

The Inheritance of Loss: A Postcolonial Dilemma

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Abstract: *The Inheritance of Loss* discovers some of the important issues of present globalized world. The novel covers two countries, India and U.S.A, and takes up some of the important issues from feminism to the problem of immigration. The novel brings out the search for suppressed identity and the fight of a group of people against the hopelessness created after independence when the agitation of Gorkhaland was at its peak. The time segment is 1980 when the political ferment inside the country leads to dislocation of a normal life and further loss on all fronts. It also explores the uncontrollable temptation for fashionable life that leads to restlessness, economic injustice, multiculturalism and the agony of being a foreigner. The novel examines at a deeper level, the consequences of the introduction of a western element into a non-western country.

Keywords: Women, multiculturalism, Globalization, Immigration, Insurgency

The Inheritance of Loss presents an in-depth study of a teenage girl's disillusionment with men from varying age groups, be it her tutor, her grandfather or her servant. The narrative ends finally with loss on all fronts for all the major characters; the worst sufferer being Sai. The novel oscillates telling simultaneously stories between two places- an Indian hill station in the north-eastern Himalayas and a ghastly place in New York. The first place consists of a retired judge, his young granddaughter, his cook and his pet dog, and a small group of people amidst political turmoil resulting in suffering for each and every character. It highlights the impact of blending of people from different cultures and social strata, the episode of love and hate due to loss of confidence, and further to retrieve from uncertainty. The second place covers the saga of Biju, the son of the judge's cook, who has illegally entered America and fears for being an illegal immigrant, keeps on changing low profile jobs, has to face the apprehension and injustice of the ruthless world where on one side he is projected by his father as a monarch and on the other side spends a miserable life. The cook Panna Lal connects the two storyline in which the unlike characters share the common jolt of embarrassment and loss on all fronts. Though India got freed from the colonial rule, the impact of colonialism and the suppression of poor country like India by the West influenced the future of the Indians in the post colonial era.

Kiran Desai infuses in the novel her own experiences of leaving India. Unlike Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* this novel is not an autobiographical novel of Kiran Desai, but it provides an imaginative experience of Kiran Desai as she migrates to other western countries.

India is the birth place of Kiran Desai where she spent first fourteen years of her life and in this novel she visits her past experiences in Gujarat, the place from where her father and grandfather came and Kalimpong, her aunt's home. After spending the first fourteen years in India, Kiran Desai migrates to England and then to America for higher studies. Thus Kiran Desai successfully links her experiences with India's colonial and postcolonial history, which brings out splendid stories of impact of globalization, fundamentalism and extremist violence. The novel starts in a decayed and disintegrating estate in Kalimpong which is situated at the foothills of the north-eastern Himalayas, in the Darjeeling hills of West Bengal. A retired and introvert judge, Jemubhai Papatlal Patel, lives with his granddaughter Sai, old and talkative cook named Panna Lal and his pedigree dog Mutt. Though Jemubhai is branded as a Cambridge educated judge, he keeps himself cut off from the social intermingle and stuck himself to his past legacy of his high profile job. Jemubhai finds himself in the shadow of his own magnificent individuality, keeping himself isolated from the society and lives in a big bungalow, named Cho Oyu. Even though the bungalow has a scenic view of the Kanchenjunga, the judge has no interest in the mystical and divine aspect of the area. The judge is so dazzled with the bungalow when he first sees it that he leaves his job and starts to live like a rootless foreigner. Jemubhai is disillusioned with his life and took Cho Oyu away from the real world. Due to lack of concern, Cho Oyu becomes dilapidated and its once attractive floors were rotten where mice sprints around freely and termites have damaged all furnitures. The old man, who lives a life where he still powders his dark brown face, and likes scones for tea, is not blind to the rotten state of things around him and accepts this unusual kind of existence where he dominates and crushes the identity of everyone around him. The devoted cook, Panna Lal looks after the judge and in return he is paid low and treated like an unskilled labourer. The only creature that the judge found affectionate is his pet dog who lives with him like an better half. Jemubhai locked himself within the four walls of his bungalow, playing chess against himself and living in the memories of past glory. Jemubhai's unfamiliar lifestyle is disturbed with the arrival of his young granddaughter named Sai, whom he considers to be a burden. Sai's cosmonaut parents have died of a bus accident in Soviet Union. Orphaned Sai is expelled from her convent and finally comes to Cho Oyu. Sai hates her grandfather who looks more like a reptile than a human in her eyes:

