

## Loss of Identity and Consequential Alienation in Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss*

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### Abstract

*Any novel with the word 'loss' in the title is likely to deal with some kind of loss. Kiran Desai's novel The Inheritance of Loss develops the theme of loss. For Desai, in my view, the protagonists of the novel are all cut off from their own identity. As a result, they are totally alienated and pass into a sense of perpetual limbo from which they never recover. Studying the major characters – the Judge and the Cook – I have argued how these individuals suffer from a loss of identity. The identity-loss takes place when the main characters fail to identify themselves with Indian (the colonized) identity. I have argued how these individuals suffer alienation, and how they finally reach a moment of impasse, wherefrom they find no progress. In such cessation, they suffer a sense of loss which they fail to overcome.*

**Keywords:** Loss of Identity, Alienation, British and Indian Identity, Binary of Superiority/Inferiority, Anglophilia.

### 1. Introduction

Kiran Desai (2006), an Indian born writer in English Language, the daughter of great fiction writer Anita Desai, graduated from Columbia University has been an acclaimed novelist now. Her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* won the Man Booker Prize in 2006 and had been one among the international best sellers. The novel centers around a Cambridge educated retired Judge who comes to live in Kalimpong, Darjeeling, his grandchild Sai, the Cook, who lives with the Judge, and a home tutor to Sai, Biju, the Cook's son, who pursues a dream to live in the USA. In her novel, characters are portrayed with a keen emphasis on their political, cultural, economic, and ideological tensions. A very remarkable thing about the characters of the novel is that all of them are, explicitly or implicitly, isolated from one another. Focusing on the themes of

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the novel, Gulrez Roshan Rahman (2001), in her *Indian Writing in English: New Critical Perspective*, comments that the novel works with the idea of “nostalgia”, “lost identity”, and “a sense of failed romances”(p. 50). The Judge in the text adopts an air of Englishness and the Cook imagines serving a British lord. They never probe into who they are and how they are connected to their own society. Their failure to connect to society gradually isolates them from others and they also fail to identify themselves with others living around them.

The Judge is one of the most important characters in the novel who deliberately discards his own values and embraces others’. Forcing oneself to adopt different values is disturbing and disruptive for the major characters like The Judge, The Cook, Sai or Biju. This attitude makes him feel alienated not only from people of his own kind, but also from the ones he wants to be a part of. He cuts ties with his own people but fails to integrate with others (English). The Cook is even more pathetic as he suffers from a megalomaniac fancy of serving a British lord whereas he is serving only a retired judge. He blindly follows Judge’s attitude and adheres to the romantic values of the colonized. Thus, the Judge reduces himself into a fantasizer. On the other hand, the Cook’s son Biju suffers from the fantasy of a life in America and subsequently loses everything. His return to India is harassing and shameful. His dream of being materially successful in America receives a great shock. The disassociation of all three characters from the external society goes through the process of internalization and they bring themselves into an awareness of the “subjective reality” (Hook, 2004, p. 101). When the minds are colonized in the aftermath of political colonization, the subjects (people) of colonial force (the empire) are still occupied by nostalgia and remembrance of the empire. This suffering is more psychological than it is physical. Lavine (1984) quotes from Marx and shows how the proletariat suffer from the oppression of the capitalist groups and ultimately are bound to embrace alienation and do the “animalian functions of eating, drinking, and sexuality” (p. 281). In all these cases, the sufferers usually lose their socio-cultural inheritance, that is, values of their own identity, and gradually step into a painful alienation.

The family hierarchy of the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* includes a grandfather, (the Judge, Justice Jamubhai Patel at the top), the grand daughter Sai, taught for some time at the convent, and the Cook (at the bottom). The characters can comfort each other in a tight-knit family ambiance. However, they do not make any attempt of bonding because of two reasons. Firstly, they



did not find comfort in socializing with one another. Secondly, they had never been reared in a true family ambiance, where, they might have learnt the family values and the importance of being together. It is even painful that none of them has ever taken any initiative to create a bond. The characters, on the other hand, are confined to their private spaces; consequently, any attempt of a family-tie is ruined resulting into complete isolation.

