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## Colonialism and Its Legacy: A Study of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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### Abstract

The author illustrates the consequences of imperialism. Actually, the British influence in India gave birth to a society where there came out to be a great gulf between the colonizer and the colonized in relation to money and power. The process of decolonization begins as the oppressed take full control of the situation and it is not what can be called uncommon but a natural reaction from the Nepalese. Perhaps, the author tries to bring to the notice that the Nepalese were twice colonized both from the British and the Indians. In fact, injustice has been done to these poor people and its price must be paid. It will take generations to pay for what the colonizers owe the colonized and the oppressed. It also suggests that it will take generations for India to be free from the British influence.

**Key-Words :** Colonialism, Fundamentalism and Terrorism, Humiliation, Western Lifestyle, Cultural Differences.

*The Inheritance of Loss* is the second novel by Kiran Desai, which has been widely praised by critics all over the world and won the 2006 Man Booker Prize as well as the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award in the same year. To some extent, the book seems to be impacted by her own journeys as well as the journeys of her grandparents from east to west. Kiran Desai was born in Chandigarh and spent her early life in Pune and Mumbai. When she was around nine years old, her family moved to Delhi. By the time she turned fourteen, her family moved to England. After one year she moved to the United States with her mother and since then she has been living there. These are the very journeys which might have made her feel de-rooted from her native place and would surely be in her mind while writing *The Inheritance of Loss*. When asked about her link to the characters of the book, Kiran stated, "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 what I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance." The very questions which Desai raises in the book are simply related to the problems faced by immigrants. It tries to focus on, 'what it means to be an immigrant?', and 'what happens when a western element is introduced into a country that is not of the west?', and 'what happens when you take people from a poor nation and place them in a wealthy nation like America or England?' Do these immigrants face identity crisis? Does this imbalance change a person's feelings and thinking? These are some of the main issues Desai wanted to focus on while writing this book.

The book also deals with some international issues like globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorism. Apart from these issues, special attention has been given to racism, colonialism, the Gorkha Separatist Movement and ethnicity. But the aim of the present paper is to reveal colonialism and its legacy through different characters especially Jemubhai Patel. Through the main characters in the book, in particular Jemubhai, the author tries to show how discrimination due to race can influence and wound and even destroy the psyche of human beings. The bitter experiences of Jemubhai in England turn the racial theme into a universal subject. The author focuses on a pattern of white, imperial superiority and power and shows how people from the colonized countries are badly treated in the western world due to their skin colour and Third World origin. But on the other hand, the white Europeans prove their superiority in universal perspective and have been quite successful in gaining power and dominance all over the world. This leads to poverty, humiliation and discrimination of people from the Third World colonized nations. It forces one to think that the West means that is developed, industrialized, well advanced, secured and modern. It can also be described as a historical rather than geographical construct. Based on this, the Orient stands for what is not Europe but rather than the 'Other'. Thus, while discussing the racial issues and ethnicity, the West will represent Europe and America and the East will represent the Orient or what is not Europe and America.

In the case of Jemubhai, Desai illustrates the point- what happens when you take people from a poor nation and place them in a wealthy nation like America or England? For this, we need to have a close look at the very life of Jemubhai right from the beginning of his childhood. During his school days, Jemubhai sees the portrait of Queen Victoria and develops an obsessive respect for the queen. He feels "deeply immersed that a woman so plain could also have been so powerful. The more he pondered this oddity, the more his respect for her and the English grew." (*The Inheritance of Loss*, 58) The turning point in his life begins in 1939, the year when he moves to England to study for duration of five years. In fact, his sharp wit and cleverness at school, together with the dowry he receives in his marriage, makes his foreign journey possible. During his stay in England he faces the ugly faces of racism and learns what hate is. The first impression of England to him is a cultural shock. Due to his dark skin and different cultural background and accent, he is not accepted by the English. Remember, India in 1939 was a British colony and the British were proud of their superiority over others. Nobody talks to him properly and he is made to feel inferior in an alien nation. This turns him into a social recluse as he withdraws from all social activities: "He retreated into a social solitude that grew in weight day-by-day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow." (39) The impact of racism on him is so strong that he becomes a stranger even to himself, he notices that his own skin colour is odd, his way of speaking unpleasant and he is terribly scared of the very thought of being different from the white-skinned people:

