

Between Home and Exile: Migration, Identity and Belonging in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract:

The *Inheritance of Loss* is Kiran Desai's exploration of the themes of migration, identity and belonging, through characters whose lives bridge colonial experience, postcolonial India and the migration today. The novel, largely set in Kalimpong and New York, frequently recalling colonial England, asks the question of whether geographical mobility affords freedom, prosperity, or a secure identity. Jemu-bhai Patel's schooling in England brings about cultural disorientation and self-loathing even after he returns to India. Biju's existence in New York is different from the one we are accustomed to, and involves a new sense of dislocation due to unstable work, a lack of economic equity, and the absence of legal documentation. Sai and Gyan show how other class differences, cultural inheritance, ethnicity and political conflict can make belonging unstable within the homeland. This paper will suggest that Desai deconstructs the binary opposition of home and exile by demonstrating that it is a psychological, social and historical state as well as a geographical one. The study uses close reading of characterisation, spatial imagery, movement of the narrative and migration and return experiences to demonstrate how colonial history and contemporary globalization create different but interconnected forms of displacement. Migration is neither romanticized nor idealized in Desai. Rather, *The Inheritance of Loss* offers a picture of belonging as an unsettled process that depends upon dignity, recognition, relationships, cultural memory, and material circumstances. Home is then not a place we start but a dynamic encounter with the histories, communities and spaces which shape identity.

Keywords: Migration, identity, belonging, exile, diaspora, globalization, colonialism, displacement, home, Kiran Desai

Introduction

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai sets the issue of belonging in a landscape defined by colonial past, economic migration, cultural hierarchy, class disparity and political rivalry. The novel's focus isn't so much on geographical travel as it is on the back-and-forth journey between India and the United States, and on repeated returns through memory to England. Desai is more preoccupied with the nature of identity when people shift between cultures, acquire histories that aren't theirs, realize that the home they thought they knew may not recognize or validate

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them, or find that their identity is not coherent. this worry is developed in the novel through multiple characters. During the colonial era, Jemu bhai Patel, a retired judge, studied in England. He has spent a lot of time overseas, and feels quite estranged from his Indian heritage. Biju, the judge's cook's son, leaves India in search of better economic opportunities, but finds himself in an unstable world of undocumented restaurant workers in the United States. Jemu bhai's granddaughter, Sai, lives in India, but has grown up in a highly westernized cultural setting. Her relationship with her Nepali tutor Gyan slowly becomes charged with class contradiction, cultural and political differences, and the politics of the Gorkhaland agitation.

These characters highlight “migration” and “exile” as different terms. Biju is a geographically displaced person while Jemu bhai shows that exile could be psychological after living at home. Sai and Gyan demonstrate that people can be culturally and politically displaced, even without crossing an international border. The novel thus plays on the ambiguity of the distinction between homeland and foreign land.

These concerns have been noted in the existing criticism. Uma Jayaraman discusses the ambivalent nature of Jemubhai's identity and the ways that the so-called enabling diasporic or “in-between” spaces can be trapping. Her discussion is especially interesting in the way she illustrates how a space, at home, can become “unhomely” when the individual is no longer able to inhabit it “culturally”. In the novel, Oana Sabo sees diaspora both as a social reality and as a means of using the movement across time and space to highlight economic inequality and historical power dynamics, and not as a celebration of mobility for its own sake (375-92). In a similar discussion of colonial displacement, globalization, migration and divided identity, Ksenija Kondali focuses on the unequal pressures on which the characters find themselves stranded between assimilation and resistance (101-16).

The present paper builds upon such studies and attempts to combine three related but factually different functions of displacement: that of coloniality and psychological alienation in the case of Jemubhai; the precarious economic migration in the case of Biju; and the contested belonging in the case of Sai, Gyan, and Kalimpong. The argument is not that these experiences are the same. Their differences are crucial to Desai's portrayal of migration. Instead, the novel juxtaposes them on the page to show that being part of a community involves a great deal more than living near each other. This paper posits that *The Inheritance of Loss* deconstructs the dichotomy of home and exile, viewing both as relational conditions that are defined by history, culture, class, political recognition, economic security, and interpersonal relationships. Migration can be both a source of opportunity and vulnerability. Return can help to retain the emotional bond, but not the idealized past. Likewise, this is the case with homelands, which can be exclusionary in themselves.

