

## Postcolonial Identity in *The Inheritance of Loss*

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### Abstract

*This research article deals with the postcolonial identity of the Indian immigrant characters delineated in The Inheritance of Loss written by Kiran Desai, a noted diasporic novelist of Indian origin. The study reveals that the identity of South Asians or Indian immigrants in the diaspora is changed and weakened by the colonialism in such a way that even in the postcolonial era the life of the immigrants reflects the influence of cultural colonialism. On the one hand, these Indian immigrants who are portrayed as immigrant characters in the western location happen to migrate in the hope of embracing white privileges in the form of better opportunities such as higher education, jobs, social security and so on; on the other hand, they face cultural clashes and have identity crisis. They mimic the western culture as a part of survival strategy. As a result, they feel culturally displaced, unhomed, racially segregated, develop hybrid identity and find divided identity. Regarding methodology, the qualitative research method is applied. As for theory, the postcolonial theory is applied along with theoretical concepts such as Homi K. Bhabha's Hybridity and Mimicry, desiring whiteness of Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks and Frantz Fanon, and Stuart Hall's Diaspora and Identity. The theoretical framework has been prepared and used to analyse the postcolonial identity of the major characters such as Biju, Jemubhai Patel and so on.*

**Keywords:** Postcolonial, Diaspora, Identity crisis, Dislocated, Hybridity, Mimicry, Desiring Whiteness and Double Consciousness

### Introduction

This research deals with the postcolonial identity of Indian immigrants in the USA. Human beings have been migrating from one place to another place since time immemorial. Regarding South Asians' migration to the west, they have been migrating to the West since the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the Indian immigrant characters *The Inheritance of Loss* depicts deal with the post-war migration to the colonial nations from the colonized nation. Getting disappointed with the political instability of the home nation, lack of job opportunities, lack of social security and dark future of people, they desire white privileges and migrate for better opportunities such as jobs, better life style, social security, freedom, business and so on.

In one way, the writer's biography reflects even the postcolonial identity of the characters. Kira Desai is a diasporic writer who was born in India in 1971 and lived there until she was fourteen. Her parents took her to England and finally to the USA. She completed her

education in the USA. Hence, her characters in *The Inheritance of Loss* are located in England and America. In “Multiculturalism in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*”, Toshimenla and N.D.R. Chandra write “Primarily, the story of *The Inheritance of Loss* is set in India in the year 1986, a period of great turmoil. From the outset it is clear that the country and the people are crying out for an identity of their own, fighting between themselves and claiming ground for their own existence, as nation and individuals” (88). Thus, the novel reflects the identity crisis of diasporic people and the people living in their own nation as well.

The novelset in 1986 starts with Sai, an orphaned young woman living under the care of her grandfather, a retired judge of considerable wealth and standing in their community in the town of Kalimpong on the Himalayas. Her grandfather, Jemubhai Patel is the Cambridge-educated Anglophile retired judge who was an esteemed judge both in local and independent courts in his youth. Firstly, the research explores the impact of postcolonialism on the retired judge as he is alienated, does mimicry of British life style, and discriminates his fellow Indians showing his superiority to other Indians. Secondly, the research discovers Sai’s love affair with her math tutor, Gyan, the descendant of a Nepali Gurkha mercenary. Their affair ends due to Gyan’s involvement with a group of ethnic Nepalese insurgents for the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). Thirdly, the research work focuses on the diasporic journey of Biju, the retired judge’s cook’s son to America and his postcolonial identity.

### Methodology

I have applied qualitative research methodology to do textual analysis of this research work since this paper deals with the fictitious South Asian characters’ experiences, emotions, beliefs, behavior and attitudes. The textual analysis is applied as a main theoretical method, which includes interpretative analysis, narrative analysis and naturalistic analysis as main techniques/ methods. Likewise, I have used the deductive method to make the research paper quite realistic and factual. For the broad theoretical framework, postcolonial theory is applied as the novel reflects the postcolonial identity of the characters who are affected by the postcolonial state. To support the postcolonial theory, postcolonial concepts such as Homi K. Bhabha’s mimicry and hybridity, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks and Frantz Fanon’s *Desiring Whiteness* and Stuart Hall’s *Diaspora and Identity* are used. Regarding the application of postcolonial theory, in *Post-Colonial Study Reader*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin claim:

Post-colonial literatures are a result of this interaction between imperial culture and the complex of indigenous cultural practices. As a consequence, ‘post-colonial theory’ has existed for a long time before that particular name was used to describe it. Once colonised peoples had cause to reflect on and express the tension which ensued from this problematic and contested, but eventually vibrant and powerful mixture of imperial language and local experience, post-colonial ‘theory’ came into being. (1)

