


Reflection of Immigration, Alienation, and Identity Crisis in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss: A Saga of “Middle of Nowhere”*

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ABSTRACT

The Inheritance of Loss, written by Kiran Desai, won the 2006 Man Booker Prize. The book thoroughly explains the modern problems brought on by globalisation and technological advancement, followed by the escalating perceptions of economic disparities, diversity, fanaticism, and rationalism as the main contemporary survival threats. Kiran Desai has accurately captured the state of homelessness, alienation, estrangement, marginalisation, and lack of belongingness that immigrants face in both foreign countries as well as in their own countries in the name of class-culture disparities. The novel tells the story of people from various backgrounds battling social norms while being stigmatised by their caste, class, culture, and country. It depicts post-globalization effects, which have ironically had a greater impact on the segment of society known as the middle class, further divided into the higher middle class and lower middle class, despite having made notable changes in the world spectrum in various aspects. The novelist has amazingly succeeded in portraying the negative aspects of the ongoing changes occurring on all levels, regardless of geographic borders, in the technical, economic, social, cultural, and ethical spheres.

New York city, one of the two major locations of the plot, happens to be home to a large population of legal and unauthorised immigrants from various ‘Third World Nations’, and the other is Kalimpong, a small Indian town at the base of Mount Kanchenjunga in the north-eastern Himalayas, which is shown to be experiencing political unrest in the middle of the 1980s following the launch of the liberation movement by the Indian Nepalese. Kiran Desai has effectively depicted the effects of the Gorkha movement of the time, linking it to the main plot. The purpose of this paper is to study the novel's extensive treatment of the themes of home, homeland, alienation, immigration, identity crisis, and above all, the pain of isolation in the shadow of belongingness.

Keywords: *Alienation, Immigration, Estrangement, Loss, Hope, Class-struggle, multiculturalism, Existential Crisis, Disparities.*

“Could fulfillment ever be felt as deeply as loss?”

This question raised by Sai sets the theme for the novel. *The Inheritance of Loss* is a realistic and incredibly expressive novel known especially for its moving narration and for addressing people's survival issues across multiple dimensions and locations. The novel offers a broader

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viewpoint on the issues facing postcolonial Indian society and a globalised world. One of the most dominating challenges of our time is immigration, which requires serious worldwide attention to take note of the issues that affect people worldwide and are divided into a myriad of more minor problems. The novelist wonderfully uses her writing expertise to reveal Indian immigrants' plight who fight between their national identities and the concept of globalisation in their pursuit of better employment prospects and the delusion of the superiority of the West. Kiran Desai can completely comprehend the anguish as she has spent more than twenty years living in America. She shares the drift of 'Third World Migrants' in the extensively structured and comprehensively drawn narrative of the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. Her following remark in a conversation with Laura Barton expresses:

I feel less like doing it every year because I realise that I see everything through the lens of being Indian. It's not something that has gone away—it's something that has become stronger. As I've got older, I have realized that can't really write without that perspective. (Wikipedia)

Desai considers the effects of 'multiculturalism' and 'colonialism' on racial prejudice, immigration, resentment, the complexity of hi-tech society, and disappointment brought on by the economic prosperity of the West. In her writing, which is based on her personal experiences, Desai discusses sociopolitical consequences, identity crises, exile, immigration, alienation, nostalgic reflections, and the disillusionment of the global community.

The story draws the picture of two different backgrounds dealing with the same issues. While one set of the story takes place in Kalimpong, which is close to Darjeeling in northern India, the other set occurs in America, where immigrants from various nations have gathered to find work. The plot is set in the middle of the 1980s, and the main characters are Sai, a young Indian girl, her grandfather Jemubhai, a retired judge and a Cambridge pass-out, the cook Nandu, an elderly poor north Indian man, Biju, the cook's son working in American kitchens, Gyan, Sai's math tutor, a Nepali man, and Lola and Noni, Sai's tutors, and neighbours.