## 2. The Judge

The Judge's encounter with his granddaughter is not a pleasing one. As the Judge does not accept the marriage of his daughter because of the elopement, he disconnects the filial tie. So, when he comes to know that he has a grand-daughter who cannot continue her studies at the convent, he does not feel a sense of attachment with her. The Judge cannot but accept her as he fails to bear the cost of Sai's education at the convent. Sai's arrival at the Judge's place was rather a helpless return, an end without an option. Her journey to Kalimpong is not a happy welcome.

Death whispered into Sai's ear, life leaped in her pulse, her heart plummeted, up they twirled. There was not a streetlight anywhere in Kalimpong, and the lamps in houses were so dim you saw them only as you passed; they came up suddenly and disappeared immediately behind....and finally the car stopped in the middle of wilderness at a gate suspended between stone pillars. The sound of the engine faded; the headlights went dead. There was only the forest making *sssstseutstsseuuu* sounds. (Desai, 2006, p. 31)

Her disassociation caused by inadequate communication by her grandfather is quite unusual on the part of a grandfather. She even fails to be properly reciprocated by the Cook who only indulges himself in the mouthful stories of past glories. So, she suffers from a sense of identity loss in the house she comes to reside. This gives birth to a suppressed agony in the heart of Sai, which, her Grandfather never realizes. The Judge hardly reaches out. By contrast, he lives within his own private space, cocooning within his own shell. Others do not have any access, even if the tender grandchild. Because of this isolation, he lives like an island in a home.

Justice Jamubhai Patel was born in a "family of the peasant caste" (Desai, 2006,

p. 56). His father, though a peasant, carried his family by “procuring false witnesses to appear in court” (Desai, 2006, p. 57). The idea of building his son a judge comes to his mind as he sees that judges are placed at the upper stratum of judicial hierarchy. So, he sends his son to a mission school. The Judge’s father thinks that sending in a mission school would make his child better groomed, but the education in a mission school rather makes him secluded because he did not have enough chance for socialization there. That is why the education backfires and deceives the anticipation of his father. In spite of being the Chief Justice of the country, he fails to attain homogeneity with his own people.

He was sent to England to study law at Cambridge. The author narrates, “He almost never spoke during his years in England and eventually stopped speaking as “I,” beginning sentences instead with “one,” as if his subject position were that of anyone. As the narrator says, “[h]e had learned to refuse in the third person and to keep everyone at bay, to keep even himself away from himself” (p. 111). This proves how wretched his conditions are. Jemubhai Patel, the Judge, becomes a typical Anglophile who prioritizes and admires English ways of doing things. On the other hand, he almost discards his nativism – his native culture, system and way of doing things.

He comes of a regular Indian family, who cherishes a dream, an ambition to reach the top in the Imperial British India. He follows a fixed dream – success. For this reason, he consents to marry Nimi, an uneducated girl because marriage is not a prior concern. He assumes the air of an Englishman in the British India so that he can be away from whatever is Indian. His attitude rather makes him a tragic figure. In the colonial reality, he fails to recognize himself on the either side of the binary colonizer/ colonized. This becomes apparent from the day of his journey to Liverpool on the ship, and it becomes more apparent during his life there. After getting down at the harbor, his cabin mate “hailed a porter to help with his luggage – a white person to pick up brown person’s bags!” (Desai, 2006, p. 38). Because of his own inferiority, his isolation becomes clear from here. The colonial legacy is very deep in his psyche and he cannot get rid of this easily. Huddar (2006) reflects Bhaba’s observation while trying to identify this kind of attitude, which, he rightly explains as mimicry. Mimicry is not necessarily a slavish attitude. In fact, mimicry as Bhaba sees it, an exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners, and ideas. This exaggeration means that mimicry is repetition with difference, and it is not evidence of the servitude of the colonized people. However, Judge’s attitude is rather ironical in the sense that he simply imitates, which is futile and pointless.