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin regard post-colonial theory as a master theory which can address how colonized and the colonizers have conflict regarding identities. For the methodology, why this theory is applicable becomes clear from Dr. Swarna' views. In "Post-Colonial Issues in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*" Swarna presents the definition of postcolonialism:

The much debated term 'post-colonialism' generally refers to the writing or culture of nations or peoples who were once colonized by European powers. Post-colonial theory examines the problems which were posed by Europe's colonization of various regions of the world throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries and the cultural, political and social effects of such. Post-colonial theory attempts furthermore to recoup the lost histories of colonized subjects and reveal the ways in which colonization empires have shifted are erased the identities of the colonized subjects. (206)

Thus, the postcolonial theory reflects how the colonized people are under the influence of the culture of the colonizing nations even in the postcolonial era. Hence, in the methodology, this theory is very applicable for theoretical analysis of the Indian immigrants' life depicted in the novel.

### Objectives

My research article answers the question that causes the characters of the novel, Biju, Jemubhai Patel etc. to have the postcolonial identity. When they migrate from India to America, they face cultural clashes and have identity crisis as their geographical location, language and culture make them the other. So, one objective of the research is to discover the postcolonial identity of the characters who have identity crisis because of diasporic dislocation, alienation, impact of globalization, racial discrimination, rootlessness, double consciousness, mimicry and hybrid identity. The second objective of the study is to scrutinize the effects of the postcolonial identity.

### Discussion

This research project investigates the postcolonial identity of Indian immigrants mainly the Protagonist, Biju's in America. Biju who is depicted as the protagonist in *The Inheritance of Loss* represents Indian immigrants in America. His journey to America from India reflects the growing trend of migration of Indians/colonized from South Asia to the West/the land of colonizers in the postcolonial era. As for post-colonial identity, in *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson argues "That so many peoples formerly colonized by Britain, in addition to the local languages they may use at home speak English, write in English, use English in their schools and universities, and conduct government business in English is an indication of the residual effect of colonial domination on their cultures" (365). Biju's journey to America reflects how he is under the influence of American system or British system. Their desire for Whiteness is quoted by Fanon, who argues, "I marry White culture, White beauty, Whiteness. When my restless hands caress those White breasts, they grasp White civilization and dignity and make them mine" (81). Fanon shows the immigrants' desire for white privileges. On the one hand, these Indians in the hope of embracing white privileges

migrate to the West; on the other hand their identity they build living in Indian diaspora in the West reveals the postcolonial identity since their diasporic life shows diasporic dislocation, alienation, impact of globalization, racial discrimination, rootlessness, divided identity, mimicry and hybrid identity.

Along with the end of the Second World War, the post-colonial era began and the migration of South Asians took a different form, which shows the migration of the colonized to the land of the colonizers. Biju, a less educated and poor teenage boy, is Jemubhai Patel's cook's son who migrated to New York for embracing white privileges which appear in the form of the job in America. Desai mentions "Biju had just arrived in New York. 'Respected pitaji, no need to worry. Everything is fine. The manager has offered me a full-time waiter position. Uniform and food will be given by them'" (14). Desai's description shows Biju's excitement for getting a job in America, which disillusioned him finally. In course of time, he feels dislocated in New York. He feels he is completely a stranger there. Desai becomes his mouthpiece "Here he was on his way home, without name or knowledge of the American president, without the name of the river on whose bank he had lingered, without even hearing about any of the tourist sights – no statue of liberty, Macy's Little Italy, Brooklyn bridge, Museum of immigrant; no bialy . . ." (286). His such feelings of dislocation reveals his identity crisis. In 'From Pain to Gain: A Study of Diasporic Dislocation in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*', Jannatul Farhana uncovers Biju's state of endangered identity "After arriving at New York, Biju's life faces a series of challenges. He just enters the alienated world as a migrant, as an exile. His dream of a secure future is defeated by the harsh reality" (34). Farhana's criticism about Biju shows how Biju's American dream gets shattered. Father Booty, a Swish citizen, like Biju is another character who feels alienated and dislocated in India. Father Booty has been living at the foot of Kanchanjenga for forty five years with a keen desire to live a peaceful life, but he is like in exile. Farhana's statement "When he has to leave his property and home, Shuktara, and back to Switzerland, he one way or another loses his faith and discovers himself as an alien for the first time in his life in a foreign land" (35) indicates Father Booty's sense of dislocation. Thus, the Indian immigrants in the diaspora suffers from alienation in the postcolonial era.