The narrative of the novel is divided, which is an aspect that corroborates this argument. Desai's use of Kalimpong and New York as a frequent jumping point, as well as the inclusion of immediate experience and colonial memory, runs throughout. As a consequence, neither India nor the West can be the center of the narrative. The stories highlight and complicate each other: Jemubhai's colonial schooling affects the reader's perception of Sai's cultural heritage; Biju's experience questions the fantasies of global mobility; and political conflict in Kalimpong shows that displacement can be a part of the nation-state as well.

Colonial Migration and the Fracturing of Identity.

Jemu bhai Patel is the most continuous psychological portrayal of the colonial migration in the novel. His trip to England seems to start out as a path to education, career development and administrative authority in the colonies. However, his experience there does not contribute to confident cultural mobility. Rather it creates shame, isolation, and an ever more negative attitude towards himself. Jemu bhai arrives in England in a colonial order where British language, education, manners, and institutions already exist as criteria of advancement. His meeting with England is thus not an encounter between two cultures. He is encouraged by this authority of British culture to judge his Indian identity by standards according to which he is made to feel inferior.

Racial prejudice exacerbates this process. As Jemubhai grows older, he begins to feel conscious of his looks, speech, actions, and body odor. He doesn't direct his rage against the social hierarchy that humiliates him, but rather gradually turns that hierarchy against himself. Desai says that he "grew stranger to himself." The term refers to the ultimate effect of his migration: his estrangement from England and India is not only from one country to another, but from one "body" to another. This process separates cultural influence from cultural self-rejection. Jemubhai's difficulty isn't just learning English customs. In contrast, Desai explores the unequal contact with other cultures and how he is left with a sense of the other cultures being superior and his own culture embarrassing. Anglicisation is therefore an internal process produced by external shame.

Jayaraman shrewdly characterizes Jemubhai as an 'Anglicised Gujarati' who is neither at ease with his own culture of origin nor one who is fully 'westernised'. His migration does not create a harmonious amalgamation of cultures. It leaves him to rely upon an identity that England itself has not fully embraced. When he goes back to India, it does not signify the end of his exile. He brings the judgment of the colonists with him and gradually strives to distance himself from the Indian social and cultural environment. The physical return of the migrant is not enough to give him back his sense of belonging if the meaning of home has changed as a result of experiencing another country.

In the case of Cho Oyu, it is the clearest spatial representation of this condition. The judge retreats to a house in India, but remains culturally attached to the world he has come to appreciate. Desai speaks of the "foreignness" of this isolation as "a foreigner in his own country". The contradiction is at the core of Jemubhai's identity. Generally, foreigners are those who do not belong to their homeland. In his case foreignness is something that is actively created in the homeland. Distance is a shield for him as being in India would otherwise require him to face the cultural self that he had rejected for years.

Cho Oyu is, at the same time, a place to live and a place of homelessness. It offers physical protection and validates psychological distance. Jemubhai has been residing in it for years, but ownership alone cannot make it a meaningful place of belonging. The house also bears the traces of colonialism. It has architecture, artefacts, routines and isolation which allow the judge to maintain cultural customs he has inherited through association with Britain. But this apparent stability is fragile. The presence of a private colonial retreat in the house and of the political

turbulence that manifests itself in the house indicates that the fixed postcolonial world outside the house is never going away.

The alienation of Jemubhai is of course very well done by Desai, as the alienation doesn't stay an abstract cultural issue. It penetrates into his relationships. It is difficult for him to accept himself which is why he struggles to build intimacy with others, especially Nimi. She is identified with the Indian world from which Jemubhai wants to break away. This shame he carried with him in foreign countries is then channelled towards the internalisation of domestic hostility. The man who is feeling culturally inferior tries to assert himself in relationships in which he is socially and in terms of gender more powerful.

Thus, Desai proves that colonial violence can live on in the psyche even after formal political colonialism has ended. The colonial hierarchy becomes Jemubhai's self-understanding and then it is reproduced in the domestic and social relationships.

