



## Echoes of Discrimination: Unravelling Racial Dynamics in Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss'

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**Abstract.** Kiran Desai's "The Inheritance of Loss" is set in both India and the United States, and it examines the effects of colonialism on its protagonists. It explores identity, privilege, and the far-reaching effects of prejudice to provide insight on the individual and social ramifications of this ubiquitous problem. Desai's story provides a thorough and nuanced analysis of the ways in which prejudice may damage one's psyche.

**Keywords:** Racism, Ethnicity, Colonialism's Aftermath, Identity, transformation.

### 1 Introduction

Kiran Desai's "The Inheritance of Loss" is a scathing condemnation of a capitalist system that, by a continuous assault on their national and ethnic identity, has succeeded to shatter the spirits of a major section of the world's population. Desai uses the characters of Jemubhai, the judge, and Biju to show how difficult it is to hold on to one's national identity under threatening situations. Desai shows us two very different ways in which people in oppressed nations deal with the humiliation they experience daily.

### 2 Racial and Ethnic Discrimination

Discrimination based on race is a major subject in The Inheritance of Loss. Desai's detailed character and story descriptions suggest he is toying with these concerns. Throughout history, racism has been a problem for many individuals. Even as globalisation continues, it has not been successful in resolving this issue. Therefore, defining racism more precisely is essential for any analysis of the novel's treatment of the topic of race. The problem of racism is complex.

"Race is now viewed as a social construction that is primarily recognised by physical appearance, or phenotype," says Professor of Anthropology Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban (Fluehr-Lobban, 2006, p. 1). The colour of one's skin, the texture of one's hair, the shape of one's nose and lips, the size and shape of one's eyes, and one's height are all examples of "such features," she adds (Fluehr-Lobban, 2006, p. 1). The dynamic and ever-changing idea of race, ethnicity, culture, background, origin, language, and identity means that this definition, based on American society, is nevertheless accepted as a scientifically approved interpretation of the word. Therefore, the definition provided by Fluehr-Lobban will serve as a springboard for future debate.

### **3 The Idea of Ethnicity**

An additional topic worthy of study is that of ethnicity, given that the gap between Sai and Gyan in *The Inheritance of Loss* is driven more by ethnicity than by race. Gyan and Sai's "ethnicity" is intertwined with their own selves. Readers are additionally drawn into the characters' realism by their shared ethnic background. According to Omi and Winant (1994), page 15, the word "ethnicity" emphasises that race is a social concern, as opposed to the biologically focused approaches. Ethnicity is the sociological manifestation of culture; it is based on both socially assigned and self-assigned identities (Fluehr-Lobban, 2006, p. 17). Omi and Winant argue that ethnicity, class, and country are the three archetypal ways to think about race and racial relations. Over the last 50 years, the ethnicity paradigm has been the standard for thinking about race.

### **4 Discrimination based on Race/Ethnicity**

When discussing race and ethnicity, it is important to differentiate between the problem of racism and the problem of race. Racism "evaluates that difference, ranking it into superior and inferior types," whereas race "describes, distinguishes, and classes racial or phenotypic differences among humans" (Fluehr-Lobban, 2006, p. 20). Unlike racism, which focuses on skin colour, ethnocentrism emphasises a group's unique culture. It's clear that people of different races and ethnicities face discrimination. However, there are several forms of racism that remain hidden. One example is the fact that members of minority groups often don't feel welcome or that they have equal access to opportunities. Although these problems may be hard to see, they are real and may make daily living challenging for those affected.

### **5 Ways in Which Discrimination Affects People**

Desai uses the protagonists of *The Inheritance of Loss*, especially Jemubhai, to demonstrate the psychological damage that racial prejudice may do. However, the subject of how racial prejudice affects the thinking of an individual is also strongly tied to the issue of discrimination based on race and ethnicity. People's personalities are said to be formed by both their upbringing and their DNA. Racially profiled individuals have various responses.

The events in Jemubhai's life also make the topic of race more universal. The reader also sees a consistent pattern of imperial white supremacy and the exclusion of individuals from formerly colonised nations from the "western world." The white Europeans are always proving their supremacy in a global viewpoint, just as Jemubhai is constantly being discriminated against because of his dark complexion and Third World background.

## **6 Jemubhai's Quest for Self-Definition**

There was "hatred in the judge's mind" (Desai, 2006, p. 165). Although these thoughts have just entered Jemubhai's consciousness, the sensation of hatred has been prevalent throughout his adult life, even before he became a judge. Painful memories force Jemubhai to look back on his life and explain to the reader how and why things turned out the way they did. Desai shows how racial prejudice may damage the character of a young, impressionable guy via her account of Jemubhai's life.

