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A Post-Colonial Study of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Dr. Satyendra Kumar
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bundelkhand College, Jhansi
Email: satyendrachaudhary376@gmail.com

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Abstract:
Kiran Desai has established herself among the most prominent writers of the contemporary time just by writing few novels which include, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), and *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* (2025). Her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, for which she won the Man Booker Prize of 2006, is the finest example of postmodern literature. It deals with the problems of postmodern era like globalization, multiculturalism, migration, and post-colonial issues. But the major concern of the paper is to explore the problem of migration and post-colonialism that is exhibited throughout the novel. Through this novel, Desai tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Migration, Diaspora, Ambivalence, Other, Globalization

Postcolonial critics, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write in their book, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature*, "a major feature of post-colonial literature is the concern with placement and displacement" (8). Shifting of location from one land to another is a painful process, and uprooting from one's own culture and re-rooting in another alien culture always results in identity crisis. Kiran Desai's novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, addresses this postcolonial problem faced by her characters. All the characters in the novel, one way or the other, suffer from a colonized mind set as their minds are filled with the seeds of westernization. Their blind pursuit of the West results in migration, which in turn leads them towards alienation. The sense of alienation is an inherent aspects of the migrant situation in which the individual's identity is torn between the old and the new world experiences.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha talks about the negative effects of migration and diaspora. Moving to a new place forces people to live far away from what they still think of as 'home'. He explains that the experience of going to another country brings "gathering the signs of approval an acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines, gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present" (139). Through her novel, Desai traces the pains, pathology, despair and agonies of Indian immigrants in European countries and depicts the feeling of humiliation experienced by these immigrants due to racialism. The aptness of the poem, by Jorge Luis Borges "The Boast of Quietness", which Kiran Desai has chosen as the epigraph for *The Inheritance of Loss* adds immeasurably to the impact of the depiction of immigrants in the narrative. These immigrants have lost their homelands and have lost their identity and cannot hope 'to arrive' anywhere:

"My name is someone and any one.
I walk slowly, like one who comes from
So far away he doesn't expect to arrive".

Desai keeps on highlighting throughout the novel the colonial mindset that Indians have. People in countries like India have great regards for everything that is associated with countries like Britain or America. This blind attitude is seen in almost all the characters of the novel. They still live colonized lives socially, mentally, and culturally. The characters in the novel blindly appreciate everything that is related to Western countries. However, copying blindly and running towards the West might put a person into a point from where one can go nowhere. Because a person might lost one's own culture and may not adopt the western lifestyle in a proper way as a result he faces the problem of ambivalence. Under the bright and glorious prospects of the West lay darker, dreadful realities that the writer brings to light.

The story of *The Inheritance of Loss* predominantly moves between Kalimpong in india and New York in America. The thoughts, actions, aspirations, dreams, memories and sufferings of the two main protagonists – Jemubhai and Biju– as migrants in London and New York respectively, represent their expatriate consciousness. Jemubhai originally belongs to the famous Patel family in Gujarat. He was a brilliant student in school and got scholarship in college for higher studies. Bomanbhai Patel, the judge's father, was like any ambitious Indian parent who nurtured the dream of sending his son to England for higher studies. However, his financial limitations made this impossible. To overcome his financial limitations, he borrowed ten thousand rupees at an interest rate of twenty-two percent from a moneylender. When he realized that even this amount was not enough to fulfill his ambitions, he began searching for a bride for his son who could bring a substantial

dowry. As the news of judge's bright prospect- his forthcoming studies at an English university- spread throughout the localities, a suitable match was quickly arranged. Before the judge could leave for England, his marriage was hastily solemnized with Bela, the daughter of a wealthy man. Leaving his one month old bride at his ancestral home in Piphit, he set out on his sea journey to pursue higher studies at Cambridge. During his voyage, he enjoyed a great deal of sight-seeing and assumed that poverty was simply part and parcel of the Indian sub-continent. The judge had imagined only the glories, prosperity, and affluence of the Western world, believing those countries to be free from dirt, rubbish, undernourishment, and poverty. But when he arrived at Cambridge, he found that the reality was different from what he had imagined:

> The England in which he searched for a room to rent was formed of tiny gray house in gray streets, stuck together and down as if on a glue trap. It took him by surprise because he'd expected only grandness, hadn't realized that here, too, people could be poor and live unaesthetic lives. (38)

While his father-in-law had arranged for a military band to serenade his grand departure at the Bombay docks, his arrival in England was met with little pomp and proved utterly disappointing. He even struggled to find a room, and when he finally did, miles away from the university, his landlady was unwelcoming and insisted on calling him 'James'. So, the first thing that happened with Jemubhai was that he losed his name–his identity-as he reached England.

