

**Review**

## Post Colonialism, Literary theories and perspectives in the novel 'The Inheritance of Loss'.

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The article sets out to interpret the different literary theories and perspectives in *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai. Further, it has explained the meaning of post-colonialism and analyzed the term "loss" in the title of the novel. Through the experience of being a diaspora, the author has shared the nostalgic feelings of immigration stating that it is not an easy venture to undertake as it requires leaving one's family and friends and a country one was born in. The characters always felt a sense of not-belonging, alienation, dislocation, a great sense of loss, readjustment along with serious doubts about one's decisions and a standstill between person's sensible and logical understanding and their emotional upheavals. In this backdrop, the critical study of this novel becomes a meaningful tool to explore post-colonial theories with the changing notion of power- politics, gender and sexuality. This paper is an attempt to understand Kiran Desai's work 'The Inheritances of Loss' with the focus to analyze "loss" in the title and critically analyze the literary theories and perspectives. The close reading technique is used to analyze the characters' struggle and the novel had been viewed from various angles in order to find a space and question their self-identity.

**Keywords:** Post colonialism, Orientalism, Subaltern, Power-politics, Gender and Sexuality.

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### INTRODUCTION

Kiran Desai was born in 1971, in Chandigarh to Anita Desai, a distinguished creative writer and to Ashwin Desai, a renowned industrialist. Her father is *Gujarati* whereas her mother a *Bengali*. Kiran Desai's maternal grandmother was a German married to a refugee from Bangladesh who later separated from her husband for all times. This is important to mention because through this we come to know about her hybrid race. Kiran Desai has a much traveled about childhood, she spent her early childhood in Pune and Mumbai stepping into the corridor of cathedrals and John Cannon School. At the age of nine, she moved to Delhi; at the age of fourteen to England and then to US where she has now made a permanent home. On completion of her school education, she joined Belington College to become a scientist but

soon her preference for writing surfaced and she joined a graduate writing program at Hollins University, Virginia. She has emerged on the Indian English fictional scene in late 1980s where she has created a distinct place for herself in the congregation of Indian women novelists in English. As a gifted writer, Desai keenly observes the existing social values, political issues and ideologies and depicts them through the people of her fictional world with exceptional creative imagination and deep analytical insight. She attempts to unravel the hidden as well as the complex inner urges of man and portrays with evocative power and sublimity the various losses which result out of the feelings of alienation and isolation.

Kiran Desai's first novel is *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), which claimed the Betty Trask Award. Her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), won the 2006 Man Booker Prize and the National Book Critics

Circle Fiction Award. This novel stands out among the post-colonial novels as it is structured of contemporary world which is also timeless, at times familiar yet unpredictable. This novel reveals the theme of minority and the feelings of nostalgia perfectly shown by a diaspora. Her work associates with the works of members of the Indian diaspora, such as V. S. Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, Agha Shahid Ali, Rohinton Mistry and Salman Rushdie etc. who are all of Indian descent. Their works come under the broader empire of postcolonial literature which is the production from previously colonized countries such as India.

*The Inheritance of Loss* is a story that portrays the inflexible class systems that exist in India and abroad amongst Indians, and the struggles that the people face within these classes after colonialism. The story is set in Kalimpong in the north-west India. As the story unfurls, the turbulence among the population of Indian-Nepalese fighting for a separate country apart from India is unveiled. This introduces the political struggle that the region is facing, as well as the breakdown of the social fabric, which eventually hampers all the characters in the novel. Therefore, the term post colonialism is first analyzed, followed by interpretation of "loss" in the title and finally the literary theory and perspective will be applied to understand the novel.

