

## **Fractured Identities: Reinterpreting *the Inheritance of Loss***

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### **Abstract**

This paper will traverse the after effects of colonization which has resulted in loss of identity of many who have borne the brunt of colonization. It will extenuate selected Indian characters depicted in Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). The study finds that these characters are struggling with an identity dilemma which induces their inner- conflicts, double consciousness and resistance due to the dominance of colonial system. The research attempts to draw special attention on how the meeting of East and West culture brings complication in the life of individuals. It will scrutinise the after effects of colonization and the loss of identity and the way it travels through generations as a sense of loss.

**Keywords :** Colonization , identity,dominance, consciousness

Defining identity is not an easy task, it is a creative process ,an individual constructs its own identity it is the qualities ,beliefs attributes ,knowledge of one's capabilities and skills and the awareness of one's physical attributes .The psychological term identity crisis maybe defined as the struggle between what a person has come to be, and what the society expects one to become ,the process of knowing and being able to set oneself apart from other people and things. A person's sense of self is not inborn,instead we actively construct a sense of self through our interaction with others,with the process of socialization, society plays a major in

shaping our identity, society can involve many people ,school ,friends ,family ,play mates and extended family, all these associations is essential in forming ones identity.Failure in constructing an active identity may lead to scepticism and confusion in indentifying the self.

The sense of belonging and the loss of identity is apparent in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of loss*,all the characters falsify with several identities imposed on them by the society and the independence struggle of the country. The story is set in the backdrop of the kalimpong hills, in the north east ,as the characters unfolds the narrative ,the ancestral strife ,and the internal squabble torment their sense of belonging.

One of the prevalent themes of the novel is the after affects of colonialism which is responsible in shaping the identities of almost all of Desai's characters.The gorkhalnd movement is used as a historic backdrop in the novel; their demand for their own state further explains their definition of "Home".

From the very opening of the novel, the activities of the characters point to a theme of colonialism the character who is most affected by colonization is the character of the judge, he is seen playing a European game,he follows the mannerisms of the British ,from ironing his under garments to eating "chapatti", with knife ,the judge's character is the prime representation of colonial attitude. "where is the tea?",he woke up and demanded,"(2) the judge exhibits the privilege of being able to wait for things to be done for him, he gets angry when the teatime is delayed, this explains the depth of his colonial impact, the judge feels like a foreigner in his own home land .Likewise the story line of Biju the judges cook's son in America, provides for another example of the extension of the colonial system, he moves out of his home land to a foreign country where the influence of colonialism is less, but he suffers all the more ,he is subjected to racial discrimination ,he makes very little because he is

treated as a second class citizen .Biju fails to connect to the unfamiliar system of the American society , he feels alienated and undergoes internal conflict ,he refuses to work in a restaurant which serves beef ,according to hindu customs a cow is worshiped ,and the respect of a cow is part of hinduism he quits his job at the restaurant which serves beef.

The judge's granddaughter Sai, is an example of British influence, she had been separated from her parents for most of her life. She was just eight years old when she arrived at cho oyu, before living with the judge, Sai lived in a convent in Dehradun, she received a convent education, the convent education system was started by the British in India ,these schools observed the oddity of the imperialist as a result Sai's upbringing was highly influenced by the British way of life. "Sai ,her hands shaking, stewed tea in a pan and strained it, although she had no idea how to make tea this way, the Indian way.She only knew the English way." (7) This line from the novel demonstrates how Sai is caught up between the two worlds.

She is an Indian by birth, but observes the British mannerism, she faces constant internal conflict, her inability to cry at her parents death reinforces the cultural homelessness she feels. The value system she received was instilled by the convent,this attitude of Sai will further make her interaction with Gyan, hertuition teacher with whom she develops a romantic relationship all the more difficult, with the character of Gyan, Desai has brought to light the struggles of the Gorkhas , their history in regard to their settlement in the hills of kalimpong .

The Nepalese, constitute the majority of population in kalimpong and Darjeeling but they are treated like an outcast in their own country. In the novel the author has accentuated

the plight of the Indian Nepalese who are attempting to create a state in which their culture, language and people are valued as much as anyone else.