The Judge forgets how he had been undermined because of his Indian identity as he pursues his higher education in England. He is declassed and repulsed by the ordinary English people who did not extend their warmth to accept him and integrate him to their society. The humiliation mounts up when people turn him down. He fails to get a rented house because of Indian identity. He goes out to twenty-two houses. In most of the cases, he is humiliated severely. At last, he gets one from Mrs. Rice who “needed the money” (Desai, 2006, p. 39) very badly. At Fitzwilliam College, he cannot create any important relationship with anyone. The author expresses it very authentically by telling:

For entire days 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- blued- haired, spotted, faces like collapsing pumpkins-moved over when he sat next to them in the bus, so he knew that whatever they had, they were secure in their conviction that it wasn't even remotely as bad as what he had. (p. 39)

So, he gradually “retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day” which “crushed him into a shadow” (Desai, 2006, p. 39). But he never learned from such humiliation of repulsion by the British. Ironically, he cherished the English way of life, the gait and the courtesy. The crisis of properly identifying himself in an alien society leads him to such an extent that “he envied the English, he loathed Indians” (Desai, 2006, p. 111). This crisis reduces his value as an individual as well. As we go down deep into The Judge's psychology, we find a sense of affinity with the colonial legacy reflected in his education. A futile effort of Identifying himself with the colonizers throws him to a certain helplessness.

The political dominion ends, but the legacy is long lasting, because the legacy is shaped by the cultural and educational factors that remain in the colonies many years after the departure of the colonizers. The Judge, being a product of such legacy cannot overcome the eminent affect the legacy, left by the British Empire. In one way, The Judge himself is responsible for bringing himself to the brink of such reduction of self-respect. It is his assumed Englishness, which, he is not a part of. On the other hand, he fears to integrate with English Society knowing that he cannot be English. He feels impotent. David Wallace Spielman (2015), in his essay “Solid Knowledge and Contradictions in Kiran Desai's

*The Inheritance of Loss*”, shows how some major characters lack the ‘solid knowledge’ of cultural contradiction, for which they failed to fare better in a situation, they should handle well (p. 1). As the Judge severs ties with his own people and mimics an Englishman’s attitude, he fails to find a compromise between two.

The judge’s Anglophilia marks him as a particular kind of postcolonial subject: a self-hating Indian, a would-be Englishman, a foreigner to everyone including himself. He supports assimilation fully and believes in the superiority of the English. To suppress his “Indian” past and elevate himself above others in his community, the judge holds fast to what he has learned of performing English identity. (p. 4)

As far as his relationship with the English is concerned, the Judge feels an unrealized anger in him. This inability to understand the cultural differences becomes apparent when we discover his failure of establishing relationship with anyone of his family. His wife is vulnerable to his suppressed anger. His attitude, according to Spielman, is merely a “cruel mimicry” (p. 4) of the cultural and social subjugation he suffered in England. He further argues that:

He does to her what his experience in England did to him. She becomes his suppressed Indian self, though her presence constantly reminds the judge of his failure to suppress her fully. He sends her away, telling her that otherwise he will kill her, and refuses to accept her back. Ultimately, he has her murdered and gets away with it by bribing the police. To avoid feeling guilty for her death, he convinces himself that it was an accident. (p. 4).

In this text, we do not see the Judge perusing self-knowledge, the knowledge that enables him for self-exploration, a knowledge that distinguishes between him and the others, a knowledge that differentiates between the Indian and English identities. He comes out of his air of supremacy through a loss of his dog Mutt which is a mirror image of his romantic colonial identity. In losing the dog, he becomes almost insane. He goes to the police station to file a complaint where he becomes a subject of ridicule. The police laugh heavily, “Ha, ha, ha. Come about his dog! Dog? Ha, ha, ha...Madman!”(Desai, 2006, p. 291). Consequently, he avoids human contact.

Now, under compulsion, he comes to be in touch with people and painfully



realizes that he has been reduced to an object of ridicule, and feels unreal about his acts. He goes from place to place frantically and asks about the lost pet. In an act of desperation, "The Judge got down on his knees, and he prayed to God, he, Jemubhai Papatlal, the agnostic, who had made a long hard journey to jettison his family's prayer" (Desai, 2006, p. 301). It is a terrible loss of his identity. But this loss, for the first time comes to an "undoing of his education, retreating to the superstitious man making bargains, offering sacrifices, gambling with fate, cajoling daring whatever was out there" (Desai, 2006, p. 301). This situation disillusion him into thinking about the false ideals which he has been living with all these years—the ideals of superior/inferior culture. He carefully places himself in the superior side of the binary. He identifies himself a subject of superior culture whereas the other around him are placed on the other side of binary. A shocking incident of humiliation brings him to the painful realization of his wrong notion, and lack of self-knowledge. It tells him how unkindly he wants to sever from his past, from everyone around him including his father, family, wife and a daughter. "He thought of his father, whose strength and hope and love he had fed on, only to turn around to spit on his face. Then he thought of how he had returned his wife, Nimi" (Desai, 2006, p. 302). He comes to a painful realization that "[...] he had killed his wife for the sake of false ideals. Stolen her dignity, shamed his family, shamed hers, turned her into the embodiment of their humiliation". (Desai, 2006, p. 308)