### Post colonialism

Post-colonialism is an intellectual direction that exists since the middle of the 20th century. It developed from and mainly refers to the time after colonialism. Colonial powers came to foreign states and destroyed main parts of native tradition and culture. Furthermore, they continuously replaced them with their own tradition and culture. This often led to conflicts when countries became independent and suddenly faced the challenge of developing a new nationwide identity and self-confidence. The postcolonial direction was created as colonized countries became independent. For India, postcolonial period refers to the condition of people and the country after the imperial rule was over and the British Empire receded back to Great Britain. It also deals with conflicts of identity and cultural belonging. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1998):

*Post-colonialism deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies. As originally used by historians after the Second World War in terms such as the post-colonial state, 'post-colonial had a clearly chronological meaning designating the post-independence period. However, from the late 1970s the term has been used by literary critics to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization.*

India's experience of colonial rule and exposure to the western modern society has a lot of impact in the societal rules. Post-colonial India is marked by East-West encounter and the advent of social realism. It also experienced a lot of fragmentation amongst the different religions, and ethnic groups, which is exposed in the novel when the Gorkha people demand a separate land for themselves. Thus the literature that comes out of any colonized nation brings out the emotional and political turmoil of the situation of that nation. The post-colonial theorist enters this novel through a specific critical lens, or a specific way of reading a text.

'Loss' in the title *The Inheritance of Loss*.

In novel reveals the great loss of identities of the characters that were removed from their root. The loss of self-identity of the characters and their quest for it, plays a dynamic significance in the plotline of the story. In order to comprehend new identities which are generated into new spaces of knowledge that one has experienced, it is important to understand clearly what an identity is. These identities born in such interactive spaces, inevitably retain influences not only from memories of origins or roots, but also absorb influences of the new culture in the transnational space. The individual living in this space, being conscious, constructs himself by uniquely combining the cultures of his roots and of his land of dwelling. This space intensifies the politics of polarity by continually highlighting the vision of the individual living in this space rather than elude it as Homi Bhabha suggests in his celebration of this space as the 'Third Space of enumeration' (1994).

Almost all of Desai's characters have been stunted by their encounters with the West. Sai and Gyan, lose their innocence as well as their love amidst the social turmoil. Jemubhai Patel loses his identity, his family and friends as well as his dog, Mutt in pursuit of an Anglicized lifestyle. The cook loses his wife and then his son Biju in the service of the judge. Biju loses everything including the clothes he was wearing as he returns home from the pursuit of a better life abroad. Noni and Lola lose their home to trespassers. Father Booty loses his dairy farm to the authorities. Uncle Potty loses his inner self to alcohol. Nimi lose her life. The Gorkha land agitation is merely a catalyst for this loss. Thus it seems clear from the title of the book, *The Inheritance of Loss* that it is simply about "loss" that has been inherited by the people under different circumstances.

Further, it also suggests the patterns of loss such as the loss of selfhood, identity, nationality, and loyalty. As Desai portrays the various losses faced by the major characters in the novel, it is possible for the reader to identify that the origin of displacement begins in the mind. It works in the mind unconsciously and gives feelings,

concepts, or desires of being transported from their basic object to a new environment. Deshmukh (2007) in the review of the novel comments:

Every character in this novel is a foreigner. In this world, ravaged by the colonial past and pulled by the deceptions of a globalized future, the poignant emptiness of the present is felt in the absence, the lack of genuine feelings of love, of connections, of lasting bonds, of roots and of truth. (p. 76)

When characters attempt to settle abroad, they struggle to root themselves in a foreign land as the feeling of displacement gets introduced in their mind. Subsequently when they become mentally disturbed, the alienated feeling starts to gain roots and as the story goes on, the Indian immigrants in America long for home which is the root itself, and yearn for love and acceptance. The experience of being trapped between two cultures has remained another prominent theme. In the search of their distinctive identity, subaltern voices are being highlighted and signified. The prominent patriarchal attitude and approach is presented in all its complexity throughout the book through the character of the retired judge. As can be seen in his treatment of his wife Nimi, as he tormented her, "The bruises didn't fade for weeks...The quieter she was, the louder he shouted, and if she protested, it was worse. She soon realized that whatever she did or didn't do, the outcome was much the same..." (Desai, 2006, p.305). Moreover the existence of patriarchal attitude in India is seen through Nimi's uncle's reaction upon Jemubhai's rejection of his wife:

