



## Culinary Memory, Belonging, and Cultural Identity in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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### Abstract

This paper explores the intertwined themes of belonging, unbelonging, and cultural identity in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* through the lens of food literature. In the novel, food functions as more than sustenance; it becomes a symbolic marker of memory, identity, and displacement. Characters such as the judge Jemubhai Patel, Sai, Biju, and the migrant workers express their emotional and cultural fractures through their relationship with food – what they eat, reject, long for, or are denied. The judge's rejection of traditional Indian foods reflects his internalized colonial shame, while Biju's longing for home-cooked meals in foreign kitchens reveals how immigrant labourers endure alienation through food deprivation. Sai's experiences with Western and Indian dishes illustrate her struggle to situate herself between cultures. Through these culinary moments, Desai reveals how food encapsulates the conflict between rootedness and rootlessness, anchoring cultural memory even as global forces displace individuals. By reading the novel as a text of food literature, this study argues that the politics of taste, hunger, and culinary nostalgia offer a powerful lens to understand immigrant trauma and cultural fragmentation. Ultimately, the paper shows that the search for belonging in *The Inheritance of Loss* is often articulated not through grand political statements but through the intimate, everyday language of food.

**Key words:** Food Literature, Cultural Identity, Belonging and Unbelonging, Migration.

## Introduction

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* explores the fragile nature of cultural identity and the deep sense of displacement experienced by individuals shaped by colonial history, migration, and global inequality. While the novel is often discussed for its themes of exile and belonging, Desai also uses food in subtle yet powerful ways to express emotional and cultural tensions. Food becomes a carrier of memory and identity, revealing how characters negotiate their place within constantly shifting social and geographic landscapes.

The judge Jemubhai Patel's rejection of Indian food reflects his internalized colonial shame, whereas Biju's longing for simple, home-cooked meals exposes the emotional hunger of immigrant life. For Sai, food reveals her struggle to navigate between Western modernity and Indian tradition. Through these varied culinary moments, the novel shows that the experience of belonging or unbelonging is often expressed not through dramatic events but through the everyday rituals of eating, remembering, and craving. Reading the text through the lens of food literature highlights how culinary memory becomes a key to understanding the characters' identities and their search for a place in the world.

## Literature Review

Food studies scholars view food as a cultural text that reflects identity, memory, and belonging. Research on migration shows that food practices travel with individuals, offering continuity and comfort during displacement, while postcolonial critics note that culinary choices often reveal colonial influence and class hierarchies.

Although *The Inheritance of Loss* has been widely studied for its themes of colonial trauma, migration, and cultural dislocation, very few scholars have examined it through the perspective of food literature. This gap is important because Desai uses food symbolically—seen in Biju's longing for home

food, the judge's rejection of Indian cuisine, and Sai's cultural ambivalence. A food-studies approach thus provides a fresh insight into the novel's emotional and cultural dimensions.

## Culinary Memory and the Crisis of Identity

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, food becomes a powerful repository of memory, identity, and emotional truth. Carole Counihan highlights this when she observes that food acts as "a carrier of identity and a medium through which emotion and memory are encoded" (34). This insight resonates deeply with Desai's portrayal of her characters whose experiences of hunger, nostalgia, and shame are all mediated through food. Biju, the migrant worker struggling in the underbelly of New York, embodies this connection most poignantly. Working in kitchens filled with exotic aromas he does not recognize, he experiences a constant sense of emotional depletion. Desai writes, "He missed the smell of rice from his father's kitchen and the taste of lentils that reminded him of home" (73). His longing is not merely for food but for the sense of groundedness and cultural belonging that food represents. Each remembered taste becomes a lifeline connecting him to a home he fears losing.