Gyan and Sai's relationship grows from a teacher- student as the novel unfolds and blossoms into a romantic one, they enjoy each other's company go for excursion all over kalimpongbut with the development of the GNLF, that arises in the hills their relationship turns sour, Gyan undergoes a political awakening, and realises that he shares many of the complaints and concerns and marches in the protest with his community .“You are like slaves, that's what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself. It's because of people like you we never get anywhere.” (163)

He blames Sai and her British way of life, and calls her an imitator of the British mannerism, the GNLF, movement tried to establish a political state which they can truly call home. The GNLF struggle shows the identity dilemma which the Indian Nepalese faced in their own country. Even though they represent eighty percent of the population in kalimong, they were still fighting for a place to be called “Home”.

The character of Biju on the other hand is physically displaced from his home. He tries to create a home for himself by searching for a place of work which affirms with his own culture.

One should not give up one's religion, the principles of one's parents and their parents before them. No, no matter what.....those who could see a difference between a holy cow and an unholy cow could win. Those who couldn't see it would loose(143)

Biju acknowledges his values and refuses to work in a restaurant that serves steak, he deserts his job and comes to the realisation that he needs to work at a place that doesn't not thwart his value system. Towards the end of the novel Biju becomes so overworked and questions his identity time and again as the novel progresses, he cannot relate with the American culture and yearns for "Home" and decides to come to India, although he knows that his act would disappoint his father, but his quest for his sense of "Self" is much more than a few extra dollars that he would earn living in America, sacrificing his true identity he refuses to compromise with his true self and returns to India.

The character of Biju is in direct contrast with the younger self of the judge Jemubhai, who goes to Cambridge University on a scholarship, aiming to join the Indian civil services. He is seen as an outsider in England, who is not accepted by his fellow mates, he finds it extremely difficult to find place for himself, he is subjected to racial discrimination, and alienation instead of preserving his true self, he succumbs to the pressure of the new world to be accepted, and tries to imitate the British,

Jembhubhai's mind had begun to wrap; he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely barely manage to lift his lips in a smile, and if ever did, he held his hand over his mouth, because he couldn't bare anyone to see his gums, his teeth.(40)

Although the judge passed the ICS examination, his stay in England has impacted his "sense of self" to the extent that he had started hating everything that was Indian; he despised his dark skin color and covered his brown face in powder, to conceal his identity as an Indian. The judge serves as the primary character that experiences colonization firsthand.

The incident at Cambridge and the failure to adapt in a foreign environment converts the judge into a stranger himself, in retaliation he tries to impersonate the British way of life to be accepted and respected, he constantly tries to strip the Indianness, of his wife as result he has a troubled marriage. One of the critics, Abraham (*Releasing Resistance*) notes that “resistance takes the form of refusing to be devalued” this comment rightfully explains the inner conflict of the judge rejects his Indian self because he fears being devalued. The judge hated his wife and her Indianess, so much that he took off her bangles, threw away her hair oil, when he caught the sight of her squatting on the (English toilet) he propelled her face into the toilet. He is ashamed of her Indian orientation which he perceives to be inferior, with the character of the judge's wife, Desai points out how she becomes an embodiment of Indian culture from which the judge is trying to separate himself. The final blow to his embarrassment from his wife happens when he learns about her symbolic support of an anti-British party. The judge feels humiliated with Nimi's actions and sends her away. In the present, the judge is an old angry man filled with self-hate in his heart, who is neither accepted by the British nor the Indian due to his own prejudices, he only finds solace in the company of his dog Mutt, who apparently cannot comment on his twofold attitude in life, maybe that's why Mutt is so dear to him.

Through the disposition of the judge, Desai has accentuated the plight of people like the judge, who become the victims of the post-colonial mentality, wherein people internalise the feeling of cultural inferiority of their own culture, it is a belief that the cultural values of the colonizers are inherently superior. As a result of it people start to ape the traits of their dominator in order to have a higher sense of self, by impersonating gradually people lose their

own identity and are caught up in the cultures of two worlds ,and therefore have fractured indemnities.

Desai's insightful writing calibre and quick-wit has enabled her to fabricate the characters of Lola and Noni, the two sisters and Uncle potty who are the paragons of British culture ,the neighbours of the judge, Noni also the first teacher of Sai ,when she first arrived in Cho Oyo ,the two Bengali women have imbibed many parts of the British and the western culture ,they read the novels of Jane Austen and look forward for celebrating Christmas and enjoy listening to the BBC, Lola has a daughter named Pixie who works as reporter in the BBC ,about whom she loves to flaunt and brag about her daughters achievement. Uncle potty the nearest neighbour of the judge and also friends with the two sisters represent the privileged section of the society in spite of being well educated and belonging to a good family ,Lola and Noni still considered him to be less cultured than they were.