Professional success does not repair this damage. Jemubhai gets the institutional job he sought, but his insecurity persists alongside his external authority. He may be able to make judgments about others professionally, but may not be able to reconcile the conflicting aspects of himself. His identity is therefore split between performance and self-perception. He is able to enact his dignity with the help of the English ways and their political or administrative control; and his performance is contingent upon staying away from everything that could remind him of his cultural roots.

Kondali sees this as one of the significant results of colonial displacement in the novel. Jemubhai's Westernisation provides him with privilege, and deepens his sense of self-loathing and alienation at the same time. Desai thus undermines any notion of Western education as being emancipatory for the colonial subject. Apart of this is passed on to Sai, but not in the same way. She has never visited Colonial England, but she has received her education in places where Western language – and culture – remains socially prestigious. The values formed through Jemubhai's traumatic direct colonial encounters reach Sai in a normalised manner.

The Inheritance of Loss is therefore very important because it is an inter-generational story. Not all colonialism is remembered as a political memory. It bequeaths to succeeding generations the system of cultural valuation which has been its legacy. Unlike her grandfather, Sai does not harbour self-hatred. The distinction matters. Culture clash is solved by a repudiation of some part of oneself: Jemubhai tries to escape cultural contradiction by rejecting part of himself; Sai begins to realize that she herself is in a culturally constructed position and that her life is not the only one that fits into it.

Jemu bhai's narrative then creates the first major exile in the novel: psychological exile through internalisation of the colonial hierarchy. He has seen the world, and returned, and found no rest in any of the world's stability. His experience shows that one can't always feel at home within geographical boundaries alone. People can live in their own state, own property there and still be radically estranged. A judge is not homeless; he does actually have a house. He is homeless because he has become incapable of inhabiting a part of himself without contempt, and thus his history.

Migrant Labour, Economic Precarity, and the Search for Home

In the context of colonial migration, Biju's narrative of *The Inheritance of Loss* moves to a new understanding of economic mobility in the present day. Whereas Jemubhai travels to England due to education and the colonial administration, Biju travels to the United States for economic advancement. He migrates in pursuit of his father's dream of America as an escape from inherited social and economic constraints. But the difference between this vision of America and Biju's reality illuminates the inequality of global mobility. Migration seems to carry connotations of opportunities and status in India, but in New York, Biju faces insecure jobs, cramped living, job hopping, and the precarious status of being undocumented.

In Desai's restaurants, Biju's migrant experience takes a concrete form. Without the poorly protected migrant labor, eating establishments would not be able to keep food flowing to their tables. One restaurant illustrates the hierarchy as the struggle between “On top, rich colonial,” and “down below, poor native” (Desai 2006, p. 29). The restaurant's design makes economic inequality visible, with wealth and consumption above and racialised migrant labour below. The colonial vocabulary does not suggest that today's globalisation is merely a reversion to colonialism in an unchanged shape. Instead, it highlights the continuity of the unequal access to mobility, privilege and labour. Similarly, as Kondali (2018) notes, Desai's restaurant scenes indicate the hidden violence of the cosmopolitan facade of the global city.

Biju is thus involved in globalisation from a precarious situation. Crossing an international border gives him neither secure employment, citizenship, nor social recognition. The repeated shifting from one restaurant job to another reflects instability, not cosmopolitan freedom. His work is welcomed by the global economy, but denies him the security of a full-fledged member of the society he serves. In this way, celebratory understandings of migration are complicated by Desai, as she demonstrates the different kinds of mobility that exist within class and legal status.

The novel doesn't idealise migrant communities as monolithic units that are bound together by the common experience of migration. National, racial, religious and cultural prejudices persist in workers' interactions with each other. While there is general economic fragility, there are opportunities for sympathy and limited solidarity at the same time. Migration results in neither simple multicultural harmony nor complete social disintegration. As Sabo (2012) suggests, Desai challenges cosmopolitan approaches to diaspora analysis that ignore material inequalities. Biju's experience suggests that this emphasis occurs in the context of insecure employment, economic vulnerability and unequal access to legal protection.