Eventually he felt barely human at all; he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his own skin odd-coloured, his own accent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely manage to lift his lips in a smile, and if he ever did, he held his hand over his mouth, because he couldn't bear anyone 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



offence. He began to wash obsessively...To the end of his life, he would never be seen without socks and shoes and would prefer shadow to light, faded days to sunny, for he was suspicious that sunlight might reveal him, in his hideousness, all too clearly.(40)

In this way, Jemubhai starts feeling that the discriminating behaviour of the English towards him is justified. He feels that they are the colonizers and thus have a moral right to suppress others. Simply speaking, he becomes a victim of internalized oppression. Moreover, he loses self-respect and starts hating his own body and personality. The humiliation is so deeply rooted that he starts using cosmetics like powder in order to make his skin look like the very skin of the English. This habit becomes an obsession to him and remains throughout his life even after his return from England. This act of hiding his original personality symbolizes that he puts on a mask, the mask of whiteness behind which he tries to hide his black-skinned face. It can also be seen as an attempt of Jemubhai to adopt the characteristics of the white man, who he adores and admires. After his return from England, this mask of whiteness becomes the mask of cruelty as he uses the weapon of cruelty and hatred against the Indian people, who he hates and considers inferior. Now, "He was a foreigner-a foreigner-every bit of him screamed." (167) He is mocked at by the people due to his anglophile attitude of life and for the habit of using powder on his face, a habit he developed during his stay in England. The fact is that he is not able to forget the traumatic experience of England and wants others to see in the same pain and trauma he himself felt in England. It can be referred to as projection through which a man conceals from himself that he has a trait of which he is unconsciously ashamed and tries to see its presence in others.

Nimi, Jemubhai's wife is the first one to face the sadistic treatment of her westernized husband. In order to pacify his own troubled mind, he transfers his misery to his young wife. One can feel that he is giving to her wife what he himself received in England- loneliness, frustration, humiliation and above all a kind of mental trauma. He gives her an English name and forces her to learn English and adopt the westernized manners. Her refusal turns him up to the point of insanity and he finally leaves her and his own family members. Thus, he behaves like a strong white man who uses his male dominance against a weak, passive and submissive woman, Nimi. Not only this, he gives himself an English name- James Peter Peterson. Through Jemubhai, Desai wants to reveal the fact that discrimination in any form is an inhuman act and can come out very dangerously for those who suffer. It also shows the very behaviour of the English who take it to be a privilege to suppress the people from the Third World nations. They feel that the people from these Third World countries are unworthy and also look upon them as intruders who want to benefit from their well-developed advanced society. It is the result of this discrimination that the people like Jemubhai suffer and develop the feeling of homelessness. But unfortunately, when Jemu comes back to India, he starts discriminating the Indians, his own countrymen. While in England he was not accepted by the English, when in India he is not ready to accept the Indians. What actually is his position vis-a-vis home? Now he belongs neither to the East nor to the West-he is homeless and de-rooted.

His character further raises a number of questions which can bruise the minds of a number of wise and sensible people. Why does he remain devoted and loyal to the English throughout his life even after suffering much from them? Why does he accept the suffering in a docile manner? One should pay attention to the fact that he was a highly educated man. Why does he not take the revenge of his humiliation after becoming a judge in India? Most importantly, why does he not help the other Indians who suffer like him and are the



victims of the British atrocities in India? On the other hand, he seems to be very callous to the Indians, not to the English people? Again the answers can be traced out in his cultural background and his very personality. We know that during his childhood days he develops a possession for English ways and culture after seeing a portrait of Queen Victoria. He grew up witnessing a contrast in society between the rich and prosperous Englishmen and the poor Indians. These childhood observations make him prefer English to Indian, a preference which remains with him deep in his mind throughout his life. To be a successful and prosperous man, he chooses the powerful and dominating side. It shows that he has no feelings of self-respect and dignity. Though he is more a victim of callous fate, but he also seems to accept it quite easily by tolerating each humiliation silently. He never tries to defend himself and save his dignity. His sole purpose is to work hard and earn the degree for which he comes to England. He is a coward who tries to accomplish only what suits him best and what contributes to improve his own situation. It can be proved with the incident that Jemubhai comes across during his stay in Cambridge. When he sees an Indian boy being brutally kicked and humiliated, he does not try to help him in any way. Neither does he call for any help from others for the boy. It shows that Jemubhai is concerned only with his own welfare. Moreover, the hopes of his entire family rest on him, and he succeeds in leaving India for a difficult task of getting education in England. His colour, his religion, his language—all make him the embodiment of 'other' in an alien land, and he begins to question his identity and his connection to India.