Regardless of their age, gender, or background (educational, economic, social, cultural, and national), individuals in the story fight for their survival concerns persistently. They become victims of severe social injustices at many levels. Biju, a poor young Indian boy, left his homeland to make his life better for himself as well as for his father; he has spent his entire life serving others for the slightest possible benefit. There are echoes of the rigid class structure. The cook stands for the class that is identified to serve others and subsist on scraps. We observe superciliousness and hypocrisy as defining characteristics of upper-class society. The narrative

contains numerous instances where a superiority complex echoes the Judge's temperament. Due to overwhelming nebulous emotions and escalating social discontent, the severity of cultural disparities is to blame for the demise of the passionate relationships between innocent lovers Sai and Gyan. The inclusion of Lola and Noni in the story adds to the realistic element of increased survival insecurity for single women in society. Characters' hopes and dreams seem to be crushed by the differences, which expand their enormous wings and cause them to give up on their goals and desires to be recognised, admired, loved, and become independent (financially, socially, and socially). A feeling of uneasiness that permeates both classes, even the highly educated and powerful, unites these seemingly dissimilar personalities.

The impact of globalisation is seen in two different ways by Kiran Desai. First, Sai, an English native who was raised in England, looks down on the poor Indians who are sitting by the train tracks, referring to them as "Dirty People". There is a pervasive feeling of "otherness" due to poverty and lack of resources. Like Noni and Lola, immigrants who live in India, neither of them feels at home. Desai contends that there is no genuine relief to be found in globalisation and that racial and ethnic prejudices are a worldwide problem.

After a tragic accident Sai, a seventeen-year-old girl, comes to live with her grandfather. After being taken from an Anglican convent in Dehradun to Kalimpong, she is one of the major characters who is forced to deal with unusual changes. She experiences an altogether new world which gives her the feel of an alien forced to live with some strange people having weird outlooks toward life. She has been raised in an environment of Western customs and manners. Her mindset, which is more Western in nature, shows this. She finds the Indian environment and society unsettling and views everything with an odd perspective. This world seems completely "other" to her. Sai, who is the only female in a family of two older men, attempts to find comfort in the fantasy world she has created for herself out of loneliness. As Desai narrates, "Sai walking to the kitchen, caught a glimpse of herself being smothered and reached forward to imprint her lips upon the surface, a perfectly formed film star kiss. "Hello," she said half to herself and a half to someone else." (2). As a result, a teenage girl's first encounter with a male of her age triggers the feminine energies that lead to a romantic relationship. Gyan, Sai's math teacher, and Sai start liking each other. This compact relationship, however, seems to be taking a natural course as both are going through a tough time. Sai feels lonely in the gloomy and pessimistic environment dominating her close surrounding and desperately looking for a friend to share her mind with; at the same time, Gyan is facing many financial and political

survival threats and finds Sai, an innocent company. The two find a cosy solace in their newly discovered world, where they forget their problems for some time. They both share cultural and social differences; this stops their courtship from progressing any further and, unfortunately, comes to a sadistic end. Nevertheless, this adds a lovely chapter to the novel, which otherwise contains a great deal of pressure.

Along with her grandfather and the cook, Sai lives in a big mansion named Cho Oyu, which was formerly built by a Scotsman in the form of a monument but is now in a very poor and deteriorated condition. This we assess through the conversation of the Nepali boys whom we encounter at the beginning of the story. They come to steal the judge's years-old hunting guns and observe this decay and warn the people living there, "House needs a lot of repairs" (7). The home is also noticeable for its depressing outlook that affects the atmosphere in the family: "the gamy mouse stench of a smell place ...the ceiling had a reach of a public monument and the rooms were spacious in the old manner of wealth, windows placed for snow views"(4).