In stark contrast, the judge Jemubhai Patel embodies a crisis of identity shaped by colonial mimicry and self-denial. His relationship with food is marked not by longing, but by shame. The judge's internalized colonial prejudice leads him to reject the sights, smells, and textures of Indian cuisine. Upon returning from England, Desai notes, "He could not bear the smell of Indian cooking; it reminded him of everything he wished to reject" (45). His disgust is symbolic of a deeper psychological rupture and rejection of self-brought on by years of trying to imitate British habits and sensibilities. Homi Bhabha describes this state precisely, arguing that colonial mimicry produces "a desire to be like the colonizer, but never fully achieving it" (86). The judge's food preferences reflect this incomplete transformation. Though

he adopts Western tastes in an attempt to distance himself from his origins, he remains alienated from both of the cultures. His identity is suspended in a space where belonging becomes impossible. Through Biju and the judge, Desai shows how culinary memory can either sustain identity or expose its fractures. Food becomes the emotional language through which characters articulate their deepest fears, losses, and desires and revealing the powerful connection between what they eat, what they remember, and who they believe themselves to be.

### Food, Power, and Colonial Hangover

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, food becomes a subtle but powerful marker of class, hierarchy, and the lingering shadows of colonial influence. Taste is never innocent; as Pierre Bourdieu argues, “taste classifies the classifier” (170), meaning that the foods individuals choose reveal their social aspirations and internalized hierarchies. The judge, Jemubhai Patel, embodies this phenomenon most clearly. His preference for English food like, tea, biscuits, and bland, boiled dishes is not a matter of genuine liking but a deliberate performance of colonial sophistication. Desai exposes this façade when she writes, “He ate in silence, pretending to enjoy the tasteless food of the land that never welcomed him” (57). His culinary choices are a form of self-erasure, reflecting his desire to distance himself from the Indian identity he associates with inferiority. The irony lies in the fact that the very culture he idealizes mocks and excludes him, leaving him alienated in both worlds.

Sai, too, reveals the complexities of colonial imprint through her culinary upbringing. Raised on Western dishes in convent-like settings, she grows up disconnected from the rich sensory world of Indian cooking. Desai notes, “Sai could not tell one spice from another, for she had grown up away from the smells of Indian cooking” (132). Her unfamiliarity with spices and symbols of

cultural memory and tradition mirrors her fragmented identity. Sai moves effortlessly between scones and samosas, tea cakes and chapatis, yet she feels rooted in neither culinary nor the world. Her dilemma resonates with Gayatri Spivak’s argument that colonial education produces “a disrupted identity and a confused sense of self” (121). Sai is the product of this disruption: shaped by Western schooling, estranged from her native traditions, and suspended in a liminal space where belonging becomes elusive. Through the judge and Sai, Desai demonstrates how food can function as a tool of power, assimilation, and cultural dislocation. Their culinary choices illustrate the haunting persistence of colonial hangover, revealing how deeply food can shape, divide, and destabilize identity.

### Migration, Hunger, and Emotional Dislocation

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, migration is inseparable from hunger. It is not only physical hunger, but also emotional and cultural hunger. For Biju, life in America exposes the profound dislocation that defines the immigrant experience. His struggle reflects what Avtar Brah terms the “homing desire” is a longing not for a literal return, but for the emotional comfort of familiarity (192). Although he works in the kitchens of affluent restaurants, surrounded by abundance, his inner world is marked by deprivation. Desai captures this poignantly. “They served food he could not pronounce, but not once could he find the taste of home” (89). The unfamiliar dishes he cooks like French, Italian, Mexican, highlight the vast distance between his cultural identity and his economic reality.

Biju’s hunger is not just the result of poverty; it symbolizes the global inequalities that force migrants into invisible, back-breaking labour. While preparing elaborate meals for wealthy customers, he often survives on leftovers or nothing at all. Desai writes, “He swallowed the smell of cooking more than the food itself” (94), emphasizing how hunger

becomes a permanent condition of his immigrant life. Food scholars have noted this contradiction. Anita Mannur argues that food in diaspora “marks the tension between assimilation and the longing for cultural continuity” (48). Biju embodies this tension completely. The more he tries to adapt—shifting jobs, hiding from immigration officers, learning new recipes and the more he clings to the memory of dal, rice, and the warm simplicity of home-cooked meals. His food memories function as emotional anchors, preserving a sense of self in a world that constantly erases him. In this way, Desai shows that migration produces not only physical displacement but also a deep, unending hunger for identity, belonging, and recognition.