*The uncle turned his niece from the door. "You are your husband's responsibility," he said angrily. "Go back. Your father gave a dowry when you married you got your share and it is not for daughters to come claiming anything thereafter. If you have made your husband angry, go and ask for forgiveness."(p.306)*

### **Orientalism and Subaltern**

Edward Said's book *Orientalism* is considered the foundational work on which post-colonial theory developed. His work focuses on exploring and questioning the artificial boundaries, or the stereotypical boundaries, that have been drawn between the East and the West, specifically as they relate to the Middle East. In doing this, Said focused specifically on our stereotypes of Middle-Easterners; however, these same ideas can be extended to include how we view all "others." This is the "us and other" mentality that many colonizers take with them into a new country. He not only disfigured the imperialism of boundaries but also the imperialism of culture in *Culture and Imperialism*. He argued against the misrepresentation of the non-West. His ideas influenced

post-colonial culture studies. Hence orientalism, post-colonialism and subaltern theories mark a considerable change in the concept of power and in the concept of the colonizer and colonized, center and margin and powerful and weak.

The subalterns reflect the motive to bring socio-cultural change, in such a way that, the marginalized get acceptance in the society and live a life without discrimination of any sort. Spivak borrows the term subaltern from Gramsci, to refer to the unrepresented group of people in the society. In the Indian cultural context, the term subaltern acquires more significance as the people have struggled hard for Indian independence. She prefers this term as it encompasses the exact picture of the lower class people. Morton (2003) quotes the words of Spivak as:

*I like the word subaltern for one reason. It is totally situational. Subaltern began as a description of a certain rank in the military. The word was under censorship by Gramsci: he called Marxism "monism", and was obliged to call the proletarian 'subaltern.' That word, used under duress, has been transformed into the description of everything that doesn't fall under strict class analysis. I like that, because it has no theoretical rigor. (p. 46)*

All the colonized nations of the world have a subaltern identity. It is only in the post-colonial context that they do realize their past-subordination. To their great humiliation, the subalterns recognize the fact that their minds are colonized and it is very difficult to erode the colonialist ideology. The subaltern identity is the identity of difference and the subaltern, "celebrates hybridity, and cultural poly-valency" (Barry, 2015, p.198). Spivak preaches on the subaltern in developing nations. Her subaltern studies reveal how female subjects are silenced by the male-dominated world, offering little hope for the subaltern woman's voice to rise up amidst the global social institutions that oppress her. In her influential essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' She signifies the paradox of speaking of subalterns. She further writes, "...if the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak, 1998, p.296)

### **Double colonization of women**

*The Inheritance of Loss* can also be best read as the mouthpiece of the marginalized community as a whole. It is not only that women who are subjugated but there are men also who have to suffer because of their class, caste and race. The double colonization of women has been voiced in her novel. Like the colonized nations which

dominated the colonized countries, the women too were dominated over by men over centuries. But the status of women in the countries which were colonized was even more complicated. The women belonging to the colonized countries, how much ever they try, cannot have a standing for the entire community they represent because they can never be isolated in their experience, either as a woman or as a member of a colonized community. It is very difficult to study and analyze women's writing without a basic study of Feminist movements and the history of feminism. *Gynocentricism* is a term which is referred to women's texts and their writing, which was coined by Elaine Showalter, an eminent Feminist theorist, to describe the last phase in the Feminist movement. Feminism is an interdisciplinary approach to issues of equality and equity based on identity, sex and sexuality, gender and gender expression as understood through social theories and political activism. Historically, feminism has evolved from the critical examination of inequality between the sexes to a more nuanced focus on the social and performativity constructions of gender and sexuality. Feminist theory aims to interrogate inequalities and inequities along the intersectional lines of ability, class, gender, race, sex, and sexuality, and feminists seek to effect change in areas where these intersects to create power disproportion.

