entire narrative discloses the efforts of the various characters to achieve a better understanding and meaning of their „self.“ From the story, Samantharemarks in his review, “Characters battle not only with the loss of their freedom and homes but also with the loss of identity.” (P:2) This research paper explores and analyses the theme of loss, realization, and redemption encountered by major characters in the novel.

Kiran Desai’s novel „*The Inheritance of Loss*“ attempts to elaborate on the issues of global problems faced by third world countries. Here, she displays migrant people, who leave their native land searching for global ambition and face cultural and emotional loss. Leaving behind the money and material, they only get humiliation and frustration. Moreover, Whipple Marg comments in his review, “It presents the social and political history of India in terms of the experiences of the novel’s character (p:3). The characters in the novel are revising rather than skill-oriented. They insist on imitation and loss of self and play the game of hiding and seek through the narratives. After a lot of struggle, they realize the futility of immigrant life and fight to come out from the dig of money and materialism that was the product of globalization. They concluded that the self of human beings is more important than anything else in the world. They tried to recover their mistakes and move in search of the emancipation of self. Here, Kiran Desai tried to fetch characters from their dilemma of to be or not to be, leave or live. Finally, they realized that blind following could not solve their problems. Realities of life are naked like Biju at the end of the text, the pink powder cannot hide the brown skin of Jemubhai, cook’s difference between reality and nightmare, Gyan’s economic condition and otherness in own country, as well as Sai’s love and frustration, is more alive than romanticism of ideas. Robin Cohen states that “people voluntarily abandon their native land for jobs or commerce or for the pursuit of imperialist interests, and on the other side they can become both victims and labourer.” (p:4) It suspends them between home and host countries, native and alien lands, desire, and losses.

Jemubhai Patel, a retired judge, is now living in north-east India in Kalimpong in north ranges of the Himalayas at the foot of Kanchenjunga, a small place called Cho Oyu. He is educated from Cambridge and worked as a respected judge in Gujarat. Jemubhai has an anglophile kind of personality. Being a high ranked civil servant, he became introverted and did not involve with the society. He belongs to the class of persons, “*Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, opinion, morals, and intellect* (p:5). His attempt to behave like the British makes him ridiculous as he has imitated the manner and culture of Europe. He was not accepted either by the British or the Indian, so he lost his faith and identity. He lost his family and friends, his nears and dears, lived an isolated life cut-off from society, rejecting him as a human being. He is closer to his dog named Mutt rather

than his cook and other people. His cynical behaviour is unpredictable, and there is no guarantee of how he will behave with others. He recalls memories of his childhood and remembers everything about his mother and father when he was ready to leave India abroad. His departure from India to England for studies could not cover his emotional loss. He lost the taste of life and human emotions, sentiments, and behaviour. His life became dull and less enthusiastic. He was isolated from people, deeply involved in his past, and spent his life in solitude.

Thus, Jemubhai's mind had begun to wrap; he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his skin old-coloured, his own ascent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely manage to lift his lips in a smile, and if he ever did, he held his hand over his mouth because he could not bear anyone to see his gums, his teeth. They seemed too private. (p.33)

Jemubhai lost grip and vision of life and became hopeless, losing the future. He cannot find the difference between day and night; even forgets the cycle of the season. Life seemed to be completely meaningless and useless; everything becomes agonizing and disgusting to him. Jemubhai's sense of loss came with his own aspiration to follow the colonial mind-set. He is an enemy of himself. His encounter with western culture blinds him. He became cynical, self-centered, and frustrated. He desperately tries to be very „Englishman“ by imitating the British lifestyle and speaking in a “fake English accent.” He also tried to hide his Indian complexion by covering his dark brown face with pink and white powder. He even eats his chapattis, purees, and parathas with fork and knife. The lingering effect of colonialism destroys happiness in the life of an old judge. Madhu Shalini directs our attention to the colonial hangover that influences the behavioural habits of the judge, demonstrating how the “loss of self-esteem and dignity” braces the psychological self-restraint scenario (p:6). Jemu's encounter with western culture confused him because of the strange feeling for the native land and the failure to mingle with the adopted land. Eventually, he feels of being a foreigner in his own country. He stands a tragic figure at the end of the novel due to his detachment from his wife, people, and nation. He is the fine embodiment of a fractured cultural personality. The judge, who has become a stranger to himself, tries to complete his fragmented self with different ways of behaviour. The fragmented and fractured self of the judge is barren of any human and emotional attachment except for his dog, Mutt. Eventually, he assimilates into his identity after the loss of Mutt. Falling down on his knees, „Jemubhai Popatlal the cynic“ who had been embarrassed about his faith and customs prays to God, bargaining to have his animal friend back instead of transforming into a believer from a nonbeliever.

Sai Mistry, the granddaughter of Jemubhai Patel, also moved from innocence to the experience of loss, realization, and redemption. At the beginning of the narrative, she is very innocent, completed convent school education, and falls in love with tutor Gyan, a Nepali boy. After meeting Gyan, her position seems to change. She began to retrospect her style of sitting, hair, and beauty, etc. She wanted

to become more careful about her appearance. A different kind of fascination began to govern her life. She became an imaginative, innovative, and enjoys the company of each other, but she was humiliated, insulted, and frustrated by the failure and loss in love.

