SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:** 8.175 (SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 8, Issue-1(January);2026**

Macaulay's Legacy: Colonial Psychology in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Biswaranjan Nayak
Lecturer in English ,Sarala Mohavidyalaya, Rahama.

Article Received: 07/12/2025
Article Accepted: 08/01/2026
Published Online: 09/01/2026
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.8.01.74

Abstract

This paper examines the persistence of colonial psychology in post-independence India through Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss, using Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 educational agenda as an interpretive framework. Macaulay's goal—to produce Indians who were "Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes and intellect"—reorganised Indian self-perception and shaped generations of English-educated Indians. Desai's characters embody the long afterlife of this policy. The Judge represents the direct victim of colonial conditioning; his humiliation in England transforms into self-hatred, and his adoption of English manners becomes a form of psychic survival. Sai inherits this mindset indirectly, absorbing Englishness as education, refinement and aspiration, while disconnecting from her cultural environment. Biju and the Cook reveal the same mindset from another angle: their dreams of Western success reflect the inherited belief that dignity still lies outside India.

The paper also situates the Gorkha political unrest in Kalimpong within this colonial hierarchy, arguing that language and education have contributed to historical exclusion. Drawing on theorists such as Fanon, Bhabha and Chatterjee, the study shows how English continues to function as symbolic capital in India. Recent government initiatives, including the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and increased promotion of regional languages, illustrate ongoing attempts to dismantle the inherited colonial mindset. Gandhi's insistence on mother-tongue education further supports the need to rethink India's linguistic priorities. While several studies discuss postcolonial identity in The Inheritance of Loss, little work has connected Desai's narrative with India's contemporary language policies, Macaulay's educational design and the psychological roots of political unrest in the northeastern hills. This paper fills that gap by linking literary analysis with historical policy and modern cultural debates.

KeyWords: Colonial mindset, Macaulay's education policy, Postcolonial identity, Language and power, The Inheritance of Loss, Indigenous education revival,

SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:** 8.175 (SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 8, Issue-1(January);2026**

Introduction

In his recent Mann Ki Baat address, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke about what he called a lingering mindset among many Indians, a mindset shaped during the colonial period that still influences how people think about language, education and self-worth. He emphasized that although India has been independent for many decades, the psychological traces of colonial rule continue to affect confidence, cultural pride and the value people assign to English over Indian knowledge systems. This reminder from the Prime Minister sets the right stage for discussing the idea of colonial consciousness, a phenomenon where people judge themselves and others through standards created by the colonizer. The issue is not only political or historical but emotional and deeply personal, and literature becomes one of the strongest mirrors to explore it.

Eighteenth-century educationist Thomas Babington Macaulay made this intention clear when he proposed creating "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." This line, mentioned in the college education letter that inspires the present paper, represents the psychological blueprint of colonialism. The goal was not only to rule India but to shape the minds of Indians so fully that they would voluntarily prefer Englishness to their own identity. Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss provides a powerful narrative to study how such a mindset continues to shape individuals long after the end of direct British rule.

The character of the judge, Jemubhai Patel, stands at the center of this inquiry. He is a direct victim of colonial conditioning. From the day he travels to Cambridge for his studies, he begins to absorb English values as superior and Indian ways as inferior. The insults he faces abroad create a deep insecurity which later turns into self-hatred. His polished English accent, strict routines and emotional distance do not only show personal discipline; they reveal a man who has spent his life running away from his roots. The judge transforms himself into exactly what Macaulay had imagined. His sense of loss does not begin with wealth or status but with the loss of cultural and emotional belonging. This paper argues that the judge inherits not only land and prestige but a persistent sense of shame, a belief that Englishness is a mark of dignity while Indianness is something to suppress.