Kiran Desai wants to show how the Judge pursues the false ideals of Empire and makes his own wife a victim of his self-generated antagonism by branding her inferior or a lesser being. He never had a mind to accept her with the given dignity of a wife, who has certain rights to claim. He thinks her a subject of subjugation, an illiterate, uncourteous being who lacks the manner of Empire (the attitude that an English would demonstrate). She is not only unequal and inferior, but also odious and repulsive. He keeps her on the other side of the binary (superior/inferior) and holds an antagonism, unreasonably.

Nimi, for him is a shadow "drifted away like everything in his past" (Desai, 2006, p. 66). The Judge considers her a silly Indian girl who is not surely worthy of being his wife. Any Indian girl as she is—poor and illiterate, stayed in countryside—is silly because she is not capable of mimicking the air of an English woman. Keeping all illiterate Indian girl on the other side, the Judge keeps about him an inflated ego of superiority. His wife, being in the subject

position, has been a victim of his condescending attitude. This is how he thinks her silly. He feels it oppressive for him to stay with her. He distances himself deliberately on the excuse of her being an uncouth, silly, detestable being. He felt concerned.

The skin disease would infect him as well. He instructed the servants to wipe everything with detol to kill germs. He powdered himself extra carefully with his new puff, each time remembering the one that had been cushioned between his wife's obscene, clown-nosed breasts" (Desai, 2006, p. 173).

Being a subject to such abuse, she keeps herself aloof from everything and passes into a being whose existence is merely felt. The subjugation of being born as a rustic girl in the lower stratum of Indian village and the abuse in the hand of her patriarchal husband makes her withdrawn from life. Justice Jemubhai, the Judge places himself on the other side of the binary with all the attributes of the colonized people as perceived by Said (2001) in his Orientalism such as "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different" (p. 40). The way he distances from his own wife Nimi and, at a later stage, rears a girl Sai, who mostly grows up in a convent, makes him an enigmatic character. The way he treats his wife Nimi proves his irrationality. The Judge's inheritance is grounded more on his inability to follow a system that he owns, or a system that is alien to his culture. He inherits an enigma of not recognizing himself as an Indian and his failure of completely identifying himself with the British. He is, therefore, living in a perpetual crisis of not losing an identity.

### **3. The Cook**

Another important character in the Judge's family is the Cook who has spent almost all of his life serving the family and constantly cursing himself for his poverty. His only son Biju somehow manages to go to America but fails to fulfill his ambition. The Cook is a character who indulges himself in myth making. He takes strange delight in telling the fabricated stories about the past of his master, Justice Jemubhai Patel. As he tells the stories to Sai, he takes a romantic escape into the golden past that exists only in his imagination. He tells her about the judge's journeys during his different official tours in different places of India by telling:



We would put up tents all over the district: a big bedroom tent like a top of your grand-father, with an attached tent bathroom, dressing room, drawing room, and dining room. The tents were very grand, Kashmiri carpets, silver dishes, and your grandfather dressed for the dinner even in the jungle, in black dinner jacket and a bow tie. (Desai, 2006, p. 60)

Though the Cook tells all the fanciful stories about the Judge, magnifying his position in the servitude of a gracefully elegant man, he still has some dissatisfaction deep in his mind. He imagines Jemubhai in a mirror image of a person who adopts all the elegance of a typical Englishman appointed in Royal service. "The Cook had been disappointed to be working for the Judge, which is a severe comedown, he thought, from his father, who had served white man only" (Desai, 2006, p. 63). Thus, he projects himself as an embodiment of a lost identity by emphatically asserting some of his fancies and whims. Here the Cook represents a typical subject who is obsessed by the fancies of the empire. The idea of an Englishman is, nevertheless, an illusion for him which he never achieves. So, he takes a flight – a worthy escape into an ideal world, fed by his own ideas. His position is somewhat like that of his master (the Judge) who fails to identify his position in the established social stratum. He feels like serving an Englishman, but in reality, he is not. He fancies all the elegance of Englishness, but working under the Judge, the Cook feels like reducing to a mere name. Living in a remote location bordering between Nepal and India, in a space of political violence, the Cook discovers himself out of the metropolis, sometimes, out of time and place, far away from the world he fancies. He thinks that he is designed by nature to do something greater than the one he is doing. He lies mostly about the past for two definite reasons. He meticulously chooses his subject, Sai, who is young and speculates that, she may not have either much interest, or any connection to the past glory he talks about. He is a very cunning story teller. He understands that by magnifying the status of judge, he magnifies his own status too. He must tell megalomaniac stories about his patron to lift his own values. This is a deliberate trial of compensating his present plight with past glories.