Whatever the ambiguities in her commitments are (to the West and East), Sai is not weak to become a victim of them. Unlike the judge's blind imitation of the English or Gyan's hatred of it, Sai strikes the balance of self-perception. Her journey towards more honest and authentic self-realization is evident in her introspections. She does not try to be someone else; she is in perfect harmony. Being inexperienced and immature, she focused her life on Gyan, but at the end of the narrative, she realizes:

Her crying, enough for all the sadness in the world, was only for herself. Life wasn't single in its purpose...or even in its direction... the simplicity of what she'd been taught wouldn't hold... Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it. (p. 323)

Sai goes beyond merely steering clear of concrete, known, and accepted knowledge. Instead of a centre in which they revolve, she starts to think of herself regarding other people. She knows that she is a part of, not the focus of, a greater narrative. Ultimately, she feels "... a glimmer of strength. Of resolve" (p.323). Finally she plans to set out on an adventure and pursue her parents' unfulfilled dream.

Gyan also faces the question of whether to be or not to be. He cannot deceive Sai, and he also wants to join the Gurkha Liberation Front's independence movement. He expresses love and appreciation for Sai, but freedom of movement is essential for his recovery. He was born poor and lived in a house made of mud with a roof of thatch. He denies Sai's privileged life where he discovers that the Indian-Nepalese in the area where they are, where the majority are treated as the minority. He winds up with a lot of furious racial revolutions from Nepal.

Ultimately, he accepted the freedom movement as his life's goal. Due to class consciousness and her embrace of western culture, Sai's romance of Gyan, tutor in math, is broken. Gyan thinks Sai is part of the upper westernized Indian elite, and the Nepalese's brutal condition is the responsibility of this class. Owing to cultural disparities, societal inequalities, and political upheavals, Sai and Gyan's romantic dream of happy married lives is puzzled.

Gyan, of both socio-economic and cultural temperament, was unlike Sai. Gyan is battling for stability. When he realized the contradictions, he became frustrated. The character of Gyan was the most complicated, where he discovered insecurities that created a desire for knowledge. He was Nepalese, whose forefathers fought for the British in the Indian military. His urge for strong information is primarily due to his being part of a group oppressed by the elitist,

New-Colonial Bengalis, who had been dominated by the English. His ethnicity creates a complex collection of contradictory identities, his ability to avoid confusion and to define himself more clearly to contribute to his participation in the Gorkha National Liberation Front. He was a successful boy, a man of calibre and principle, but he rejected Sai's love for his participation in the Northeast India insurgent movement. He realizes the conflict within himself, where he immediately wanted to be a masculine Gorkha warrior and therefore, a Sai tea party. He possibly mitigated Sai's feelings and distinguished himself with his fellow men. Finally, with his half-hearted involvement, he was disappointed and attempted to reconcile his love for Sai.

Biju is another outstanding character struggling to figure out himself, who used to consider "America as the symbol of Utopia and the Promised Land that offers equal opportunity to all (p:7). He was living the life of an underdog in America, working as a waiter in a restaurant without a proper visa, thinking that it will soon come to an end, but he has to go through many hardships and perils. He is strolled to get a proper job for his settlement, but he fell in a complex situation to get a suitable job for his earnings. It is an American dream for which many colonial migrants are struggling to fulfil. Their journey to the West in search of a better life consequently results in depression and meaninglessness. At this point, Kiran Desai notes that the people are not willing to work in their homeland, but they are ready to work as anything in other countries rather than adequate placement offered with emotional shock for their life. Eventually, he decided to leave America and return to India to have words with his father. He was advised by the travel agent not to leave America because it is going to buy all the jobs in the world. On one side are companies of America while on the other side are all the world as a consumer, so choose the life of the king and not a servant. But Biju leaves America as early as possible to meet his father. Biju's return from America might be considered as the symbol of the failure of the American dream, where less importance is given to humanity and sentiments of the people. Biju also realizes the same fact that money is not everything. He does not feel any discomfort in leaving behind the great empire of luxury. The novelist writes the emotions of Biju as follows:

In the mirror of this bathroom, Biju saluted himself. Here he was, on his way home, without name or knowledge of the American president, without the name of the river on whose bank he had lingered... He returned over the lonely ocean, and he thought that this kind of perspective could only make you sad. Now, he promised himself, he would forget the insight, began anew. (p.286)

He feels happy and free from all the troubles when he saw himself in the mirror. Once he returns to India, he has to face many difficulties in his country. He was robbed and humiliated in his mother country on the way to Kalimpong. Still, he is eager to see his father as quickly as possible. He lost all his things, but the breath of the freedom he feels in India is fantastic. Loss of all material things cannot lose his freedom. He moves from disappointment to the emancipation of

hissoul. Globalization cannot solve his problem of poverty; maybe that's the reason he lost everything insurgent of Kalimpong, including his self-pride. Globalization and colonialism cannot eradicate the problem of poverty on the other side created by dualism, nihilism, and void in the conscious of third world countries.

