



# **INHERITANCE OF LOSS BY KIRAN DESAI-A POSITIVE RESPONSE TO COLONIALISM**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

Multiculturalism has become an integral part of the global society today. Multiculturalism occurs with intermingling of cultures, races and ethnicities of various minority groups with a resultant struggle for acknowledgement despite their differences amidst the dominant political groups. This brilliant novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* holds its pride for being a depiction of a multicultural global society. The entire novel is adorned with the brilliantly colored blossoms of globally mingled cultures and races challenging the racial and cultural discrimination, one the most widely described phenomenon involving diaspora. This novel portrays the joy and despair involving immigration in relevance to cultural hybridity and global multiculturalism. Desai has wonderfully woven the fabric of the novel thereby enabling a positive understanding and response to colonialism. The author approaches multiculturalism positively through the *Inheritance of Loss* thereby propagating the idea that the whole Earth is a family, which in turn creates a strong encouragement to colonialism.

**Key Words-** Multiculturalism, cultural hybridity, discrimination, displacement, loss of self-esteem, psychological trauma.

## **Introduction**

Kiran Desai was born in India in 1971. She lived in Delhi until she was 14. She lived in England for a year with her family and then moved to the United States of America. She completed her schooling in Massachusetts before attending Bennington College, Hollins University and Columbia University, where she studied creative writing, taking two years off to write *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. She is the daughter of Anita Desai, the author of many books, three of which have been short listed for the Booker Prize: *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). Anita Desai is currently a teacher of writing in MIT. Her maternal grandmother was a German but left India before World War II never to return. Her maternal grandfather was an origin of Bangladesh.

Multiculturalism comes to play in her own family through the grandparents where the paternal grandparents were from Gujarat and her grandfather was educated in England. Though Kiran left India at the age of 14, her nostalgic impulses drive her to visit New Delhi every year where her family house exists. She first came to be recognized in the world of literature in 1997. Her first novel that won her a great accolade was *Hullabaloo in the*

*Guava Orchard*, which was published in 1998. Her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* was published in early 2006, and was widely praised throughout Asia. While comparing the characters in the novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, and of her own life she says, "The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys (of her grandparents) as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is this I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance."

The setting of the novel is centered partly in India and partly in the USA. In Desai's view, the novel "tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant," and she adds that the novel carries out an in-depth analysis of the experience, "what happens when a Western element is introduced into a country that is not of the West" - which happened during the British colonial days in India, and is happening again "with India's new relationship with the States." The third idea explored is, "What happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one. How does the imbalance between these two worlds change a person's thinking and feeling? How do these changes manifest themselves in a personal sphere, a political sphere, over time?" As she says, "These are old themes that continue to be relevant in today's world, the past informing the present, the present revealing the past."

## Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is perceived through the reactions evoked by cultural differences in the novel. It carries the notion that the minorities do not enjoy the same preferences and privileges as the citizens of a country. Critics are of the opinion that cultures are not distinct, instead they are the longer time influences of war, imperialism, trade and migration which had led to immigration of people and intermingling of cultures.

### The Inheritance of Loss and Multiculturalism

The author addresses a wide variety of issues related to multiculturalism like cultural hybridity, displacement, identity, nationalism with reference to place and culture. Western culture influences most of the characters in the novel to a considerable extent. Through different life stories of people, the author brings forward the various aspects of postcolonial reality with the characters trying to come to terms with the strong foreign influences. The story is set in a small Indian town Kalimpong in Northeastern Himalayas, the place where the author grew up.

The novel very vividly portrays the life stories of the main characters as it sheds light on their lives and experiences which molded them. Though these characters originate from a small town, their stories extend out to different countries like Britain and the USA. The stories revolve around the 1940's until the 1980's. A clear portrayal of the lives of main characters with the corresponding development of the small town is witnessed in the novel. The novel pictures the Nepali nationalists who are the diaspora of the region contributing to the social unrest which greatly impacts the lives of the native inhabitants of the region. The novel begins with the introduction of a retired judge who lives with his granddaughter and his cook. The judge who is now an old man was sent to Britain when he was young to become a judge to serve the British government. The author by bringing the judge into the picture portrays the British society of the 1940's which was antagonistic to accepting the foreign culture in any form. The young Jemubhai Patel witnesses racist upsurge which hurts his self-esteem and destroys his identity.

He became a victim of agony for days as nobody spoke to him, his throat was jammed with words which he had not uttered, his heart and mind were transformed to blunt aching things, even the elderly ladies and the hapless blue-haired, spotted, faces like collapsing pumpkins moved away as he sat next to them in the bus. The young girls were even worse as they crinkled their noses and covered them and giggled, "Phew, he stinks of curry!" Eventually, he felt barely human at all," These incidents greatly traumatized his psyche which led to his transformation which is very well witnessed through the behavior he exhibits towards his wife.

As an older custom, a month before him leaving to Britain, his parents got him married to a fourteen years old girl. He was too young even to consummate his marriage as he was afraid of hurting his young wife. His transformation becomes evidenced after his return from Britain where he violently rapes his wife for stealing his powder puff. Through this event, the author brings out the fact that the judge counteracts his humiliation and anger which he had experienced in the foreign country by making the ones in his power to suffer. The powder puff very clearly symbolizes that the judge used it to powder and lighten his complexion to get better assimilated in Britain but his wife, by discovering the puff has exposed the humiliation and low self-esteem he had experienced in Britain.