People are found lost in that large house in the book's opening chapters. Inside that house, they have occupied their isolated corners, living in complete withdrawal from the world. Sai is seen reading a National Geographic book on the porch, her grandfather is seen playing chess by himself "stuffed under his chair" in a different area, and the cook is seen working hard "to light the damp wood" in the kitchen. We discover this place devoid of energy and joy, identifying alienation at its top. Sai's grandfather is a retired judge. He is a Cambridge University graduate with a high level of qualification. Now that he has left his position, he no longer feels the power, status, and aura he previously possessed as an officer. Due to the political and economic instability in the nation at the time, as depicted in the novel, he has gradually lost his social status and respect. As the novel progresses, we see him as a self-centered man lost in his own world. Jemubhai's father-in-law pays for his education at Cambridge, he neglects his wife Nimmi, considering her an illiterate, ill-mannered Indian woman unwilling to adapt to his Western etiquette, and sends his pregnant wife back to her parents' house. He loses interest in his daughter and stops caring about his family altogether. We perceive him as a rigid, disgruntled man who gets aggravated by everything that goes on around him. This is his resolve (based on the past power), which, despite life's ups and downs, allows him to maintain his so-called "sahib" attitude. He expresses the same annoyance towards the bakery man, who has left to attend a wedding without delivering them their regular order. He bursts out: "How dare he go for a wedding? Is that the way to run a business? The fool". Further, he shifts his anger

towards the poor cook “Why can’t the cook make something?” (3), This provides a glimpse of the position and power he once held, in contrast to the poverty and turmoil he recently experienced. Additionally, despite being subtle, we can discern his rigidity towards class disparities in his attitude. The Judge's sense of authority and the high position held in the past are expressed in the manner in which he gives commands to his slaves and anybody else nearby. After returning from England where he completed his education, we witness him struggling to settle down with his own family and wife. The adverse effects of Jemubhai's social isolation led to his superiority complex and his seclusion from society. Ironically, in his effort to overcome the inferiority complex that had grown during his time in England, he now wants to treat the world around him the same way he faced for years. He is unaffected by the sense of community now. Despite his utterly resentful and thoroughly discontented stay in the foreign country during his years of graduation, he expects to be treated as a Westerner, a man with more impeccable manners than anybody else, as he believes. Though many years have passed, we see his pride in his days spent at Cambridge University, as reflected by the certificate on the wall.

He loses his identity in the process of becoming anglicised and is unable to completely embrace Western society or feel a sense of belonging to his people. He finds himself in the "Middle of Nowhere" because nothing in this world genuinely belongs to him. Amidst this existential crisis, he "found his skin odd-coloured, his own accent peculiar". In addition to feeling utterly cut off from the world around him, he feels distant from his family, friends, and society. The Judge is raising his granddaughter, who lost her parents in an accident. His regret over not fulfilling his obligations to his wife is one of his main driving forces in taking on the responsibilities of his granddaughter. Although, He decides to settle in Kalimpong, yet never learns the local language to live "with the solace of being a foreigner in his own country" (29). Throughout the novel, he conveys the impression of a man with a sense of superiority and takes great pride in his high birth and English education. He also exudes a lot of power as he holds his lordliness. Desai quotes in an interview with Ira Pandey and Nilanjana Roy as follows:

...the judge’s story was certainly taken from hearing about the experiences of people going to England. There is often an attempt to cover up what happens when you go abroad ... The loneliness is immense. You’re plucked from everything you know, your entire community, you’re telling lies to everybody...I think people find themselves in really lonely places.

In contrast to Jemubhai Patel’s upper-class image, we see the cook as a symbol of a marginalised group in society that is denied access to the necessities of everyday life. He is “A

poverty-stricken man growing into an ancient at fast-forward.” Through Desai's lively narrative, we feel placed among the story's characters and progressively integrated into it. Everything seems to be taking place in front of our eyes. She goes on to describe the size of the cook as a “Compressed childhood, lingering old age. A generation between him and the judge.” Exhibited “...age in his temperament, his kettle, his clothes, his kitchen, his voice, his face, in the undisturbed dirt, the undisturbed settled smell of a lifetime of cooking, smoke, and kerosene” (19). The cook has built up a great deal of anger against his current job, which he has managed to keep within as a result of his challenging personal circumstances. He rarely feels satisfied with his salary or position, yet he dares not leave his job out of the possibility of replacement and increasing unemployment. This demonstrates the extent of instability, a gift of dearth and poverty. He moans: “No thanks to me for anything....see what I have to deal with and I am not young and healthy anymore....Terrible to be a poverty-stricken man, terrible, terrible, terrible....”(34).