There was more than a hint of reptile in the slope of his face, the wide hairless forehead, the introverted nose, the introverted chin, his lack of movement, his lack of lips, his fixed gaze. Like other elderly people, he seemed not to have travelled forward in time but far back. (33)

Jemubhai brought honour to his family by being the first boy from his birthplace who studies in spite of the poor conditions of the family in Gujarat and goes abroad for higher studies. Jemu's father neglects his

daughters and for providing all resources to his son goes to the extent of borrowing money from money lenders at an excessive rate. When this is not sufficient, Jemu's father starts searching for a bride who could pay heavy dowry. Jemu is thus married to the daughter of a rich businessman and got a heavy dowry in return. This reflects the pathetic state of women who are considered a burden in the family and married with heavy dowry. Jemu's marriage is to fulfill the ambitions of his father and therefore there is no emotion in the marriage which is bound to fail. Jemu marries at the age of twenty to Bela. After marriage Bela's name is changed to Nimi Patel and thus she took her husband's title. This shows the condition of women who lose their identity after marriage and their husband's identity is forced on them. Jemu used the dowry money for his passage to England and even before starting his married life he left for England within a month of the marriage. This reflects the selfish attitude of men who consider women to be a commodity having a market value. Jemu and his father are driven only by selfish motives that have no place for emotion and the existence of women. Women are thus considered the objects that are meant to fulfill the baser instincts of men and have to real identity. They are suppressed by the male dominated society and are not allowed to develop their fullest potential to that they can free themselves from the clutches of a matrix that make their life miserable and are left like destitute.

Jemu leaves for Cambridge from India on a ship and carries a trunk that contained stuff like an Oxford dictionary, a sweater made by his mother and a decorated coconut to be thrown into the sea which would bring luck to his journey. Jemu's father accompanies him to the dock and finally Jemu set on sail to Europe. The time segment was 1939 in the pre independence era. Jemu feels embarrassed with the fact that his parents were poor and he belongs to a culture and tradition whose condition is miserable. Jemubhai looked at his father, a barely educated man venturing where he should not be, and the love in Jemubhai's heart mingled with pity, the pity with shame. His father felt his own hand rise and cover his mouth: he had failed his son.(4). Jemu is so disturbed with the miserable fact of his parentage that he refuses to cry and did not throw coconut into sea. It is ironical that the parents, who have done so much for the son by neglecting the development of their daughter, have no respect in the eyes of their son. The remarkable thing to note is that though Jemu is not British, he is fascinated with the British citizens and their customs. Jemu is disliked by the British because he is an Indian and White people made fun of his accent, colour and smell. It is a time when people of colour are disliked in England. Jemu finds himself secluded and there came an astonishing change in his behaviour.

He worked twelve hours at a stretch, late into the night, and in thus withdrawing, he failed to make a courageous gesture outward at a crucial moment and found, instead, that his pusillanimity and his loneliness had found fertile soil. He retreated into a 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)

Jemu feels heaviness in his mind due to extreme kind of isolation, and his mind starts to losing control. He becomes an alien to himself and there is nothing that could amuse him. During his stay in England, he did not make even a single friend nor did he tried to explore the English countryside. Fearing the mockery made by young girls for his pungent stink, Jemu finds the library to be the only escape route. Jemu is finally unable to bear the dual identities he is carrying and finally starts to hating himself. This further adds fuel to the fire for his hatred of his parentage, culture and society to which he belonged. He finally passed with the lowest qualifying marks in the ICS examination. During his stay in London, Jemu met his only friend Bose and went through the final change by wiping out all native qualities from his behaviour, and putting up a false appearance that didn't belong to him originally. Jemu's devise to copy the English men and his hatred for his native culture miserably failed and boomeranged. Thus he felt embarrassed in the group of English people and among his own people. Jemu's fascination for the English people led to his dislike for his own culture and native people. Jemu returns to India and loathed his own family members including his own unrefined wife. In reality, Jemu has no feelings for his wife and has forgotten that she is waiting for him to come back. Jemu considers his wife to be of no use and treats her like all immaterial facets of the past. Now that Jemu has returned to India with an anglicised attitude, Jemu finds his wife disgusting whom he has once considered to be attractive and pleasing. Jemu got disillusioned with Nimi and can not even tolerate her childish act of powder puff, which he considered to be a breach of disturbing his personal space. This led Jemu to develop an extreme dislike for Nimi. "You filth!" he shouted and, "from between her sad breasts, pulled forth, like a ridiculous flower, or else a bursting ruined heart—His dandy puff" (8) Jemu follows Nimi like a hunter chasing wild animals and with uncontrolled rage physically assaulted her.