The very setting of Cho Oyu, the house where Jemubhai lives, also indicates toward the colonial legacy maintained by the Judge. In the beginning of the book, the author gives a minute description of the house where, on the veranda, Sai is reading an article in National Geographic, while the Judge is playing chess by himself. The dog Mutt is enjoying a sound sleep under the Judge's chair. This sophisticated picture illustrates the privileged western atmosphere of the Cho Oyu house. Moreover, there is no proper and cordial communication between the Judge and his servant. Though they have been living together for quite a long time, but the very relationship between them is that of the colonizer and the colonized. When the police come to investigate the robbery, the servant tries to interfere by giving some clarification. It annoys the Judge and he rebukes the servant by saying, "Go sit in the kitchen, bar bar karta rehta hai." (11) The Judge uses two languages which clearly suggest his loyalty to the English colonizers of the West, while the Indian language is used in patronizing manner to maintain the class distinction between them. It shows that there is no understanding between them except that of a master giving orders and the servant obeying them without any grudge. His colonial legacy is further elaborated by his jealous feeling towards the cook who tries to improve his situation by selling liquor.

The professional life of Jemubhai does reflect something, which is a clear-cut example of colonial legacy. Through his position as a judge, he enjoys a sophisticated life in the upper-class Indian society. During his different trips around his district, he lives a luxurious life even when he is in a forest for professional work of his routine life:

Through jungly areas and through deeper, swifter currents, he crossed on elephant. We would travel before him in a train of bullock cars piled with the China tents, furniture, carpets-everything. There were porters, orderlies, a stenographer... We would put up tents in villages all over the district: a big bedroom tent like a top for your grandfather, 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 dinner even in jungle, in black dinner jacket and bow tie. (60)

The statement shows the sophisticated life of the Judge enjoyed during the postcolonial period. From the viewpoint of the Judge, his dignity and standard life is important to maintain the western lifestyle he feels he is entitled to and the power he has achieved through his profession. With the passage of time, the power, wealth and standard of the Judge decline, but his status remains the same. This shows how deeply he is impacted by the colonial rule, and how difficult is it to leave the colonial legacy. We also need to have a close look at the relationship between Jemubhai and the cook as it reveals how imperialism and the western life have affected the Indian social life and in particular the life of Jemubhai. The author also brings to light the very sense of class dignity in the case of Jemubhai. Towards the end of the novel, we come to know about the disappearance of the dog Mutt, a loss almost unbearable to the retired Judge. Perhaps he loves the creature more than anything in the world. The Judge blames the cook for this and threatens him to kill. The cook's low position makes him feel guilty for not doing his job properly. Drunk and guilt-ridden, the cook knocks at the door of the Judge at an untimely hour, asking for forgiveness and punishment. This irritates the judge so badly that he becomes almost insane with anger and hate and starts, "... beating with all the force of his sagging, puckering flesh, flecks of saliva flying from his slack muscled mouth, and his chin wobbled uncontrollably. Yet, the arm from which the flesh hung already dead came down, bringing the slipper upon the cook's head." (321) The servant, on the other hand, pleads to be punished and even killed: "I'm a bad man, 'cried the cook, 'I'm a bad man, beat me sahib, punish me." (319) And when Sai enters the room and tries to stop the Judge, the servant says, "Let him. He wants to kill me. Let him kill me. What is my life? It's nothing. Better that it's gone." (320) The judge feels that as a master, he is privileged to beat and humiliate the servant. One can remember the colonial period when the Indians were whipped mercilessly by the white masters for no fault, the whites felt that they had a divine right to punish and insult the dark-skinned Indians. The same mentality has been presented by the Judge towards his own cook with whom he has been living for a long time and who has been serving him for a long time. The judge's disgust for the cook can be compared to the white men's disgust for the Indians. Here, undoubtedly, the judge represents the white, western-oriented mentality and uses his power and position to oppress the poor man who symbolically stands for a poor man from the East.