The resultant psychological impact brought by marginalization and alienation leads him to divorce his wife. He chooses to live in a secluded place after his retirement with his cook and his granddaughter, Sai as his companions. Most of the expatriates are of the opinion that anything Western is of a higher esteem. The judge is found to despise everything that is Indian and clings on to British customs showcasing him to be of a higher class. His granddaughter proves no exception to this ideology as she gets educated in a Westernized convent. After the unfortunate death of her parents, at the age of seven, she is brought to live with her grandfather in Chou Oju. She proves to be an epitome of Westernization as she prefers Western traditions than Indian ones and feels at home with the use of English as her first language. She has an affair with her Maths Tutor, Gyan, who is a Nepali, who accuses her to having been a servant of the West.

You are like slaves, that's what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself. Can't think for you. Copycat, copycat. Don't you know these people you copy like a copycat, THEY DON'T WANT YOU!!!! She gets pointed out for her sandwiched state of existence as she neither belongs to the Indian nor the British culture. The cook is presented as a representation of a typical Indian who believes Westernization is something of higher standards and feels proud of his son, Biju who lives in New York. The cook's imagination is filled of his son cooking ham roll ejected from a can and fried in thick ruddy slices, of tuna fish soufflé, khari biscuit pie, and is sure that his son cooking English food is always of higher standards when compared to Indian cooking.

The dawning of realization of the preservation of one's culture and adherence to it is brought out by the character of the cook's son, Biju who leaves Eastern culture and encounters the Western culture as an illegal immigrant in New York. Desai brings out the difficulties of adaptation for a person from a poor country getting shifted to a wealthy one through the character of Biju who fails to succeed in the Western culture as he does not completely understand it. His experience makes him realize that he belongs to his own culture. His belongings get stolen on his way to India. Though his mission of immigration does not bring him financial success, he adores his own country with its rich culture and tradition. As his foot struck the ground of the Calcutta Airport, he was overwhelmed by nostalgia for his own country that he felt like a baby falling asleep on its mother's lap.

He felt to be himself all over again after his feet hit the ground of his land of origin. His anxiety of being a foreigner that he experienced in the United States was swept away, his shame of being an immigrant wiped away, he was no longer treated like an alien and the words aimed at him casually were all unconcerned and easy. He looked around him unbelievably and he could now see clearly where he was and was overjoyed to be there. His Western experience enables him to understand his cultural identity better.

Sai's tutor, Gyan is portrayed as an individual who feels disadvantaged because of his Nepali identity and struggles to establish his personal identity. His relationship with Sai also proves to be a contributor to conflict between classes and nationalities. Another representation of a wealthy higher class influenced by Western culture are the two sisters, Noni and Lola. According to them, classes are based on how far people are westernized. They were very dismissive in their behavior towards people who in their belief was of a lower class. Lola's daughter, Pixie was employed in BBC in England. The sisters believed that everything Westernized is of a higher level and adopted British culture by cooking English food, wore Marks and Spencer shoes and read only British Literature. However, due to the

flamboyant richness displayed by them, they fall easy preys during the Nepali riots in India. Another character portrayed in the novel is Father Booty who is a Swiss priest who visited India on a missionary work and got settled in Kalimpong for over thirty years. The novelist showcases the character of the priest who is of a Western origin but has gotten easily assimilated the Eastern culture. He had brought some remarkable Western influences to that region but still loved the Eastern culture. The riots brought a great impact of displacement in his life as he had to return back to his own country due to his Visa getting expired. He felt lost and displaced after leaving India. The most remarkable feature of the novel is that nowhere in the novel had the novelist depicted the traditional Indian lifestyle as all the characters in the novel manifest Westernization and the postcolonial impact of it.

This clearly substantiates the author's view of bringing out the relationship between East and West and the real case scenario of immigrant lives. The novelist being a subject of multiculturalism and post-colonialism has felt the pang of displacement in her life which becomes manifested as she travels across the three geographical locations of India, England and USA in her novel thereby exploring the ideas of exile, dislocation and displacement. Modernization brought by Westernization has led to a fast growing economy which has contributed to liberalization. Liberalization is not achieved to the fullest extent as it has only reached the urban Indians. Much of rural Indians are still not liberalized. The author's endeavor is that the rural Indians also are to be liberalized in order to live with dignity and freedom. Hence the author has shifted her focus towards the rural area in her novel in order to explore the struggles met by people to even meet their daily necessities as when Sai thinks of Penna Lal, "a few clothes hung over a string, a single razor blade, a broken watch that would cost too much to mend, but was still too precious to throw away."

## Conclusion

The novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* clearly portrays the influences of both the Eastern and Western cultures in the lives and temperament of human beings. The novel pictures how the Easterners perceive the Western culture and how the Westerners perceive the Eastern culture which contributes to the tremendous impact on the self-perception of the characters in the novel. This kind of an influence is very well described through the character of the judge, who falls a prey to Westernization, adopts cruelty and despises humanity. Through the character of the judge, Desai brings out the lives of many Indians who get victimized by Westernization thereby forgetting their own culture and tradition.

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