"Ghoulishly sugared in sweet candy pigment, he clamped down on her, tussled her to the floor, and. . . in a dense frustration of lust and fury. . . he stuffed his way ungracefully into her." (9) Jemu removes the disguise of refinement from his face and commits an inhuman act repeatedly so that he can vent his frustration of hatred and seclusion that he has himself faced in his life. His hatred for Nimi is to such an extent that whenever he is out in public he never spoke to her, nor did he look at her. The result of this harshness, ruthlessness and apathy is that Nimi lost her confidence, individuality and turns into a hopeless character.

Nimi accompanies Jemu when he is posted in the district of Bonda in Uttar Pradesh. Though Jemu has failed in his imitation of English culture, he made sure that Nimi gets anglicized. Jemu appoints Miss Enid Pott to teach Nimi English language and culture. Nimi disregards her husband for whom she has no love and declines to learn English. Jemu can no longer endure this disagreement with Nimi. Jemu is embarrassed with his uneducated wife and no longer took her anywhere. Deserted by Jemu and humiliated by the servants, Nimi is now left within the four walls of her house and feels like fish out of water. The whole

family of Jemu has high expectations on him, but this very act of deserting Nimi has disappointed Jemu's father who has done so much for him by showering all love and energy for his development. Thus, Jemu's imitation of artificial standards leads him to deceive and dump his own family. "He had been recruited to bring his countrymen into the modern age, but he could only make it himself by cutting them off entirely, or they would show up reproachful, pointing out to him the lie he had become"(306).

Jemu has thus disgraced his family, embarrassed the family of his wife, dishonours his wife's self-respect and turns her into a living corpse. This act of Jemu is very inhuman and beastly when he is not ready to take care of his pregnant wife and dumps her with his own child. Nimi's uncle has taken over the whole property of Nimi's father and refuses to keep her in his house. Nimi's uncle believes that a married girl has no right to stay in her father's property when a heavy dowry is paid in marriage. *The Inheritance of Loss* also examines at a deeper level the consequences of the introduction of a western element into a non western country. The western element is so-called civilization, modernity, and the quest for a life of comfort, affluence and privilege. This is what happened during the British rule in India, as is evinced by the judge's story, and is happening again with the country's improved relationship with the United States in the era of globalization. And this is proved by Biju's narrative. In fact, it is modernity—each character's understanding of it—that the little men and women in *The Inheritance of Loss* spend their lifetimes trying to attain and come to terms with. Jemubhai Patel, the future judge, had studied his way out of the pettiness of family circumstances in Gujarat and found, by way of a lonely stint in racist England, a lucrative job in British India. He was the best bet of his family to bring his community into the modern age. Much was sacrificed for his success. But he could only make it himself by cutting his people off completely. In his attempt to ape the colonial masters, he consciously rooted out everything native from his personal system and developed a self-loathing as well as a loathing for his own people. But he could never achieve the confidence that could make him feel comfortable in the colonial high office. He suffered from a crushing sense of inferiority and defeat which resulted in a sadistic violence in personal sphere of life and turned him into a hated recluse in his own community. In the process of becoming equal with the British, he disowned his family, tradition and culture and inherited the loss of self-esteem, pride and vitality that left him emotionally paralytic and spiritually dead. So degraded he became that he hated the presence of humans and felt comfortable in the company of a pure bred bitch.

In Kalimpong, the judge's cook basks in a feeling of patronizing superiority over other fathers who seek his and his son's assistance to find jobs in America for their unemployed sons, and derives pleasure from the thought that his own son is earning a lot of money far away in New York, Biju is, in fact, not getting rich. In a city that offers so much to so many, he runs from one restaurant to another, always dogged by the nagging fear that he will be detected by the INS (Immigration and Naturalization

Service) as an illegal worker and forcefully deported. Serving in upscale restaurants that are 'perfectly first world on top, perfectly third world twenty feet below,' he wonders that in a country of so much wealth, only so little is available to him. He wanders from place to place, seeking something reminiscent of home and feeling 'a pang for village life'⁸¹. India is the place that Biju, like thousands of other compatriots, had dreamed of leaving. But once in New York he is not immune from nostalgia. He is assaulted by memory of home and can feel the pulse of the forest, the delicate gesture of the ferns, and smell the humid air.