In his seminal book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said says, "The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (1). In England, Jemubhai faced racial discrimination and was treated as an outcast, as an 'Other'. It was there that he began to feel shame about his cultural heritage and his darker skin. This sense of shame grew stronger with each passing day. In a completely alien Western world, he felt hesitant and timid, unable to go out or interact comfortably with white people. Jemubhai was acutely aware of his brown skin, his Indian accent, and above all, the contemptuous and discriminatory looks of the white people around him. The character of Jumubhai embodies what Fanon describes as the psychological violence of colonialism, "Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea" (*Black Skin* 116). Desai has very precisely portrayed the suppressed psyche of a young Indian living among the white British:

For the entire day nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things, and elderly ladies, even the hapless -blue-haired, spotted, faces like collapsing pumpkins moved over when

he sat next to them in the bus...the young and beautiful were no kinder, the girls held their hoses and giggled, "phew, he stinks of curry!". (39)

His culture, his skin color, and his language all made him the embodiment of the 'Other' in England and he began to question his identity and his connection to India while studying there. As a result, "He retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man and it crushed him into a shadow" (39). The judge looked at the English as someone superior and this attitude put him in a post-colonial dilemma that aggravated into him a sense of ambivalence. In his attempt to integrate into the imperial center, his skin color became an eyesore and the greatest obstacle. He then adopted the strategy of disguise, applying copious amounts of powder to his face and emulating English manners, ultimately becoming excessively English in his behavior.

When he returned from England, he turned completely into an anglophile and began to hate the Indian culture, traditions, and mannerism. He purchased an old house from a Scottish man who told him, "it is very isolated but the land has potential" for "quinine, sericulture, cardamom, orchids" (28). However, he was not interested in the agricultural possibilities; rather, he valued the house as a place where he could live "with the solace of being a foreigner in his own country" (29). He imitated the British habit of building cottages in hill stations and indulged in gardening, emulating their lifestyle. He could not treat anyone from his father to his cook affectionately when he returned back to India, because his futile attempts to fit into an alien culture made him emotionally barren and spiritually drained. He lived entirely in an Anglicized manner – applying copious powder to his face, hunted animals with his gun, eating toast for breakfast and crumpets for tea, using a knife and fork even for chapattis- and poured all his love and affection into his pet dog, Mutt.

Through the character of Jemubhai Patel, Desai illustrates how many leading Indians consider themselves overly English and, in the process forget the traditional ways of Indian life. Consequently, they fail to assimilate the new culture while abandoning their own, ultimately becoming 'nowhere men' or 'foreigners,' nurturing intense resentment toward both Indians and the English. Frantz Fanon, in his analysis of the psychological effects of colonialism on the colonized mind, argues that when "the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil", over the time, the native begins to internalize this prejudiced and racialized view as true (*The Wretched* 41). As a result, the native comes to see himself as evil, pagan, and primitive. The black man loses his sense of self because he can perceive himself only through the eyes of the white man. For the native, the only way to cope with this psychological inadequacy is to try to be as 'white' as possible. He adopts Western values, cultures, religion, language, and customs while rejecting his own traditions, putting on, in

Fanon's terms, 'white masks,' as the judge does in the novel. However, this 'mask' over black skin is never a perfect solution. Fanon argues that the native experiences a schizophrenic condition as a result of this duality. As Fanon says, "If he is overwhelmed to such a degree by the wish to be white, it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race; to the identical degree to which that society creates difficulties for him, he will find himself thrust into a neurotic situation" (*Black Skin* 100).

The build-up of this sense of inadequacy and inferiority in the colonized psyche, Fanon argues, results in violence. Violence, he writes, becomes a form of self-assertion. When the native realizes that he cannot hope to become truly "white," or even expel the whites, his violence erupts against his own people. According to Fanon, "Violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (*The Wretched* 94). In the novel, the judge directs his frustration towards all Indians, especially his wife. He treats her inhumanely, abuses her physically, and develops a habit of beating her for trivial and insignificant reasons. Although his wife is beautiful, he always looks at her with hatred, having nurtured the conviction that an Indian girl can never be more beautiful than an English one. He considers his wife uncivilized and barbarous, unfit to be taken to official parties. ¿He despises her typical Indian qualities and asks her, "Why do you have to dress in such a gaudy manner? Yellow and pink? Are you mad?" (172). He attempts to change her identity, forcing her to learn English and behave in a Western manner, even though she resists. Ironically, the judge's wife, who had provided the financial assistance for him to go abroad, becomes 'double-colonized'—first as an Indian at the hands of the British, and then at the hands of her husband. ¿As Gayatri Spivak notes in her most quoted essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the structure of colonialism prevents the subaltern from speaking, and this silencing is doubly reinforced in the case of the native woman, who is oppressed both by patriarchy and colonialism—on account of both her gender and her race. As Spivak says, "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (287).