Sai, his granddaughter, becomes an indirect inheritor of this same mindset. She does not receive colonial insults firsthand the way the judge does, but she grows up under his influence and inherits the emotional distance and cultural confusion that he carries. Her convent-school education, her detachment from Indian traditions and her inclination toward Western habits show how colonial thought travels across generations. Sai does not consciously reject her identity, yet the environment around her quietly teaches her that Western things are modern and Indian things are old. In this way she becomes part of a psychological pattern that she did not choose but has received as a legacy. The title The

Inheritance of Loss becomes meaningful here because the loss itself becomes the inheritance. The judge inherits it from the colonial period; Sai inherits it from him.

Colonial mindset as a theme also expands beyond the household of the judge. Other characters in the novel struggle with the same pressures but experience them differently. The cook's son Biju, who goes to America as an undocumented worker, faces the global version of this mindset. He imagines the West as a land of opportunity, only to face humiliation, exploitation and invisality. His hope reflects the widespread belief that Western life is superior. But his experience reveals how deeply this belief wounds those who chase it without understanding its cost. In contrast, the Gorkhaland movement, which surrounds the judge's home in Kalimpong, reflects a collective frustration with identity and belonging. People fight for recognition not because they reject India but because they have been historically pushed aside by political systems influenced by colonial hierarchies. This tension becomes part of the broader loss that the novel explores.

The inheritance, therefore, does not refer only to property or family legacy but to psychological scars left behind by colonial education and social systems. The judge's self-hatred, Sai's confusion, Biju's illusions and the unrest in Kalimpong all point toward a deeper problem: the inability of individuals and communities to see their own worth without comparing themselves to the West. The colonial rulers may have gone, but the mental structures they left behind still influence behavior, dreams and fears. This is the central idea that the present paper attempts to explore.

The discussion also becomes relevant to contemporary India. Even today, English fluency is often considered a sign of intelligence, while Indian languages face neglect in many academic and professional spaces. Western lifestyles are admired as symbols of success, sometimes even more than Indian cultural achievements. These attitudes do not arise naturally; they come from a long history of being told that Indian knowledge and identity are inadequate. Modi's remarks in Mann Ki Baat highlight that this mindset has not disappeared but continues to shape how people evaluate themselves. The relevance of Desai's novel increases when we see these patterns in real life. Literature becomes a space where we can understand how these mental structures began and how deeply they have entered personal psychology.

By placing the novel beside historical education policies and current public discussions, the paper aims to show how colonial thinking moves from one generation to the next. The judge stands as a direct victim, carrying wounds inflicted by colonial society. Sai stands as an indirect victim, shaped not by political rule but by inherited attitudes and value systems. The loss they experience is not only emotional but cultural. They lose confidence, connection and a sense of belonging. And this loss itself passes down as inheritance. This is

why the title The Inheritance of Loss captures not just the story of a family but the story of a nation still negotiating its identity after centuries of foreign rule.

This part of the paper, therefore, sets the foundation for a detailed study of how colonial mindset functions within the novel and within contemporary India. It shows why this issue matters, how the characters illustrate it and how the theme continues to shape Indian society. By connecting Macaulay's intentions, Desai's characters and the present national conversation, the paper highlights that the inheritance of loss is not just a literary symbol but a living reality.

Colonial Mindsets

Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss captures how the weight of colonial thinking continues long after the Empire has vanished. The novel becomes a field where personal stories, historical memory and inherited shame move together. This mindset is not accidental. It goes back to the famous argument made by Thomas Babington Macaulay in his Minute on Education, where he urged the creation of "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay). Desai's characters often look as though they are taken straight from that blueprint.

Jemubhai Patel, the Judge, is the clearest product of this mental design.

His transformation begins the moment he reaches Cambridge and experiences continuous ridicule for his accent, complexion and posture. Desai writes that the Judge would walk "in silence, afraid to speak, because each word delivered was a humiliation" (Desai 39). His later life in Kalimpong shows how deeply he internalizes this scorn. When locals greet him in Nepali or Hindi, he stiffens and replies sharply in English, as if the language itself protects him from his own origins. In one scene, when the Cook accidentally mispronounces an English word, the Judge snaps, "Speak properly. Do you think this is a jungle?" (Desai 54). In that moment, he is speaking with the voice of the colonizer he once feared. Fanon calls this sort of reaction a "psychic colonization," where the oppressed person adopts the oppressor's attitudes as self-defense (Fanon 14).