Desai has portrayed the image of a servant in such a realistic manner that it ironically stands in opposition to any notion of advancement and development. This class, strangely, has always remained far behind from any impression of so-called globalisation to maintain the class divisions by the ruling classes and has rarely shown any indication of advancement in position and survival in any century. “....something about their closeness being exposed in the end as fake, their friendship composed of shallow things conducted in a broken language, for she was an English speaker and he was a Hindi speaker.”(19). Amazingly, the novel addresses the problems and themes of the present times, “India blurred into Bhutan and Sikkim” where “great amount of warring, betraying, bartering had occurred; between Nepal, England, Tibet, India, Sikkim; Darjeeling stolen from here, Kalimpong plucked from there” (9). The cook, who is originally from Northern India, has made his home in Kalimpong to support himself and his son, whom he has sent to America to gain fame and fortune. He always introduces his son with the utmost pride, and we can see his accumulating sense of respect and self-security behind it.

On the other hand, we see Biju trying to survive in a foreign land working in numerous kitchens in New York city and switching jobs frequently as an illegal immigrant from one deplorable restaurant to another. Through his letters, he draws parallels between the entire Indian experience and America's globalisation in contrast to colonialism and immigration. Desai's description of Biju's personality reflects her complete sympathy with immigrants and sufferers of colonialism. The portrayal is filled with compassion and humanism. According to Desai,

multiculturalism and globalisation are the terms inseparably associated with urban class and metropolis. She seems to be implying that the challenges faced by the oppressed are not resolved by economic globalisation. Because of this, the majority of people in the post-colonial world only experience the churning wheels of advancement in illusionary development. It will be valuable to use Desai's own words to describe Biju's anguish:

Biju put a padding of newspapers down his shirt—leftover copies from kind Mr. Iype the newsagent-- and sometimes he took the scallion pancakes and inserted them below the paper, inspired by the winter with his lunchtime paranthas down his vest. But even this did not seem to help, and once, on his bicycle, he began to weep from the cold, and the weeping unpicked a deeper vein of grief...

Throughout his time in America, Biju has been a victim of the differences between Indian and Western customs. Due to the contrasts in caste, class, and background, he faced in India, he is forced to search for his identity elsewhere. He leaves for America in the hopes that he would be treated fairly in a highly developed society that, in his opinion, has moved past class discrimination to escape the class system and his lower caste heritage. He is disillusioned, nevertheless, by irrational scorn, repeated rejection, and ignorance in a distant land. “He smells,”. The statement is enough to assess his struggle there. Elaborating her statement she voices her thoughts further, “At least they might have something in common with them like religion and skin colour”(48).

Biju quickly understands that he is a victim of economic servitude in America—a word appropriate for immigrants. Although he is having a difficult time in the United States, Biju does not give up his Indian identity. We see him refusing a coworker's tempting invitation to go meet the prostitute to demonstrate his manliness, while Biju takes it all very seriously. Despite these inequities, this beautifully combines Indian culture and advancement. “In America, Biju had spent his early days standing at a counter along with a row of men.” Among these strange people, Biju feels nostalgic and struggles for survival in one way or another other “The spirit of these men he worked with amazed Biju, terrified him, overjoyed him, then terrified him again”(15). The persisting feelings of homelessness keep Biju’s longing for homeland burning. We see his yearning for his father and country in his conversation. He can "feel the pulse of the forest, smell the humid air, the green-back lushness; he could imagine all its different textures, the plumage of banana, the stark spear of the cactus," despite initially making the decision not to go home without a green card and suppressing his longing for his native land. (230)

The lower class has historically been oppressed and marginalised in terms of legitimate social and economic interests in our country, but Biju had a more favourable image of a sophisticated country like America in his head. He now describes America as a nation where no steps are taken to improve the status of slaves, who are hardly given humane treatment. The harsh truth that every nation strongly opposes the existence of the lower class and upholds hate, suspicion, and contempt for them is how he comes to his conclusion. Biju realises “White people looked clean because they were whiter and darker you were, the dirtier you looked” (186).