## **7 Jemubhai's Time in England**

He had a true understanding of racism throughout his time in England. towards first, Jemubhai's animosity is centred only towards his fellow humans; but, as time goes on, it expands to include his own identity. Jemubhai is transformed into a vicious guy by the overwhelming emotion of hatred. After a heartbreaking goodbye with his father in India, Desai writes, "Never again would he know love for a human being that wasn't adulterated by another, contradictory emotion" (p. 37).

## **8 The Evolution of Jemubhai**

Jemubhai is able to study law in England because to his wit and academic prowess, as well as the dowry he received from his wife's family. He has a natural culture shock upon arriving in England. The English have a similar problem accepting a young guy of African descent who comes from a different culture and speaks with an unusual accent. The British Empire still ruled India in 1939, and Jemubhai's English classmates looked down on him as an inferior pupil.

In the 1950s and 1960s, before mass immigration from formerly colonised nations, Jemubhai was one of very few non-British residents of England. After being rejected, he begins to isolate himself: "He withdrew into a solitude that grew heavier day by day." "The isolation turned into a routine, the routine into the man, and the man into a mere shadow" (Desai, 2006, p. 39). Soon enough, he begins to feel "barely human at all" (Desai, 2006, p. 40) since he no longer recognises himself in the mirror. He finds his own skin colour unusual, his accent disagreeable, and he is horrified by the notion of being different.

## **9 Jemubhai's Challenges Keep Piling Up**

Desai uses this excerpt to demonstrate the impact that internalisation may have on the human psyche. Jemubhai eventually comes to see the use of the English rules and attitudes, and by the end of the story, he considers them to be his own. Internalised

oppression sets in for Jemubhai, who begins to rationalise away the prejudice he faces.

As a result of being neglected, he begins to dislike himself and his appearance. His psyche is confused and harmed as a result of his isolation and loathing of himself. He begins to powder his complexion a white or pinkish colour out of dread of being different and embarrassed. He has a lifelong fixation with the behaviour. This captivating routine is significant because it shows how Jemubhai begins to mask his true character. In addition, it's a metaphor for the mask of whiteness he wears. This suggests that he is beginning to take on the characteristics of the white guy he looks up to. Considering how white people have treated him, it's possible that his perceived whiteness is really a cloak for harshness. The fact that Jemubhai is acting out in kind those who have wronged him is more evidence of the white people's superiority and power. Thus, Jemubhai's experiences with racism at Cambridge stay with him even after he graduates. His broken heart will never mend.

"He was a foreigner—a foreigner—every bit of him screamed" (Desai, 2006, pp. 166-167), Jemubhai says of himself after returning to India after five years in England. He is also made fun of for being too Westernised, namely for his preoccupation with powdering his face. He is unable to ignore his own painful emotions, and he longs to see those same sentiments reflected in another person. He does this so that he may feel better about himself by making his wife, Nimi, who is just 19, suffer. Both of them are tested by their marriage. His anger, fury, and hatred ruin everything for Nimi. While in England, Jemubhai vows to "teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself" (Desai, 2006, p. 170), and from that point on, he treats Nimi in a sick and cruel manner.

## 10 Steps in the Discrimination Cycle

Furthermore, he emotionally assaults her, attempts to alter her identity by giving her an English name, and makes her study English and adopt western behaviour against her will. Her stubbornness in the face of his demands drives him crazy, and he wears her down until she submits. She spends her final days with a sister and a brother-in-law before supposedly dying in "an accident" (Desai, 2006, p. 307), and he shames her, his family, and hers by "sending her back." "the grotesqueness of it all shocked him" (Desai, 2006, pp. 169-170), even though Jemubhai constantly tried to hide his horrible actions. Still, "he did the gutter act over and over again...his cruelty to her became irresistible" (Desai, 2006, p. 170). This is one another way in which Desai stresses the awful effects of racism and the difficulties associated with colonialism, in especially the issue of identity. Because Jemubhai can't figure out who he is, he adopts a new alias with the same initials as his own: James Peter Peterson (Desai, 2006, p. 171).