The feminist perspective in *The Inheritance of Loss* is highlighted in its portrayal of women's subaltern position in Indian society. Desai illustrates the reality of female oppression through the character of Bela Patel/Nimi, Judge Jemubhai Patel's hapless wife. In the beginning, the judge is fascinated with his young, under-aged wife. Bela is only fourteen when she is married off to Jemubhai, and so terrified that she begs to be spared at the wedding night. Through Bela, Desai highlights the plight of young, Indian girls who are expected to comply with the long-held tradition of early marriage. Just like her, the women had none or very little say in almost all the walks of life. It also shows that women are considered to be of the weaker sex who is supposed to be controlled or dominated by men and used according to their conveniences. So it can be concluded this way that women were doubly marginalized and doubly colonized then, once by the males who ruled them, and secondly by the colonizers.

Likewise, a woman is always placed in the lower position in the social hierarchy and is therefore placed after the colonizers. She is denied privileges like education and work and is given no right to speak her mind in the society as can be seen through Jemubhai's sisters in the novel where the narrator mentions, "The daughters were promptly deprived to make sure he got the best of everything, from love to food" (Desai, p.59). So a woman get oppressed by her male counterparts at home and is denied of any status by the colonizers. In countries like India which have social systems consisting

of class and caste distinctions, the situation becomes even more complex. Women belonging to sub-castes or lower castes are even lower down the social status because they then are marginalized not only by men and the colonizers but also by the upper class women who have more social rights than they do. In the first case the men are the patrician and in the second it is the colonizers who are the dominating class and third, the women from higher class.

In the novel, it can be seen that most women have been used as bait to the corridor of power, have been suppressed and have been dehumanized to a great extent to mirror the detrimental nature of male gaze. Nimi, the wife of the judge, for instance, is presented as the orthodox face of the society. Through her character, Desai convincingly criticized the society for not giving a woman a proper place. She has also highlighted the movement of the subalterns from margins to the center but their march is slow and tarnished as they start following and enforcing the patriarchal system.

### **Theory of Power politics, Gender and Sexuality**

The theories of power politics, gender and sexuality has a dominant space in this novel. Power politics is reflected as an action by entities against others entities in forms of economic, political and societal structures to prove superiority of sex, gender, race, nationality etc. It is done with the motif of marginalizing with less power and resources. The societal institutions follow the hierarchy of power politics like the role of a man and a woman in the society, distribution and transfer of property in the family, laying down rules for others, use of resources, rituals of marriage, religious rituals etc.

Power produces a particular kind of knowledge about the body which in turn produces specific kinds of bodies. Foucault with his deep understanding of power and sexuality becomes primary gender theorist amongst all. He describes power as matrix and its strategies of operation as directions. Foucault's power model emphasizes all pervasive nature of its presence, "[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (93). He finds it to be embedded in the discourse this is why it is very powerful and becomes so pervasive that it shapes our identity. He describes the politics of body and power with the help of 'bio-power' i.e. collision of power/knowledge and body.

The power politics and sexuality specifically refers to the struggle of man and woman in order to exercise their will and desire to achieve supremacy over the other. For instance, the Cook and his son Biju suffer from not being able to place oneself in the superior position. Biju who is an important character in the novel, is placed in a new society in pursuit of economic stability in a foreign land. He has been removed from his native land (Kalimpong,

India) from the real self and has the strong sense of guilt for their deed; this self-realization at the end of the play is moralizing in nature. His father who is a cook of the retired judge is also a subordinate character, who represents the lowest rank in the power of social hierarchy and is treated inhumanely:

*When the judge smacked the cook over head with his slippers shouting; "If this is what you want!" Then the cook fell at his feet, clasping one of them and weeping for mercy...The judge began to beat him harder and harder to get him to let go. He kicked out and hit... "I'll kill you! I'll kill you!"(p.320)*

Through them, the author has highlighted the miseries of subordinates in the society with sensitivity by telling that they have been used as a tool for the projection of socio-cultural corruption, religious decay, death of human values and immoral politics strangling the life of all those who are powerless. Power as a rule victimizes people irrespective of their gender, but the female are by far, the worst sufferers. Cruelty inflicted on women exposes the intricate working of a patriarchal system that is instrumental in marginalizing them by giving them neither any rights nor access to any resources. Desai has highlighted the miseries of women folk with sensitivity. Women's restricted access to resources is a strategy for making them plan their life in a way that they always depend on the male for their surname, existence, identity and sustenance. Women in her novel are mostly delicate, frail, vulnerable and reductive.