Just like Jemubhai's father, who sent his son to the UK in colonial times to improve his social and economic status, in the post-independence scenario the judge's cook sends his son to the US, believing it is the only way to improve their lives. The author delineates the themes of dislocation, disillusionment, nostalgia, yearning for home, and longing for identity through the character of Biju, who dreams of a greater life and, of course, a green card in the US. Biju goes to America to fulfill his dreams

and to be in a position of power. Whiteness becomes equated with power, and he aspires to be "angrez ki tarah" (105). At the visa counter in the US embassy, Biju claims, "I'm civilized, Sir, ready for the US, I'm a civilized man" (99). Yet he is severely humiliated even when he is issued a visa, as he cannot understand the announcement at the American embassy. Thus, he experiences a sense of humiliation even before leaving his country. In America, Biju, a victim of globalization and racial discrimination, is repeatedly forced to quit his job, search for new employment, and live under the same harsh conditions endlessly. The growing threat of racial prejudice undermines the principles of humanism, which advocate equality among all people. Just as the judge felt alienated in England, Biju experiences alienation in the host country because of his race and skin color. However, his situation is even more tragic than that of the judge, as he is an illegal immigrant. Biju constantly suffers from a sense of diaspora, becoming deeply nostalgic whenever he recalls his childhood in his village in India. Memories of the Jamuna River and the men traveling downstream on inflated buffalo skins evoke strong feelings of longing. He remembers his grandmother, who would cross the river on market trips into town and back, carrying a sack of rice on her head. He also recalls a hermit who lived on the riverbank, waiting patiently for the glint of an elusive mystical fish. To quote from the novel:

On Diwali the holy man lit lamps and put them in the branches of the peepul tree and sent them down the river on rafts with marigolds how beautiful the sight of those bobbing in that young dark. When he had visited his father in Kalimpong, they had sat outside in the evenings and his father had reminisced: how peaceful our village is. How good the roti tastes there! It is because the atta is ground by hand not by machine...and because it is made on a choolah, butter, and fresh milk still warm from the buffalo... (102-103)

Sai, a seventeen-year-old orphan and the judge's granddaughter, returns to his care from a convent school after losing her parents in a car accident in Russia. She represents the countless boys and girls who live away from their parents for education and who yearn for love and warmth. Like the judge, she also feels alienated in her own homeland, living in India while following a Western way of life. In this sense, she is the judge's true heir. Eventually, she finds solace in the love of Gyan. However, Gyan disapproves of Sai's anglophilic lifestyle and that of her family. As the descendant of a formerly powerful, educated, and Western-oriented family, Sai's identity and her relationship to India differ greatly from Gyan's. She embraces a Western lifestyle, whereas Gyan adheres to a traditional one. Consequently, an unbridgeable gap always exists between them. When Gyan transforms into a revolutionary, aiming to establish a separate state called Gorkhaland, the conflict intensifies, as he becomes more aware of the foolishness and blindness of

Westernization. He scorns Sai for her uncritical acceptance of Western culture, calling her a "copycat" and telling her, "They don't want you" (164). Sai retaliates by accusing him of hypocrisy, pointing out that he enjoys eating cheese while simultaneously condemning Westernization. Through this tension, Desai presents the complex nature of the modern generation. As she observes, "They want to have all the comforts and also like to kick all these bloody foreign things out" (259).

Thus, the central theme of the novel appears to be the enduring influence of European powers in India and the ways in which Indians continue to be affected by colonial policies. The narrative highlights characters who move back and forth between the cultures of the homeland and the hostland—such as the judge, who travels from India to England and then back to India, and the cook's son Biju, who journeys from India to America and eventually returns. Their longing for a culture other than their own leaves them to feel alienated and displaced. In this process, they are transformed from their 'native' identity into something altogether different—a 'westernized native'—or, more precisely, individuals negotiating a state of non-identity. Caught between two worlds, the characters attempt to carve out a new social space. Yet they remain haunted by the questions that often trouble immigrants: Who am I? Where do I belong?

The characters in the novel are, in one way or another, 'displaced'. They cling to questionable or mistaken identities and struggle to define themselves in a more positive light. They feel inferior, constrained, and defeated by their Indian heritage—a condition rooted in their previously colonized state. Through the narrative, Desai underscores the idea that although formal colonization has ended up, the traces of inferiority and the psychological effects of colonialism still persist in countries like India and others. The novel's split narrative offers an intriguing vantage point from which to examine two contrasting sides of the same issue: Biju's negotiation of his identity as an illegal immigrant in a foreign land, and the more complex situation of Sai and her grandfather, who find themselves estranged within their own homeland due to their anglicized way of living.

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