The Indian immigrants as characters feel dislocated in one way or the other, which means Biju is dislocated in America, whereas Jemubhai Patel is dislocated in his own nation India. The cultural displacement of Jemubhai Patel in his own nation also reflects postcolonial identity. He studied law in England, became a judge, worked there and finally settled in India. He lived in India, but behaved with other Indians like a Britisher. Even in his own nation he felt unhomey. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha argues "To be unhomey is not to be homeless, nor can the unhomey be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres" (9). Bhabha's views on unhomey rightly reveal Jemubhai Patel's unhomey situation in India. Though he has a home in India, he feels unhomey, which is due to the post-colonial effect. Tyson throws light on unhomey/ being unhomey "Being unhomey is not the same as being homeless. To be unhomey is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refuge, so to speak"

(368). Due to post-colonial impact, diasporic people either in the hostland or in their homeland, feel unhomed.

Besides, diasporic people face identity crisis in the form of double consciousness too. As the immigrant characters such as Biju in America and Jemubhai Patel in India feel dislocated, they neither become fully Indians nor British/American. Despite living in New York, Biju feels he is only an Indian. Though Jemubhai Patel lives in India, he regards himself like a Britisher. Both of their consciousness/identity is divided. W. E. B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness is applicable to analyse the divided identity/ consciousness of the immigrant characters. Du Bois's theoretical concept in *The Souls of Black Folk* "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others . . ." (8) discovers how diasporic people look at themselves from the eyes of others. Regarding the double consciousness of both Biju and Jemubhai Patel, in "Globalization, Migration and Divided Identity Kondali", Ksenija claims that:

The other narrative ties Biju's displacement from India to the capital of the global economy in the 1980s to the judge's similar experience as a young man in the unwelcoming Cambridge environment of the 1930s. The two characters embody the dislocation that originates in colonial hegemony, and the experience of those who have migrated from their homeland to a place that becomes embedded in their diasporic consciousness, evoked in discourse and challenged by colonial obstruction. As representatives of a colonized people and its related legacy, these characters testify to a complex interaction of language, history and environment, reflected in their displacement and divided sense of self. (109)

The diasporic characters Biju and the judge have divided self. However one difference between them is that the judge develops it both in England and India, whereas Biju does it in America. Farhana's statements "People who have been staying in diaspora from generation to generation, after a certain period of time, they start to carry double identity. Living in between different nations, feeling neither here nor there, migrants and their next generations unable to indulge in sentiments of belonging to either place" (36) reflect the real double identity of immigrants in diaspora.

One important factor that causes Jemubhai Patel and Biju to migrate to the West is they want to embrace whiteness, which appears in the form of white privileges such as higher education, jobs etc. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks in *Desiring Whiteness* "By whiteness, I refer to a master signifier that establishes a structure of relations, a signifying chain that through a process of inclusions and exclusions constitutes a pattern for organizing human difference" (3). Here, 'master signifier' indicates Europe, America, West, Australia, liberal democracy, western education, jobs etc. In the selected novel, Jemubhai Patel migrates to England for higher education and Biju migrates to America for the lucrative job. However, whiteness does not appear only as white privileges but it also appears as racial discrimination for the immigrants.

*The Inheritance of Loss* revolves round the racial discrimination shown to both Jemubhai Patel and Biju, too. Jemubhai Patel as a student starts his journey from India to Cambridge University to study law. He started facing the racial discrimination as soon as he moved into the ship. Desai's Statements "The future judge, then called only Jemubhai-or Jemu- had been serenaded at his departure by two retired members of a military band hired by his father-in-law. They stood on the platform between benches labeled 'Indians only' and 'English only'" (36) reveal the discrimination shown to Indian immigrants. Because of his color, language and culture, he is discriminated. Desai writes:

Jemubhai's mind grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, find his own skin odd-coloured, his own accent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely manage to lift his lips in smile, and if he ever did, he held his hand over his mouth, because he couldn't to see his gums, his teeth. They seemed too private, In fact, he could barely let any of himself peep out of his clothes for fear of giving him offence. He began to wash obsessively, concerned he would be accused of smelling, and each morning he scrubbed off the thick milky scent of sleep, the barnyard smell that wreathed him when he woke and impregnated the fabric of pyjamas. (40)

Jemubhai faces such discrimination, even returns to India and joins the Indian Civil Service as a magistrate. Like the judge, Biju also gets segregated in America. Regarding the judge despite being the victim of racial discrimination in England, Dr. Kamaljeet Sinha argues "The judge is one of the 'ridiculous Indians' as the novel puts it who couldn't rid themselves of what they had broken their soul to learn and whose Anglophile can only turn to self hatred" (72). It indicates how postcolonial identity affects the immigrants. Likewise, Biju as a waiter in the Gandhi Café in New York had horrible and bitter experiences of racial discrimination as he found whites and co-workers having the habit of hatred towards Indians. Desai mentions how Indians are taken in different nations:

In Tanzania, if they could, they would throw them out like they did in Uganda.