With the rise of feminist and gender theories there was a change of focus towards less masculine ways. Hartsock (1983), comments that, "theories of power put forward by women rather than men differ systematically from the understanding of power as domination" (p. 210). Gender inequality refers to unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their gender. It arises from differences in socially constructed gender roles. Gender systems are often dichotomous and hierarchical, i.e. gender binary systems may reflect the inequalities that manifest in numerous dimensions of daily life. Gender inequality stems from distinctions, whether empirically grounded or socially constructed. The stereotypes are a possible explanation for gender inequality and the resulting gendered disparity.

The portrayal of masculine domination is clearly seen in Desai's novel. The existence of gender inequality is present in *The Inheritance of Loss* whereby women like the teenager Sai, the sisters Noni and Lola, and the Judge's wife Nimi are seen as victims of the social hierarchy. Nimi represents the victimized woman in *The Inheritance of Loss*. She lives a tedious life without any voice and is treated violently by her husband and humiliated many times. The incident of the powder puff is

evidence of her being tormented by her husband. Nimi was fascinated by the pink puff and the aromatic powder that Jemubai had brought back from England. She powdered herself and hid it in her blouse. When he came to find out that it was missing he created a racket in the whole house, searching for it all over the house. When he saw it with her, he was so angry that he grabbed her and pinned her to the floor in lust and fury. He was filled with rage and kicked her and attacked her till he felt sick in his own stomach. After that incident he never spoke to her or looked in her direction again. Later, when he was transferred, he left her alone for weeks. But just as someone who had spent a confined life, she could not even consider moving out of the gate. She had fallen out of life. After a point, she became invalid, unable to look at the mirror, dress or comb. Thus, the novel presents Nimi as a pathetic woman who has no control over her torturous life.

The other women characters like Lola and Noni, who are sisters, do not have a man in their family which bars them from the protection they require when the Gorkha people force their way in their compound and into their house. Though they are economically stable in that part of society they are victimized because the journey from the periphery to the center is full of resistance from the dominant pre-established forces dominated by men. But in case of the cook and his son Biju, they are unable to establish the dream of economic liberation, as the established power structure permits it only through association with successful and wealthy men. The woman as subject in any literary discourse is written primarily in the masculine form and interpreted in patriarchal terms.

Gender became an issue of prime concern and became more personalized in nature and got prominence over social and national issues. Gender has evolved as a tool of criticism that looks at the identity of a person as heterosexual, homosexual, lesbians, transgender or eunuch. Kaplan (2009) emphasized the changing meaning of gender, acclaiming, "Gender is now one of the busiest, most restless terms in the English language, a word that crops up everywhere, yet whose use seems to be forever changing, always on the move, producing new and often surprising inflections of meaning"(p.1). The difference between sex and gender is discussed in the writings of the psychoanalyst and anthropologist Stoller in his book *Sex and Gender*:

*On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity. He also elaborates the difference between gender role and gender identity, "Gender identity starts with the knowledge and awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not the other..." (1994, p.10).*

In Gender Studies sexuality has been defined as a set of social processes which produce and organize the structure and expression of desire. Sexuality becomes a guiding force in directing the desires, fantasies, roles and responsibilities. These roles and responsibilities are posed by the gender norms which are culture specific. The anatomy of a person is guided by a long list of does and don'ts. Gender follows cultural model proposed by Elaine Showalter. Deshpande in his essay addresses, "Gender is undoubtedly, one of the most important factors in our lives. It is realized that in a world dominated by male values, the caste and the class struggle are taken seriously and the gender struggle is not" (1996). Furthermore, Nubile (2003) claims that "Indian women live with the bondage of gender, class and caste and it is not easy to escape this triple- bonding: feminists must understand that being a woman in India is something alien and different from the concept of women in the world" (p.23). Thence, many Indian activists, writers and theorists have adopted the western theories in the Indian context with characteristics of their own.