The Cook even lies about the Judge's birth. "You cannot believe he was born a rich man" (Desai, 2006, p. 56). When asked by Sai, where he was born, the Cook replies, "into one of the top families of Gujrat, Ahmedabad.[...] Huge *haveli* like a palace" (Desai, 2006, p. 56). On the other hand, Sai, instigated by her youthful fancy, keeps on asking him questions, apparently on incredible stories fancied

by the Cook. The Cook transports her into a world of his own romantic imagination. He finds pleasure in inventing stories as he observes, Sai, who seems to be appreciating his fancies. Being encouraged by Sai, the Cook crosses all limits as he describes the judge's departure to England by saying "they sent him to England and ten thousand people saw him off at the station. He went on top of an elephant! He had won, you see, a scholarship from the Maharaja..." (Desai, 2006, p. 56). By contrast, Desai (2006) gives a very vivid portrayal of the Judge's background in the same page. Desai (2006) illustrates it by telling "Jemubhai Papatlal Patel had, in fact, been born to a family of the peasant caste, in a tentative structure under a palm roof scuffling with rats, at the outskirts of Pip hit where the town on the aspect of a village again". (p. 56 – 57)

He invents those out of his own insecurities—his awareness of marginalization in the society and his identity as one of the oppressed. He tries to create a space where he is comfortable, where he can dwell upon imaginatively. In his personal space he tries to find a sort of comfort from a world full of misery and uncertainty. The continuous awareness of his marginalization cannot bring him a sense of happiness in the world he lives in. So, there is a necessity for something that would make life easy for him—a breathing space (an imaginary space) for him where he can have some comfort. Out of a feeling of deprivation and discontent, he imagines a space of his own. Ironically, this is not his real self. The consequential loss of Indian identity is, therefore, a reality that the cook experiences deep-down. He tries to escape from the pangs of inexpressible helplessness—a helplessness that grows out of the gap between his real entity and his imaginative entity. He is the one caught between his fancies and unrealized circumstances of his positional inferiority.

The Cook is so much carried off by his fancies of empire that they start living in a subliminal space. India, for them, is an illusionary place and a fancy of Empire. In MacLeod's (2007) *Beginning Postcolonialism*, this tension is identified in the essay "Living 'in-between': From Roots to Routes" in the following way while talking about V.S. Naipaul's biographical account. Naipaul was born in Trinidad in a typical Indian family and observed the plight of Indian laborers who constructed a "different, imaginary India which is discontinuous with the real location" and which "exists primarily in the mind, and no act of actual, physical return can facilitate it (MacLeod, 2007, p. 209)". The character mentioned above experiences similar trauma and distance from the real India to an illusionary place. Losing the measure of time and



place the Cook not only gets himself disconnected from reality, but also descends into a helpless moral impasse.

#### 4. Conclusion

Thus, the article explores the tension of two characters who lose themselves into a maze of confusion about their own self-identity. They disconnect themselves from their Indian identity. The lack of conviction about their identity sends them into a crisis. What lacks in them is a conviction about what they are and what they can achieve. By losing the value of their inheritance—that is, their identity – they descend into a perpetual sense of loss. They are alienated from one another, and from their own self. This is even more tragic when the characters are alienated in their own country, and from their own people. Kiran Desai, thus nicely portrays a post-colonial reality in India after the departure of British. The Judge and the Cook are some of the examples of the individuals caught between the transition of pre and post-colonial reality. Their moral attachment to India, that is their own country, is in question, as they bear extraordinary fancy for the by-gone Empire. This is the great loss of their identity, that the text singles out.

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