Biju finds himself a foreigner in a world that is constantly in a flux and is devoid of any settled convention, where native rootedness is viewed as backwardness and any allegiance to communal customs is dismissed as superstition. With his poor adaptability and inhibitions inherited from his native culture, Biju continues his search for an elusive home while leading the wretched life of an illegal immigrant in the precarious anonymity of New York's restaurants and basement kitchens: "There was a whole world in the basement kitchens of New York, but Biju was ill-equipped for it."²¹⁰ In the new world, Biju—a good Hindu—feels everything that is authentically him inexorably leaching away as he learns to sear steaks. The cosmopolitan modernity of America stifles his native humanity and he clings more and more to his traditional Indian identity as a defence against a globalized homogeneity that tends to efface his inherited culture. Biju can not forget the taboos and interdicts of his own culture. When, after a day's hard work, many of the restaurant staff visit the Dominican call girls in Washington Heights, he demurs and conceals his timidity behind manufactured disgust. He feels relieved when a Pakistani arrives in his restaurant. Because he knows what to do and how to behave with him. As advised by his father, he keeps away from the Pakistani and distrusts him. Biju hates the Pakistani nationals and other black people. This habit of hatred is his inheritance. Like many Indians, he is awed by the white people who have done great harm to India but suffers from a lack of generosity for the poor people from the third world who have done no harm at all to his country.

Through penance, in the form of a confession and physical punishment by his master, the cook is cleansed of this feeling of guilt and rewarded with a re-union with his son who has been lured away from him by the trap of globalization. Biju was compelled to lead the humiliating life of an illegal immigrant in his search for American affluence. In the process, he lost his human dignity and freedom. His courageous decision to disregard the glitter of modernity and return home marks his liberation from spiritual bondage to the West and attainment of his true identity. Gyan, an educated, poor and unemployed youth, joined the Gorkhaland Movement in his search for an alternative way of life. He participated in the ethnic-nationalist movement of the disgruntled Nepalis mainly as an opportunity to give vent to his postcolonial rage and frustration. But in his enthusiasm he committed a blunder by betraying his beloved, Sai, and her family and forcing the philanthropic European entrepreneur, Father Booty, to leave Kalimpong. He suffers from a strong sense of

remorse and seriously longs for reconciliation with his estranged beloved.

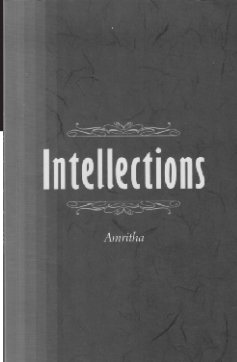
Kiran tells the interconnected stories of migration and the loss it involves, the pursuit of a better life and the price it exacts, globalization and its discontents, and the postcolonial rage of an ethnic group struggling for self-determination in a highly distinctive and flexible style. The nimbly-paced story constantly shuttles between East and West, present and past, private and public histories, and the quick shift of narrational focus produces multiple narrative threads that lead to the inevitable division of the novel into so many chapters and sub-chapters. Kiran uses extended flashbacks to the life in Kalimpong before the mobilization of the Nepalis for the Gorkhaland movement to explore the conflicting cultural identities of wealthy and educated Indians (like Lola, Noni, Joydeep and Uncle Potty) and to narrate the backstory of the retired and reclusive judge.

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References :

- All quotations are from: 1. Desai, Kiran *The Inheritance of Loss*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2007.



	Intellections – A Collection of Poems Amritha Sanathana Dharma Charitable Trust, Vishakapatnam First Edition (2011) Pages 241
	Intellections, is a collection of poems that flowed from the pen of an excellent human being born with a flair for expression for intense feelings in a touching language. The strain of a sad note pervades the entire verse which was perhaps the design of her later life. Struck by sickness and painful separation from those with whom she loved, to live a cruel disease which took her away from this world at a tender age of 27. Written in very simple, straight-forward, clear and lucid language, these verses are worth reading.