In Madagascar, if they could, they would throw them out.

In Nigeria, if they could, they would throw them out.

In Fiji, if they could, they could, they would throw them out.

In China, they hate them.

In Hong Kong.

In Germany.

In Italy. (77)

Desai shows Biju's pathetic plight due to racial discrimination in America. Sinha comments on Biju's horrible life and writes "He identifies himself with the homeless children, which also lived in the park. Every now and then Biju saw it scratching in a homely manner in the dirt and felt a pang for village life. Here, Kiran Desai has tried to portray the feeling of Biju, how he was in the alien land but still he wants himself to be attached with his homeland, he had cursed his father for sending him alone to this country" (73). Thus, the novel uncovers the tragic state of the immigrant characters due to racial discrimination in the West.

Similarly, one of the important factors that the novel reflects about characters' postcolonial impact is hybrid identity. In a literal sense, hybridity is the mixture of any two cultures,

castes, animals, and so on. But, colonization hybridized cultures of the West and the East. So, in context of the novel, Jemubhai Patel or the judge's hybrid identity is due to the British colonial impact. Because of colonial impact on the native culture, the native culture gets degraded and instead hybrid culture is formed. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha rightly argues "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal . . ." (112). As the immigrants or the native people mimic the colonial culture, the culture of the immigrants/native people gets hybridized, which means that mimicry causes hybridity. The judge wants to avoid Indian language and culture, but he eats a famous Indian dish chapatis with western knife and fork. Desai includes the impact of hybridity on Sai in the novel as Gyan points it out "She who could speak no language but English and pidgin Hindi, she who could not converse with anyone outside her tiny social stratum" (176). In "The Mimic Man in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*", Ratna Hasanthi Dhavaleswarapu critiques "The novel showcases how westernization and cultural hybridity without attachment to indigenous roots break the Indian family system and bring in marital discord and domestic violence into the lives of people associated with people like Judge Jemubhai" (53). It indicates how cultural hybridity which is caused by colonization weakens the root culture of characters in the novel.

Apart from the factors which are mentioned above to show the causes of postcolonial identity of delineated characters such as Biju, Jemubhai Patel, Sai and so on, one major factor is mimicry of the colonizers' culture and language. Jemubhai Patel or the judge is portrayed as a mimic man as he imitates English language, culture and value system in each and every way ignoring even the language and culture of his mother country. About the judge's mimicry, Desai explains "He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become he would be despised by absolutely everyone. English and Indians, both" (119). The judge's mimicry of the colonizers' language and culture damages the native language and culture. Bhabha claims "Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence" (86). Bhabha means to say that colonized or the immigrants desire to mimic, but they can never be exactly like the colonizers. Dhavaleswarapu explicates "It has to be remembered that mimicry is copying of language, manners and ideas of the colonizer in the available interstitial spaces. It is an evidence of colonial servitude when blindly stuck to, and silent retaliation when the colonized does not conform to colonizer's ways and culture" (49). The imitation of the westerners/colonizers is mimicry here. The immigrants such as the judge, Biju, Sai and others mimic the westerners. Tyson's explanation "Many of these individuals tried to imitate the colonizers, as much as possible, in dress, speech, behavior and lifestyle, a phenomenon postcolonial critics refer to as mimicry" (368) appears to be very applicable in context of the novel.

Thus the novel *The Inheritance of Loss* reveals how diasporic dislocation, being unhomely, racial discrimination, double consciousness, hybridity and mimicry cause the postcolonial identity of the Indian immigrant characters such as Biju, Jemubhai Patel, Sai

and so on. Hence, Stuart Hall's idea of flexibility of identity "Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture" (113) becomes applicable here.

### Conclusions

In this way, like other diasporic novels that reflect diasporic characters' search for identity, *The Inheritance of Loss* also shows it, but the novel uncovers how the immigrant characters are influenced by colonization. The novel reflects that immigrants from the colonized nations migrate to the land of colonizers in the hope of embracing white privileges such as jobs, higher education etc. They face conflicts and have identity crisis, which appear in the form of their postcolonial identity. The postcolonial impact is caused by colonization of the colonizing nations. When the Indian immigrants migrate to either England or America, they feel dislocated in the diaspora. Though they have their homes, they feel unhomed. They do not become themselves as they are judged by the whites from their eyes. They become neither Indians nor English/Americans. Instead, they find themselves in dilemmas regarding their identity, which means they develop double consciousness. Likewise, the novel reveals how hybridity and mimicry are caused by colonization and the Indian immigrants' postcolonial identity reflects hybridity and mimicry.

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