The Inheritance of Loss offers comprehensive insights into the issues facing post-colonial Indian society and a globalised world. For instance, it concentrates on Gyan, a well-educated Indian man from Nepal, who learns that the local dominating communities view him as an "other". Gyan, Sai's maths teacher, and her love interest, thinks the same way. He is a young Nepali boy struggling for a job despite having a graduate degree. He joins the Gorkha movement, which changes his complete mindset. At one point, his presence helps to paint the story's most vibrant and upbeat side, freeing it from a sadistic strand. Despite the nation's challenges and unrest, their love grows. They have their own world. “Eating momos dipped in chutney, Gyan said: “You’re my momo.” Said Sai “No you’r mine.” He stands for two opposing perspectives on the situation. His presence successfully draws a link between the story's main thread, which revolves around Sai's family. And the other side where escalating social and political problems are plaguing the entire nation. His heart is filled with tender feelings for Sai on the one hand, and on the other, he is a restless Nepali graduate who is struggling to maintain his identity while battling questions of nationality. Despite deeply loving Sai, he despises her heavily anglicized English culture and way of life. Sai’s presence and Cho Oyu’s surroundings accumulatively fill him with humiliation and disgust for himself. His frustration, shame, and anger get multiplied to see Sai and her grandfather’s Westernised manners. He bursts out at Christmas celebration: “Don’t you have any pride? Trying to be so westernised. They don’t need you!!!! Go there and see if they will welcome you with open arms. You will be trying to clean their toilets, and even then, they won’t want you”(176). The love story comes to an end. Gyan joins the Gorkha movement overwhelmed by his passionate involvement, leaving his love for Sai behind. She misfits his Indian image:

She who could speak no language but English and pidgin Hindi,
and she who could not converse with anyone outside her tiny social stratum.
She who could not eat with her hands; could not squat down on the grounds on her hunches to wait for a bus; who had never been to temple but for architectural interest; never chewed a paan and had not tried most sweets in the mithai shop...she who thought it vulgar to put oil in your hair....(176)

Between his commitment to love and his quest for identity, Gyan finds himself in complete confusion. Finally, a patriotic quest to build a Nepali nation incites him. He abandons his affections for Sai in favour of a furious zeal for movement. Sai is entirely ignorant of the historical context of those around her and the reality of postcolonial India. She initially has little knowledge of the political viewpoints of others around her. She gradually begins to understand the worries of people as well as the social and political unrest raging across the nation. She reads H. Hardless's *The Indian Gentleman's Guide to Etiquette*, which recounts the story of a guy who was turned away from a train compartment that was reserved for Europeans. After reading the book Sai develops a kind of dislike and hatred towards the culture, he admired so far furious and hates English people after reading the book. Now, she becomes curious to know the details of Gyan's family background, who migrated from Nepal to Darjeeling in the 1980s. When she meets Gyan's family, she learns the harsh reality of their struggle for survival. Her visit to Gyan's house put her in utter shock. She gets confused to know his poor financial situation, which stands in stark contrast to Gyan's outwardly portrayal. However, this strengthens her feelings for Gyan even more. Now, she wants to know the reasons for her dejections and to get her answers follows him in every possible place. She visits several places, including market spots and college classrooms, etc.

With increasing national, social, and economic pressure, the novel spans a wide range of chapters to address the problem of Gorkha's many different implications. A discussed: "They have a point," said Noni, "maybe not their whole point, but I'd say half to three-quarters of their point". "Nonsense, Lola dismissed her sister's viewpoint, They've been plotting this a long while. Dream come true. All kinds of atrocities will go on –then they skip merrily over the border to hide in Nepal. Very convenient." But you have to take it from their point of view," said Noni. "First the Neps were thrown out of Assam and then Meghalaya, then there's the King of Bhutan growing against". "Illegal immigration," said Lola. "You saw that letter they sent to the queen of England? Gorbachev and Regan? Apartheid, genocide, looking after Pakistan, forgetting us, colonial subjugation, vivisected Nepal....."129