It can be observed that in the novel Desai has confidently taken up the issues and subjects related to the marginalized in the social balance of India. Subaltern voices of the Gorkhas in Kalimpong who demand a separate land, are loud and noticeable enough in the novel with a clear message for changing the dominant discourses. To lead a life of respect is not possible for the marginalized in the heterosexual society which primarily follows the prominently patriarchal attitude and approach, is presented in all its complexity in her books. She has not only mirrored the image of the Indian society, where women have been used as to showcase the inferior gender but also men of inferior economic position have been shown to be suffering in pursuit of wealth. Through the representation of a variety of characters from different cultural backgrounds and tracing their mental makeup, Desai illustrates the experiences of collusion of the characters with the globalized world.

The frequent struggle in order to rise above the social steps and structures in search of their identity is clearly featured as the story indirectly attacks the patriarchal system in the Indian household, social hierarchy and the quest for economic progress which eventually exploits people at large. There is a constant friction between self and the society felt, as in the novel, by Sai as she tries to break free from the undeniable restrictions and coldness imposed by her grandfather. Meenakshi Mukherjee (1985) rightly observes that:

*The resultant tension between individual and society —could be studied in sharper contours when the protagonist's life was restricted within the narrow space with very few options regarding mobility, self-sufficiency, or vocation in other words when the protagonist was a woman. (p.144)*

Sai looks out to launch her identity in the small society she creates for herself. On the other hand, the retired Judge is the patriarchal head who dictates the lives of all family members and never frees anyone and cripples the life of others. A true patriarch is dangerous to the life of family members irrespective of gender. Patel is not only bad to his wife, but also to his daughter, granddaughter and his servants. In fact he dehumanizes them to the extent that there is no purpose of their life. Even after losing his wife and his daughter, he tries to keep no bond with his granddaughter except for financial help and shelter. Thus Desai, who has a liberated outlook, and who seems always ready to break the shackles of belief and anti-feminine norms imposed by the patriarchal society bore a strong character in Sai. The story stages the power politics against the marginalized and those who support them. The marginalized have been stereotyped as unproductive so their voice has been muted. Gyan's realization of the true self which comes only at the end of the story remains unfulfilled.

## CONCLUSION

With the rising of post-colonialism since the late of 1980s, many scholars began to explore postcolonial literatures from the perspectives of race, identity, diaspora and other key concepts related to it. Much of the literature that comes out of post-colonialism is very concerned about being able to assess the full effect of the role that social orders play in how individuals perceive themselves and their world. Furthermore, the focus of the work of postcolonial literature is how indigenous and external societies clash with one another, often at times with the result left upon the psyche of the individual. Within this arena, the effect of race and ethnicity becomes examined, as consciousness becomes products of a colonial and postcolonial setting.

In the same way, *The inheritance of Loss* is molded by the historical forces shaping the identity of the characters as well as their sense of belonging. Desai focuses on the issues of identity because of colonialism, and politics and talks about the consequence of the political turmoil on the particular family. Thus it could be safely concluded here that the subtle politics which favors the male determines the significance of sexuality and establishes its importance in the societal hierarchy and in turn marginalizes the female. Social institutions without power cannot hold at the same time victimize the people (male) who brought it into being. This way the structures are the cause and effect of power. The true self is so modified or distorted by the power politics, gender and notions of sexuality that humans as social entities strive hard for the ideals set by the socio-cultural and gender norms. The real entity undergoes so much of cosmetic change that it mirrors always, without a fail, what society wants to see,

not what it actually is.

Thus, the characters seemed uprooted from their own self, and looked trapped in an invisible territory and each one of them seemed as if they wanted to break free either from their counterparts or from unknown horizon.

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