The injustice which the British inflicted upon the uneducated Indians, has wiped out their true identities, the characters of Lola and Noni are example of this absurdity ,they have given in to the western culture and lifestyle and have completely forgotten their roots ,they judge people on the bases of their social and financial standings even though uncle potty belongs to a rich and well educated family they still consider him to be less cultured than themselves, they consider themselves superior because they have adapted the British lifestyle ,they have plenty of house helps to do work for them, it is quite ironic because Noni agrees to teach Sai at the first place because they see it as an opportunity to earn some extra income, in order to maintain their luxurious British lifestyle ,the fact that they only befriend people who belong to their so called social standards speaks volumes of their dubious identities .

Every character ,whether a major or a minor high lights its colonial pasts and broken identities .The judge's only friend from Cambridge, Bose ,who just like the judge strove hard to rid himself of the Indian culture in the hope of being accepted by the British. However after many years when he meets the judge for lunch, it comes as a rude and an unpleasant shock to the judges when he learns that Bose has come to realise how mistaken he was in idolizing the ones so oppressed them exhaustively.

He thought of how the English government and its civil servants had sailed away throwing their topis overboard, leaving behind only those ridiculous Indians who couldn't rid themselves of what had broken their souls to learn.(132)

This meeting with his old friend is probably the closest the judge comes to realizing the havoc colonialism has caused, but he prefers to remain oblivious to that fact because his sub-conscious mind realises his own indulgence in the system. The judge's ultimate interaction with Bose asserts just how much self hatred had internalised due to the racism present in the colonial system. When Bose brings up the events which make the judge less English, he becomes upset, because he laboured to be as English as he possibly could. This shows just how disconnected he was from his roots, and how he thought it was essential for him to accept the British culture to feel good about himself.

Desai designates the predicament of the cook, whose name is mentioned subsequently in the final chapters of the novel, she has deliberately kept the name of the cook hidden to draw special attention to the fact that because the cook is uneducated ,he will always be termed as a second class citizen due to his financial status, the cook has served the judge since he was fourteen years old, and his servant status is ineradicable ,he does all the work for



the judge even though he is time and again verbally abused by the judge, the cook has been subjugated all his life ,and has accepted it to be part of his nature, he has internalised the feeling of being inferior than the judge while the cook understands his place in the society he even indulges in petty illegal business to make a small sum of additional money to improve his status ,he works hard so that his son Biju can have a better life in America ,the fact that the cook wants a better life is not questionable ,what is problematic is the fact that even the cook is not spared by the colonial mentality and the desires to imitate the British lifestyle ,and makes his son unintentionally the emissary to fulfil his unadorned desires , he is practically boastful of the judges achievements and his kindness towards him ,which in reality is quite opposite he lies to Sai about the judge's wealth and his love for his wife, he exaggerates about the judge's wealth and kindness in order to make himself feel better for working for the judge .In fact he wants his son to cook English cuisines and discourages him to make Indian dishes ,he takes immense pride in the fact that his son is hopping from one job to another , he even offers to help his fellow mates to set up their son's in America with Biju's help .The cook is immensely proud that his hard work has been paid off ,and is happy to believe that he has somehow managed to climb up the social ladder because of sending Biju to America , we can see how innocent people like the cook lose their identity to become a part of the rat race.

As Edward Said ,who de-orientalise the orient from the perceptions of the Occident ,this study inspect the Indians on the bases of religion and caste and colonialism which impacted the individual as privilege and less privileged .The characters suffer from different dilemma as the story extends between the two worlds and traverses through different cultures, the characters experience detachment from the different places they inhabit. Each character

manifests its yearning for home. The novel ends on a optimistic note ,with the reunion of Biju and his father, the author has tried to suggest that one can never truly feel at home ,without the presence of their immediate family, but in contrast to the father and sons happy reunion ,the story line of the judge and his granddaughter Sai, suggest how the after effects of colonization and the loss of identity has advanced through generation as a sense of loss, they are left feeling agitated and ungrounded, as they live in two worlds with two different cultures,but belonging to neither one.

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