Sai inherits this mindset indirectly.

Her convent schooling and the Judge's influence shape her tastes before she even has the language to understand why. She reads English novels, eats scones, and gently mocks her classmates who prefer local languages. In a telling exchange, she asks Gyan, "Why doesn't your family speak proper Hindi?" (Desai 112). The question is innocent, yet it carries the weight of Macaulay's design. Homi Bhabha's idea of mimicry—"almost the same, but not quite"—is reflected in Sai's polished English manners, which imitate the colonial ideal without belonging fully to it (Bhabha 86).

Biju's story exposes the same psychology from another angle.

His migration to America is driven by a belief that dignity lies elsewhere. When he works in a basement kitchen, surrounded by other undocumented workers, he says bitterly, "We are worse than beggars here, but at least it is America" (Desai 189). His disappointment shows how the colonial mindset trains people to idealize the West even when the reality is harsh. The Cook mirrors this dream in India. He proudly tells everyone that his son is "working in the greatest country in the world," even though he does not know where Biju sleeps or eats (Desai 88). The pride comes not from fact but from imagination.
The dominance of English survives not only in individuals but in institutions.

State governments across India have pushed to strengthen regional languages in education and administration. Yet even these governments cannot eliminate English from official notifications, tender documents, court communication and higher academic work. English remains the gatekeeper. Notifications must be published in English because without it, they cannot reach national record systems or meet legal standards under Article 348. This creates a double reality: pride in regional languages on one side, but total dependence on English for authority and legitimacy on the other. The Judge represents this contradiction in miniature; he distrusts everything local, yet his entire life is built in a local landscape he does not respect.
Desai's novel also echoes the logic of educational policy that shaped generations.

Your College of Education minute rightly notes that the British introduced English-medium education not simply to impart knowledge but to cultivate loyalty. Macaulay's reasoning was never about equality. It was about producing intermediaries who would admire English culture more than their own. The Judge, who reads English literature and keeps English habits even in his solitude, is the embodiment of this purpose. Sai becomes the second-generation inheritor of the same schooling system, absorbing the prestige tied to English without understanding that it was designed to create hierarchy.
The characters' dialogues reveal how colonial thinking appears in everyday life.

When Gyan grows increasingly uncomfortable with Sai's anglicized lifestyle, he tells her, "You people don't belong anywhere. You live in the house of the English, but you are not English" (Desai 244). His irritation is political as well as personal. He sees in Sai the very class that Macaulay imagined—a group set apart from the masses by language and manner.
The Judge's internal monologue provides another striking moment: "The sight of his own people made him cringe" (Desai 33). Few sentences in modern Indian literature capture the violence of internalized colonialism more directly.

The novel resonates strongly with recent debates in India.
Many public figures, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, have spoken about the need to escape the "colonial mindset," particularly in matters of law, education and cultural

confidence. His Mann Ki Baat comments reflect a growing national desire to re-shape institutions that still carry the logic of empire (Modi). But Desai's characters show how difficult this transition is, because the mindset survives in emotions, habits and private insecurities, not only in the Constitution or judicial language.
In The Inheritance of Loss, colonialism becomes a psychological inheritance.

The Judge is the direct victim of this legacy; Sai is the indirect inheritor; Biju and the Cook are caught in a dream built by it. Their stories show how a mindset survives not through law but through longing—through the belief that Englishness or foreignness is a path to dignity. Desai's world is filled with characters who live inside this contradiction, speaking a language that promises pride but often delivers shame.