Another major issues dealt by Kiran Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss* are racial discrimination, multiculturalism and the after-effects of imperialism. Through the characters of Noni and Lola, the author elaborates the issues of race, and the challenges of postcolonial and multicultural society. The book presents Noni and Lola as the characters who have been able to take advantage from the British influence. Even though their economic status is not as fortunate as it was during the colonial period, they basically manage to maintain their western lifestyle. The book reveals that regularly, they take trips to England to buy clothes and keep servants. Culturally also their lives are influenced by the western style and ways as they prefer British authors and celebrate Christmas. Naturally their lives would have been deeply observed by the poor Gorkhas living around them. But they react as if they are not concerned with all this. But this is the point where, I feel, that they were concerned but said nothing as they were poor people. Their pent up anger takes a dangerous form when the guerrilla groups take control in the hillside of Kalimpong. Now they take revenge of each and every humiliation they suffer directly or indirectly. Until now the privileged people like Shyam and Uncle Potty have been able to enjoy a luxurious life, but

the situation changes now dramatically. They are humiliated, ridiculed and discriminated by the rebel groups. They are refused food, electricity and are spit on by Nepali children. The oppressed become oppressors and take the revenge of their humiliation. For the first time in her life probably Lola understands the difficulties of these poor Nepalese. Now she understands that:

It did matter, buying tinned ham roll in a rice and dal country; it did matter to live in a big house and sit beside a heater in the evening, even one that sparked and shocked; it did matter to fly to London and return with chocolates filled with kirsch; it did matter those others could not. They had pretended it didn't, or had nothing to do with them, and suddenly it had everything to do with them. (242)

Thus, the author illustrates the consequences of imperialism. Actually, the British influence in India gave birth to a society where there came out to be a great gulf between the colonizer and the colonized in relation to money and power. The process of decolonization begins as the oppressed take full control of the situation and it is not what can be called uncommon but a natural reaction from the Nepalese. Perhaps, the author tries to bring to the notice that the Nepalese were twice colonized both from the British and the Indians. In fact, injustice has been done to these poor people and its price must be paid. It will take generations to pay for what the colonizers owe the colonized and the oppressed. It also suggests that it will take generations for India to be free from the British influence.

The book also tries to depict cultural differences in society and provides a real picture of how an immigrant struggles to survive working illegal jobs at different places where the old class system prevails, the French upstairs, the Indians downstairs. The issue is elaborated through Biju right from his efforts to get a tourist visa for the United States to his move from one illegal, ill-paid job to another. Through Biju, the author reveals how the workers from the Third World nations are humiliated and treated. Since Biju is an illegal worker, he always remains in constant fear of being caught and sent back home by the authorities. Though he works very hard there but can enjoy no rights in the American society. The workers also make no complaints as they are undocumented there. Financially, these undocumented workers mean a lot to the owners as they are low-cost labour there. The very pathetic situation of Biju is an attack on the parents who are proud of the fact that their children are abroad but they never feel what their children feel there. Here, it is noteworthy and interesting to compare Biju with Father Booty, who also lives in India, a foreign nation on illegal terms but enjoys all the privileges. In contrast to the life of Father Booty, Biju lives a secret life in humiliation and poverty. It also reveals how a white man, due to his white race, class and authority, is often able to settle in a foreign land without being humiliated and suppressed. Biju, on the other hand, is a representative of the poor, disadvantaged people from the Third World facing oppression when approaching the West.

To sum up, Desai tries to dissect the dream of empire, old and new, and lays bare the very idea of colonial modernity. It forces us to ponder over the fact, what happens to those who leave for a new beginning but find themselves outcasts both at home and abroad. Their ambition for a better life takes them to America or England, but they are never accepted there and are treated like aliens rather intruders. It forces us to think about what is home? Is it a land of our ancestors or the land where we grow up after taking birth? In the case of Jemubhai, we can say that he is a homeless man. While in England, he remains unaccepted, in India, he does not accept others. Longing is perhaps the most dominant desire that almost all the characters in the book possess. They long for home, love and acceptance-



unfortunately their longings remain unfulfilled. The main feeling running throughout the book is closely linked to colonialism and the effects of post-colonialism: the loss of identity and the way it travels through generations as a sense of loss. With keen observation and profound wisdom, Desai knits the weight of colonial history with a bitter flavour of humiliation, and gives a multifarious variety of characters who live with questions of identity and isolation, exiles at home as well as abroad.

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