This economic status is tinged with emotion because of his relationship with his father. The cook thinks about Biju's life abroad in terms of success, whereas Biju feels insecurities behind the image of success. Their separation is consequently interpretative as well as geographical. For the father, America represents the promise of social mobility; Biju develops a growing sense that he may not have dignity or security there, and that the price for achieving these promises is too high.

The tensions are not addressed in Biju's eventual return to India, as these tensions are not resolved simply by celebrating homeland. He has “come home to no clarity of vision,” says

Desai (2006). It is not the nostalgic, unreachable India Biju returns to. Political wreckage and dispossession prevent a happy return to his native land, while those items that he has brought home from his foreign employment are precarious. His return thus uproots two illusions: the first is the belief that migration must lead to success; the second is the notion that migration doesn't impact home.

However, Biju's return to his father is an emotional moment. Biju is not the successful migrant his father dreams he will become, at least materially. But the renewal of their emotional bond offers some kind of belonging that he doesn't have in his tenuous life in New York. So, Desai separates achievement from emotion, and does not imply that financial matters are insignificant. Economic factors are a hugely significant part of the lives of characters whose lives are affected by poverty and class inequality, but they do not necessarily make a meaningful sense of home. This is further evident from the differing perspectives between Biju and Jemu bhai on migration. The movements of Jemu bhai are in the apparatus of colonial education and colonial administrative power, while Biju moves into the West as a marginal labour migrant. Jemu bhai yearns to be with the British, while Biju wonders if it is worth staying in America when there is no dignity or security in America for economic opportunity. They have different historical and material experiences and both demonstrate the failure of correlating geographical mobility with belonging.

The exile that Biju embodies, then, is an exile that is more economic and legal. His vulnerability is not due to colonial mimicry but due to class, insecure jobs, being undocumented, and the unequal structure of transnational labour. It is through him that Desai shows that migration is inextricably linked to power that is, the freedom to move doesn't mean that all migrants have the freedom, recognition, or security.

Contested Belonging: Sai, Gyan, and the Politics of Home

Sai and Gyan take the novel beyond trans-national migration. Through their relationship, Desai shows that belonging can be precarious even within the nation they belong to. Sai has been schooled in an environment of western values, and later lives in the environment of Cho Oyu where privilege and colonial inheritance are part of everyday life. Partly, she inherits cultural assumptions from Jemubhai, but she also has to deal with the historical and social context of which she has only a partial awareness.

At first, Gyan's arrival into the world of Cho Oyu as Sai's tutor seems to form a world of their own, detached from the conflicts that loom in the background. Through gradual erosion, Desai breaks down this divide. Their relationship starts to be influenced by class inequality, cultural difference, ethnicity and Gyan's political awareness. Gyan can't view Sai just as one person who is separate from the social context that is represented by Cho Oyu. The house, its way of doing things and its privileges are linked to structures from which he feels excluded. Jayaraman (2011) mentions that Gyan's desire to contact Sai is accompanied by an awareness of ethnic and material inequalities. Thus, his love is mixed with hatred and he feels the latter because personal intimacy cannot disguise unequal social status. These tensions are felt differently by Sai. Certain cultural privileges come across as normal because of her class and education. Gyan's responses force her to face divisions that she had not previously examined closely. Their

relationship consequently demonstrates that love cannot be completely separated from the social structures surrounding it. Desai is not dismissive of their emotional involvement and does not allow it to slide over the class, ethnic and political divide.

The Gorkhaland agitation brings this internal struggle to a greater level of political belonging. The movement proposes rival claims to recognition, territory and community, demonstrating the lack of uniformity in the sense of community among those sharing a territory. Desai is aware of the issues of marginalisation, but also portrays the force, oppression and violence that can result from political agitation. The novel then does not easily succumb to a simple dichotomy between legitimate and illegitimate claims. Collective identity can help marginalised communities gain recognition, yet the process of securing one group's identity can also create insecurity for others.