## 11 The Nuanced Nature of Racism and Ethnicity

The events and characteristics of Jemubhai's life are crucial to comprehending his granddaughter Sai's personality. Because he is her sole blood relative, he is significant to her both biologically and historically. Sai also relies heavily on the judge's chef. Sai and the chef become extremely close, and he educates her about Indian culture and customs. However, underneath the apparent similarities, they see significant differences:

"Sai was ashamed. When she did come looking for him and enter the cook's hut, they were both uncomfortable because "something about their closeness was exposed in the end as fake, their friendship composed of superficial things conducted in a broken language, for she was an English-speaker, and he was a Hindi-speaker" (Desai, 2006, p. 19).

This comment reaffirms the gulf in socioeconomic status between traditional Indians and the affluent, Western-influenced Indians. Sai's upbringing and environment unavoidably shape who she is now. Because in a multicultural, westernised culture, where does a girl who was born in India and who looks Indian but who was raised according to English norms fit in? Very slowly, and especially via her relationship with Gyan, she gains insight into this complex issue. Sai meets a young accounting student, a descendant of a Nepali Gorkha trader, when she is sixteen years old. Gyan's grandpa hires her as a tutor to help her with her maths and science. They quickly develop feelings for one another, leading to a passionate romance. However, the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) grows in tandem with their love affair. Among the GNLF's stated goals is the establishment of an independent Gorkha state inside the Nepali-speaking region. Gyan joins them, and the relationship takes a dramatic turn when he betrays Sai, the judge, and the chef to get his hands on the weapons he knows are stored in the home. As Sai struggles to make sense of Gyan's treachery, she realises how crucial her quest for self-identity has become. The treachery has opened Sai's eyes to the existence of cultural differences:

He has put the lives of his sweetheart, her grandpa, and the chef at danger via his treachery. Gyan utilises discrimination as a weapon because he believes that individuals of Nepalese descent in India have been subject to prejudice because of their ethnicity. He's the judge if you ask me. In the span of just 24 hours, he drastically betrays his love, risking the lives of everyone in the Cho Oyu family. Desai uses this incident to show the global and individual effects of oppression based on race.

## 12 Discrimination and Immigration in New York

The case of Biju provides a striking illustration of the racial tensions at play. The reader has an international experience while in New York. By switching between India and the United States, Desai emphasises key distinctions between the two cultures. Cho Oyu's cook's son, Biju, heads to New York City to make a better life for himself and his family. It has been difficult and embarrassing for him to try to get a tourist visa for the United States, and he is fully aware that his only option is to remain and work illegally.

Biju's restless transition from one illegal, low-paying employment to another is made clear from the very first encounter the reader has with him. He's constantly worried that the authorities would catch him and send him back home. A manager, "pink from having to dole out humiliation to these men," remarked, "Nothing I can do. Just disappear quietly is my advice." (Desai, 2006, p. 16) So the men left. This phrase sums up the systemic problems with how illegal immigrants are handled. The manager's pale complexion alludes to the preponderance of whites in managerial roles, whereas the kitchen staff is mostly of African or Asian descent. It further emphasises how being unnoticeable on the surface is a need for illegal immigrants, who form the shadow class of society.

### 13 Immigration and racial discrimination in New York City

This effectively renders them powerless in American culture, forcing them to settle for whatever employment, wages, and living conditions are available to them. Employees who disagree or criticise risk losing their employment. Undocumented workers are crucial to the bottom lines of business owners and managers, particularly those in the Third World. Biju works for a while at a restaurant called Pinocchio's, where the owner's wife has a preference for hiring illegal immigrants from Europe's poorest regions. She finds comfort in the fact that she has cultural and religious similarities with European workers. There was just one catch: "they weren't coming in numbers great enough or they weren't coming desperate enough" (Desai, 2006, p. 48). So, racial prejudice is a factor in the lives of New York's undocumented workers. Desai shows how Indians seeking permanent residence status in the United States face racial and nationalist bias.

Desai again shows the complexities of race and ethnicity via the characters of Noni and Lola, two Indian-born Anglophile sisters. Lola and Noni are two of the rare Indians who prosper under British rule. English culture permeates every aspect of their daily life. English Christmas is celebrated, and they have a preference for British writers. In a nutshell, they're concentrating on England so they may experience Western consumerism. Naturally, this lavish lifestyle colours how they see their native land. Lola describes India as "a sinking ship" (Desai, 2006, p. 47) and urges her daughter Pixie to leave the country while she still can since "...the doors won't stay open forever." As a result, the sisters enjoy special status in a postcolonial society characterised by stark divisions between the well-off and the destitute, the English and the Indians, the whites and the non-whites.