Education, Identity, and the Inherited Burden

The political tension in Kalimpong does not arise suddenly. It grows from long years of cultural disruption, much of it tied to the educational system India inherited from the British. The foundation of this system goes back to Thomas Babington Macaulay's passionate argument in the British Parliament in the early 1830s. Macaulay openly stated that India's long-standing indigenous education—rooted in Sanskrit, Persian, regional languages, and local knowledge—was "worthless" in his eyes. He advocated dismantling it and replacing it with English education so that, as he famously put it, the British could produce "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay). His words were not casual. They laid the cultural trap that shaped several generations of Indians, including the characters in The Inheritance of Loss.

The judge, Jemubhai Patel, is one of the clearest products of this system. His memories reveal how deeply he internalised the idea that Englishness was superior. His quiet confession, "I felt ashamed of my own voice" (Desai 42), shows the psychological cost of that education. His shame is not personal weakness; it is the direct outcome of a schooling system designed to make Indians distrust their own identity. The more he tries to imitate English behaviour, the more he loses connection with his own background. His coldness toward Sai and his contempt for anything "local" emerge from this inner conflict.

Sai inherits this mindset indirectly. She grows up in an English-medium environment where English is treated not just as a language but as a symbol of refinement, education, and belonging. Even though she does not face the harsh colonial environment the judge endured, she is still shaped by its aftereffects. Her behaviour, aspirations, and sense of self move along the paths that Macaulay's model created long ago.

Gyan adds another dimension. At first, he admires Sai's education, seeing it as a gateway to progress. But gradually he senses that this model forces him to distance himself from his own community. His frustration echoes the wider anxiety of young people in

Kalimpong. When he says, "You live in a world that doesn't belong to us," it becomes a direct indictment of a system that continues to celebrate Englishness while sidelining local identity (Desai 184). This is one reason the political unrest in Kalimpong finds such fertile ground. It is not merely a demand for recognition but also a revolt against cultural hierarchies that survived long after independence.

The insurgency reflects resentment toward a structure where English-educated Indians hold power, while others are judged by standards they never chose. The judge's lifelong fear of being "found out" as an Indian pretending to be English (Desai 113) mirrors the larger insecurity among the Gorkha community. When an education system makes people feel inadequate in their own culture, anger becomes inevitable.

Mahatma Gandhi understood this danger early. He argued that a child learns best in their mother tongue. Education in a foreign language, he believed, alienates students from their surroundings and weakens their self-respect. The lives of the judge and Sai support his argument. The more English they absorb, the further they drift from their own world.

Today, many Indian states promote regional languages but still cannot fully replace English in administration. Government notifications, court judgments, university work, and national examinations continue to rely heavily on English. This reflects the long shadow of Macaulay's model. However, efforts are being made to change this. Under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the Central Government is pushing mother-tongue education, translating higher education content into Indian languages, and strengthening regional-language digital platforms.

The tension between colonial inheritance and cultural self-worth shapes both the characters' inner lives and the social environment around them. Political unrest, educational conflict, language anxiety, and identity crises all trace back to that moment when the British decided to reshape India in their own intellectual image. The novel shows how this old design continues to influence modern India.

By the end of this chapter, it becomes clear that the colonial mindset is not just a historical idea. It is a psychological and social force. The characters' struggles reflect how deeply Macaulay's educational vision entered Indian life, creating generations who carry both the desire to imitate and the pain of losing something essential.

References:

Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. Routledge, 1994.

Chatterjee, Partha. The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories. Princeton UP, 1993.

Desai, Kiran. The Inheritance of Loss. Penguin Books, 2006.

Fanon, Frantz. Black Skin, White Masks. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, Grove Press, 2008.

Gandhi, M. K. The Problem of Education. Navajivan Publishing House, 1951.

Macaulay, Thomas Babington. "Minute on Indian Education." 1835. The Postcolonial Studies Reader, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, Routledge, 1995, pp. 428–430.

"National Education Policy 2020." Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. James Currey, 1986.