But in this political landscape, the significance of Cho Oyu is heightened due to the different connotations it has for different characters. For Jemubhai it is an escape from Indian society and an outward manifestation of his cultural retreat. For Sai, it's a family environment that was passed down from generation to generation. For the cook, it is a place of work, of long service, not of equal ownership. The privilege of owning such a house can be a symbol of the wider issue of social inequality in the eyes of politically conscious young Nepalis. Multiple experiences of home, then, are present in one place. This multiplicity makes it impossible to code shared residence or nationality as equal belonging because they are not necessarily equal. A striking contrast is that of Sai and Biju. Both are a younger generation influenced by world culture, but with vastly different opportunities. Sai has access to global culture through education and social status, and Biju has access to transnational mobility through precarious work. The difference between them points to an interclass linkage - the ability to function in multiple cultures is not evenly distributed.

Another clue to the importance of ethnic identity in the absence of national belonging comes from Gyan's political activities. But Desai does not depict ethnic nationalism as a simple solution. Political mobilisation could be a language that marginalised communities use to voice their grievances; however, the violence of the mobilisation highlights the risk of generating new exclusions while, at the same time, exposing existing ones. The novel is suspicious of any one answer to displacement, be it global mobility, cultural assimilation, or political nationalism that it examines. The story strengthens this argument. Desai oscillates back and forth between Kalimpong and Biju's stay in New York and Jemubhai's recollections of colonial England. These moves connect historical periods and social positions but do not imply that they are the same. According to Sabo (2012), diaspora is both a technique of narration and a social phenomenon in the novel. The intermittent journey from one location to another, from one era to another, invites readers to consider local problems in terms of broader patterns of colonial history, transnational travels, and economic inequity. Kondali (2018) argues that Desai's alternating narrative highlights the interconnections of narratives of colonial inheritance, current globalisation, migration, and local political conflict.

This also helps the reader understand the meaning of the novel's title. When we say "inheritance" of loss, we are not talking about a single loss that is passed on the same way from generation to generation. Jemubhai has the psychological effects of the colonial hierarchy; Sai

has the cultural values of the system, which are influenced by this; the cook has expectations of 'migrant' success in an unequal economy, which he passes on to Biju; and Biju has to face these expectations in an unequal migrant economy. Meanwhile, Gyan faces political and ethnic problems created by not just his history with Sai, but by his past as well. What is inherited, then, includes aspirations, cultural hierarchies, inequalities, memories, and unresolved conflicts.

However, Desai doesn't make inheritance a form of total determinism. Sai does not need to repeat Jemubhai's answer to cultural conflict; Biju decides to leave America despite its cachet, and Gyan finds himself actively negotiating his political identity. Their choices are still morally complex, but they show that there is a sense in which one's life is not determined by one's historical inheritance. Sai and Gyan create another displacement: the sense of belonging that is also contested in the homeland. They have learned not to equate exile with national frontiers. People can stay at home but feel excluded and marginalized socially, culturally or politically, or they can feel attached to where they are from while away. Finally, Desai argues that "belonging" is not solely geographical but is instead a negotiated process that is influenced by recognition, class, cultural memory, political identity and human relationships.

Conclusion

The *Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai is a novel about migration, which is fraught with historical, class, cultural, identity, and belonging issues. The novel's protagonists Jemubhai, Biju, Sai and Gyan question the notion that "home" and "exile" are merely geographical opposites. Jemubhai's studies in England provide a pathway to professional success, but also intensify his embarrassment around his Indian identity, leaving him culturally estranged even once he gets home. Biju's journey to New York is another kind of displacement, one experienced by labourers who migrate without documentation, find employment without security, and gain access to the economic mainstream only at its margins. Biju's case makes clear how undocumented labour migration, insecure employment, and economic marginalisation expose the inequalities underpinning globalization. His return to India does not bring his idealised homeland back; yet emotional connection is a key factor in belonging as well. Sai and Gyan also illustrate how displacement can happen even within the homeland, as a result of class difference, ethnicity, cultural inheritance and political conflict.

Desai's disjointed narrative does not equate colonial memory with current migration or local upheaval. The novel makes home more than just a place of birth or a place to live: a sense of home relies on dignity, recognition, relationships, and material safety. In the end, *The Inheritance of Loss* suggests that belonging is never guaranteed but is instead always negotiated between attachment and alienation, mobility and exclusion, inheritance and change.

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