Kalimpong's politics will shift once the GNLF assumes control. When guerrilla organisations seize power, the lives of everyone, regardless of background or socioeconomic status, tend to decline. Discrimination, power, and riches are all flipped on their heads in this disordered setting. Lola and Noni face the same levels of prejudice, humiliation, and contempt as everyone else. Most of their estate is taken by the GNLF movement, which considers it "free land" (Desai, 2006, p. 240). Children in Nepal refuse to eat with them and even spit at them (Desai, 2006, p. 280). Lola faces racism, sexism, and classism as she tries to address her predicament with the regional director of the organisation in Kalimpong. Lola now sees the underprivileged and empathises with their plight for the first time in her life.

For the most part, the sisters didn't pay attention since they didn't have to. The rules of chance, they reasoned, "favoured their slipping through life with nothing more than muttered comments," thus it was only inevitable that they would inspire jealousy.

After been fooled for so long, Lola comes to terms with their naivety: "When Lola had thought it would continue, a hundred years like the one past...all that they had claimed innocent, fun, funny, not really to matter, was suddenly proven wrong" (Desai, 2006, pp. 241-242). She is aware that she and Noni will no longer be part of the privileged class and that they are a tempting target for the GNLF, who are looking for a place to hide and food for their guerrilla forces. Desai, in broader context, uses these texts to show the negative results of imperialism. As a result of colonial rule by the British, India became a society in which there were stark power and income disparities between the colonisers and the colonised. Political riots and guerrilla soldiers attempting to seize power are regular occurrences in colonised nations with a harsh environment for the poor and downtrodden. Everyone, regardless of status, is fair game for rioters in such situations.

## 14 Effects of racism on minor characters

When thinking about race and prejudice in postcolonial India, two additional characters from *The Inheritance of Loss* come to mind. Uncle Potty and the gangster Father Booty stand for the Western elite who have made India their home. Despite the decline of their economy, the residents of Kalimpong continue to enjoy a higher standard of living than their Indian-born neighbours. Uncle Potty's family's financial woes might be seen as a metaphor for the decline of British influence in India. However, Uncle Potty serves to highlight the prominence and authority of white Europeans in India. The unique distinctions in this case are further highlighted by the divide in terms of money and power between Western nations and colonised countries of the Third World.

Swiss-born Father Booty maintains a journal (Desai 41). He has a close friendship with Uncle Potty, and the two often go out for drinks together after work. Father Booty is unmasked as another of Kalimpong's affluent Europeans, but his origins are kept mysterious. When the GNLFF takes over, Father Booty suffers along with everyone else. After 45 years of residency in India, he is suddenly labelled an illegal alien due to a lack of proper documentation (Desai 221).

Considering that Father Booty is also an illegal immigrant, it's intriguing to contrast his predicament with that of Biju. The two immigrants' stories couldn't be more different. While Father Booty has enjoyed the benefits of India's thriving middle class, Biju has been forced to make do with a "secret" existence marked by extreme hardship and shame. Desai uses this comparison to highlight the advantages white men get while assimilating to a new culture, whether as a result of their race, gender, class, or power. However, Biju stands in for the oppressed poor of the Third World who struggle to reach the Western world. Father Booty has never given thought to the prospect of discrimination because of his race or socioeconomic status in India. He never felt the need to renew his permission because of his race and social standing. However, things have changed now. He needs to flee the nation after losing his home and dairy. The GNLFF seems to take pleasure in seeing the once-privileged suffer, and there is likely some element of vengeance driving the actions of Lola, Noni, and Father Booty. Those who were once destitute and oppressed find themselves in a position of power, where they may inflict misery onto another person. By doing this action, they want to make up for some of the hurt and shame they've experienced. Thus, we witness in Father Booty's case a rare instance of a white man being turned away from a Third World nation because of bureaucratic red tape. As a rule, white elites are the ones that discriminate against people of colour who hail from nations that they have previously colonised. So, in the end, Father Booty is stripped of his honour as well.

## 15 Conclusions

Multiple characters in *The Inheritance of Loss* experience prejudice first-hand, but they actively discriminate against others. Because of this, the aforementioned racial and ethnic hierarchies continue to function. The hierarchy also represents a power structure and a classification of individuals according to their abilities and social standing. This has the practical implication that if one wants to climb the corporate ladder one must push others out of the way. There are a select few at the top of the



social hierarchy, whereas the vast majority of those at the bottom are unable to go up for various reasons.

Therefore, Desai shows how prejudice is a horrible human act with dire implications for the victims. The work focuses on the effects of colonialism and postcolonialism on the Indian psyche, with particular attention paid to the impact of racism. As a result, racism has far-reaching consequences for individuals.

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