The seriousness of the matter has been successfully communicated from both the viewpoints, Indians as well as Gorkhas, in this conversation between Lola and Noni. The gravity of an older woman and the hazy mood of a young woman, however, have both been exquisitely represented. Lola, a divorcee, and mother of a small kid is capable of understanding the gravity of the demands and their possible results. Whereas Noni, a young girl living in a whirlpool of

emotions, ignores the seriousness of the issue out of her impulsive approach towards things. It seems “Life has passed her by and in those days, things had to happen fast for a girl, or they didn’t happen at all.” 68 Revealing her mind to Sai, she says, “Listen to me, if you get a chance in life, take it. Look at me, I should have thought about the future when I was young. Instead, only when it was too late did I realize what I should have done long ago.”(69)

Desai, in my opinion, is one of those authors who is gifted with the ability to deal with a highly sensitive subject in a superbly humorous style, deliver the topic by weaving heartfelt tales in the suffering of characters who are contradictorily set to face various life circumstances and succeed in abruptly drawing the reader's attention towards the seriousness of the subject. We can see how Kiran Desai's writing rises beyond all human frailties and goals to achieve ironic self-fulfilment amidst all contradictions in almost every one of her works. A similar characteristic can be seen in the current narrative as we witness all struggles coming to an end in one way or another while life goes on for everyone. The entire clamour dies down at the end, much like in her debut book *Hullabaloo*. *Hullabaloo* in the *Guava Orchard*, the author's debut novel awarded with the ‘Betty Trask award’, excels in creating vivid characters and explores the particular lifestyles of middle-class people. The narrative highlights the various hardships *Shahkot's* inhabitants face, who ultimately find themselves in hilarious situations. Undoubtedly, it is a superbly fascinating narration. The novel offers a wonderful blending of fact and imagination that sometimes overwhelms our senses with a wave of laughter and other times with a soft shower of reality wrapped in excellent humour. Desai's creativity successfully balances humour and seriousness, preserving its fragrance throughout the narration of *The Inheritance of Loss*. We find humorous catches in the conversation between Sai and the cook, who weirdly pronounce words to impress her.

In the end, *Cho Oyu* is a place where people wait for a beloved, and their wait is partially fulfilled too. Certain interesting incidents help us shake the gloomy experiences we have throughout. Sai returns home noticing "a tiny dot of a figure labouring up the slope" (323–34). She moves to the kitchen with several questions running through her mind, including "Gyan? She had a sudden glimmer of optimism. Or perhaps she imagines "someone who had found Mutt?" However, she approaches attentively and observes Biju and his father "leaping at each other as the gate swung open". Biju has finally returned home. Though his desire did not come true, he was still able to travel on his own and accepted his failure, and his father is happy to see him back. Biju's struggle identifies the plight of unemployed immigrant workers and the

drift in a modern, globalised, capitalist society. However, the homecoming of Biju lightens all burdens: “The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you need to do was to reach out and pluck it” (324).

Desai draws on her experiences in both cultures through her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, which deals with a contemporary issue. Her depiction of the Judge and Biju in a strange country and their feeling of homelessness after returning to the "Middle of Nowhere" beautifully combined past and present. She has brilliantly captured the misery of immigration, penetrating deeply into the characters. Most people in the post-modern environment of the twenty-first century may relate to this sense of rootlessness., Sai's teachers Lola and Noni, love all things English, as well as Father Booty, a Swiss immigrant, and Gyan, a Nepalese, are all depicted by Desai in a magnificent portrayal of multiculturalism. We can finally see the inheritance of alienation. The 'loss' in the title identifies its meaning significantly. Each character in the novel has their own unique set of losses, be it emotional, financial, social, psychological, moral, etc. Everyone seems to be struggling hard to find their share fighting the complexities of life, irrespective of their class, culture, and social and geographical conditions. The Judge, Sai, the Cook, Biju, Father Booty, Lola, Noni, and Gyan all have to experience class, political, social, and cultural alienation being trapped in the "Middle of Nowhere", that dominates the saga.

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