Biju is unique to immigrants because he opposes the new culture in which he lives and romanticizes India, mostly due to the positive experiences he has witnessed in his country. He recalls India without first remembering any of the challenges, which led to his migration to America. His story ends at the house of the Judge, penniless, limping due to his wounded knee and humiliation. But Biju understands his dreams illusory and leaves his will to have an elusive Green card and money for his real identity. Therefore, he realizes that:

Year by year, his life wasn't amounting to anything at all; in a space that should have included family, friends.... Clumsy in America, a giant-sized midget... shouldn't he return to a life where he might slice his own importance... (P. 268).

He lived illegally in New York, being an illegal immigrant, he feels humiliated and leads the life of the marginalized. He tries to escape from poverty, hunger, and hardships of his own country, but the new land offers him nothing but torture, racism, hunger, and hardships. Biju's romantic dreams shattered when he encountered with the American environment created for others. His homecoming is absurd; he returns with nothing but a woman's nightie without any savings. He loses his pride, honours, and self-respect in that alien land.

The cook's character is quite paradoxical. All the time, like a typical Indian father, he always thinks about the betterment of his son Biju. He has great hopes and aspirations in the future of his son. He thinks his son is a real modern man, enjoying life in the West, facing all the facilities of globalization. He was caught between confusion and doubt all the time. He knows very well that it is hard to live life in America without good skills, which lacks in his son Biju. He belongs to the "second wave of less-skilled Indian migrants" (p:8). Kiran Desai aptly talks about his dilemma.

This is not only what the cook had done for Biju, but also for himself since the cook's desire was for modernity: toaster ovens, electric shavers, watches, cameras, cartoon colours. He dreamed at night not in the Freudian symbols that steel enmeshed others but modern codes, the digits of the telephone flying away before he could dial them, a grabbed television. (p.37)

It seems that all the time, he dwells in confusion, which always brings more and more complications in his life. He narrates fictitious stories about Jemubhai's past life, from his wife to granddaughter Sai, with self-prides and honours. His dilemmas often given us an indication of post-colonial concern, where people are not willing to accept the transformation of life in the globalization era. Thus, Desai writes at this point:



The cook had been disappointed to be working for Jemubhai. A severe comedown, he thought, from his father who had served white man only the ICS was becoming Indian zed and they did not like it, some of these old servants, but what could you do. Heeven had arrival for the position, a man who appeared with tattered recommendations inherited from his father and grandfather to indicate a lineage of honesty and good service. (p.42).

The cook is a nameless character in the narrative but a link of the narrative from Europe, America, and India. His son, Biju, shatter his ambition and aspirations. He dreamed that his son should live in a big country like America. Unfortunately, when his son left America, he was shocked very much. He also faces the loss of his dream about his son. He lost his identity in the text. The dog of the judge has been given a name, but the cook rejected the same identity.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is evident that through the narrative, Desai is critical about the politics of liberalization. The main characters are bound together by a shared historical legacy and a common experience of impotence and humiliation. Every major character in the narrative faces the loss of emotions and consciousness. Globalization has developed lots of material things, physical infrastructure, and high economic volume against the emotion and sentiments of human life. Globalization cannot overcome the problems of human beings based on economic and technological development. Desai's novel is truly a saga of the marginalized soul, lost in confusion, striving to find the „self“ and reconstruct it in the light of his/her experiences. Kiran Desai, in her fiction, has given a voice to her true Indian self by reconstructing her idea of the „loss“ she has left behind. The self-exploration of characters is more authentic and genuine. Every character in this novel goes through losses, realization, and redemption in the world of ravaged by the colonial past and dishonesties of a globalized future. The emotional barrenness of the present is felt in the absence, the lack of genuine feelings of love, relations, losing bonds, roots, and truth.

Today, across the globalized world, anti-immigrant sentiment is sweeping. The perfect situation would be the accessibility of employment opportunities to all sections of society with our country itself so that there are fewer pressures to seek jobs abroad. Improving the competitiveness of Indian goods and services, improving a modern robust infrastructure, and developing trade practices and support facilities will be the key to face the American challenges. Desai seeks to put forward the question of loss and hints that globalization in the current complexities is not a simple solution to the issues of the people trapped. In its many details, Desai's novel portrays the disasters of the third world country just liberated from colonialism. Also, the novel gives the impression of the European influences' effect in India and how the globalization policies entrap Indian people. It leads to a loss of self-esteem, but more importantly, it leads to a loss of mooring. This is a

significant loss because the main characters feel exiled at stationation. This leads to the shifting of their identity and self-esteem that makes voiceless to the main characters. They are forced to negotiate new identities and to understand the meaning of life. Perhaps, Desai also tries to prove the lines of Jorge Luise Borges's poem "Boast of Quietness," which refers to the self of people who are in search of the true self.

Time is living me.

More silent than my shadow, I pass through the loftily covetous multitude.

They are indispensable, singular, worthy of tomorrow.

My name is someone and anyone.

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

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