### Culinary Spaces and Emotional Belonging

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, culinary spaces—kitchens, restaurants, dining rooms, and even imagined food memories—become emotional landscapes that reveal the characters’ inner states. These spaces are never neutral; they signify connection, exclusion, and the fragile hope for intimacy. At Cho Oyu, the mansion that should signify warmth and hospitality instead becomes a place of emotional frost. Desai notes, “mealtimes passed in cold silence” (104), a detail that shows how food fails to create bonds within the household. The silence at the dining table reflects deeper fractures between the judge, Sai, and the cook, where authority overshadows affection, and routine replaces relationship.

In contrast, the cook’s memories of feeding his son create a completely different culinary world one filled with emotional nourishment rather than deprivation. He recalls with tenderness, “He remembered the joy in his boy’s face when he served the first hot chapati” (116). Unlike Cho Oyu’s cold meals, this remembered moment represents warmth, care, and the sense of home that migration and poverty threaten to erase. As critic Uma Parameswaran observes in her study of

immigrant narratives, “food memories serve as emotional anchors when physical belonging becomes unstable” (84). The cook’s recollections echo this idea: the chapati becomes a symbol of continuity and love in a life marked by loss. Thus, through contrasting culinary spaces—one physically present but emotionally barren, the other absent but emotionally rich. Desai highlights how kitchens and dining rituals can expose both alienation and connection, and power and vulnerability.

### Belonging, Unbelonging, and the Emotional Language of Food

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, food functions as an emotional vocabulary through which characters express their deepest anxieties, desires, and cultural conflicts. For Desai’s characters, eating is never a simple act it becomes a metaphorical language that reveals how they navigate belonging and unbelonging in a fragmented world. The judge’s relationship with food most clearly reflects internalized colonial shame. His rejection of Indian cuisine, its aromas, textures, and memories signal a forced assimilation into British norms. His refusal to eat “greasy Indian dishes” (39) represents a symbolic renunciation of his cultural roots. This rejection is an act of emotional unbelonging, where food becomes a reminder of the identity he tries to suppress.

In contrast, Biju’s culinary cravings embody the diasporic hunger for cultural stability. Surrounded by foreign kitchens in New York, cooking cuisines he cannot afford to eat, he longs for the simplicity of “dal, rice, and the smell of home” (148). His yearning reveals how food becomes a sensory link to belonging, a way of holding onto identity in a world that constantly marginalizes him. Sai, however, occupies a hybrid culinary space. Her confusion between Western baked goods and Indian traditional meals mirrors her mixed cultural upbringing. She is comfortable with tea and scones yet remains a stranger to certain Indian

dishes, symbolizing her liminal identity—a state of partial belonging and partial unbelonging.

The cook's memories stand at the opposite emotional spectrum. His recollections of feeding his son, of shaping warm chapatis and watching the child's delighted face, represent food as emotional grounding. His memories act like threads tying him to love, loss, and hope. This aligns with Sidonie Smith's insight that food often becomes "an archive of the self" (204), a repository of experiences, identities, and emotional truths. For Desai's characters, food serves exactly this function: it archives their struggles, preserves their desires, and articulates the places—real or imagined—where they long to belong.

### Conclusion

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* demonstrates that food is far more than a background detail—it is a powerful narrative tool that reveals the emotional fractures and cultural negotiations of characters caught between belonging and unbelonging. Through the judge's rejection of Indian cuisine, Desai exposes the psychological damage of colonial conditioning; through Biju's longing for simple home-cooked meals, she captures the migrant's desperate search for stability and identity. Sai's hybrid food preferences mirror her uncertain cultural position, while the cook's tender culinary memories highlight how food anchors individuals emotionally even when their physical worlds are unstable.

By reading the novel through the lens of food literature, it becomes clear that culinary practices act as markers of identity, memory, and emotional truth. Food becomes the language through which Desai's characters articulate who they are, what they have lost, and where they hope to belong. Ultimately, *The Inheritance of Loss* shows that the struggle for cultural identity is not only fought in political or social spaces, but also in the intimate, everyday rituals of eating, remembering, and longing—

rituals that reveal the deepest human need for connection and home.

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