



## Cultural Identities and Conflicts in *The Inheritance of Loss*

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### Abstract

A multicultural society consists of people from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures living and working together. Eventually they would mesh together and one culture would dominate. This would be cultural leveling or diffusion where the ideas and beliefs of one culture are spread around to others. This is a fertile ground for conflicts. Multicultural societies are hybrids. Even if one culture dominates, there still will be room for exposure to other ways of life as well as communication and cooperation between different subcultures within the primary society. Multiculturalism results in division and conquest.

Key words: Multiculturalism, hybridity, diversity, cultural community values

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Multiculturalism is the cultural diversity of communities and the policies that promote this diversity. As a descriptive term, multiculturalism is the simple fact of cultural diversity and the demographic make-up of a specific place, sometimes at the organizational level, e.g., schools, businesses, neighborhoods, cities, or nations. As a prescriptive term, multiculturalism encourages ideologies and policies that promote this diversity or its institutionalization. In this sense, multiculturalism

is a society at ease with the rich tapestry of human life and the desire amongst people to express their own identity in the manner they see fit. Multiculturalism is often contrasted with the concept of assimilation and has been described as a "salad bowl" or "cultural mosaic" rather than a "melting pot".

Studies dealing with mixed societies and cultural practices bring to the fore terms like 'hybridity' which can be applied metaphorically to the above situations. What results in the hybridising culture is the scattering and settlement of people in alien cultures around the world or formation of Diasporas. The conceptualization of hybridization is closely linked with the Post-structural doctrine. The study of conceptualization of hybridity in the Post-Colonial literature reveals the working of the diasporic scenario.

Monika Fludernik states in her article:

Hybridity and Syncretism have recently established themselves as new luminaries

on the horizon of critical terms. Hybridity in particular has undergone some extensive representation and refunctionalisation that have turned into a key concept in Post-Colonial studies (19 Hybridity and Post Colonialism).

As a modern International expatriate Indian novelist, Kiran Desai experienced displacement, dislocation and cultural clash. In her novel she writes of the cultural hybridity of the Post-Colonial migrant and the expatriate condition of hybridity. Her novel *The inheritance of Loss* deals with her own situation of migraney, expatriation and alienation from the mother country. Kiran Desai lived in India until she was about fourteen. In the years since she has lived in New York and in Kalimpong.

Kiran Desai reflects on the excruciating pangs of the dispossessed in the backdrop of the Eastern Himalayas. In a tone marked by sincerity she records the suppressed anguish of the illegal immigrants in New York in the novel *The inheritance of Loss*. The Observer sums up the critical opinion of the novel in Britain "it dissects the dream of empire, old and new, and lays bare the idea of colonial modernity".

The novel opens in the Eastern Himalayas at Kalimpong in the 1980's with a lyrical sketch of nature. "All day, the colours had been those of the dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains possessed of ocean shadows and depths." Sai, the protagonist of the novel, is an orphaned teenager who goes through the harrowing experiences of the loss of her parents. She also experiences cultural estrangement. She fails to adjust with the Eastern ways. Her Anglophile grandfather Justice Jemubhai Patel is a retired Chief Justice, an inheritor of English hyphenated identity. Sai is doomed to live with the judge and his poor cook, whose son Biju, symbolically represents the second wave of undocumented immigrants. One of the main themes of Desai's novel is the dislocation of invasion, empire building and migration. She detects the sense of loss of the dispossessed and the pangs felt by separation. The retired Judge's residence Cho Oyu is a symbol. Tessa Hadley

remarks, Cho Oyu is tragic-comic metaphor for the seedy remains of British Imperial culture in India. It is suggestive too of the novel form itself, another alien habit that might at first glance seem as ill matched to its Indian environment as the stodgy meals and ideas about keeping up civilization.

The novel examines the different phases of Indian migration to the European countries. The first wave of migrants reaches there for higher studies. In 1939 Jemubhai Patel leaves for Cambridge for education. Yet despite his unhappiness as an alien in England, he envies the English and loathes Indians and grows increasingly embittered by the realisation that he would be despised by absolutely every one, English and Indian both.

The Diaspora depicted in the novel shows the voluntary migration for studies to European countries affected the culture of the Indian people. The Judge is a living example for the life stunted by the encounter with the West. The atmosphere of loss and displacement spreads all over Cho Oyu. The judge who lives in that dilapidated house thinks that he is more British than Indian; he regards himself superior to all other people. He keeps alive an unhealthy contempt for his Indian heritage.

The recurrent theme of the novel is the anxiety of being a foreigner. The Judge returns with hatred for Indian culture. He treats his wife with contempt and harasses her after a long lasting ordeal, he banishes her from his life. His self loathing propels him on a path of unending misery and loneliness and once back in India, he banishes his wife because of her un-English ways. His cruel treatment of his wife makes him a detestable character. He was a foreigner—a foreigner every bit of him screamed

"He did not like his wife's face, searched for his hatred, found beauty, dismissed it. An Indian girl could never be as beautiful as an English one" (168 *The inheritance of Loss*). His hatred never extinguishes but kindles his disillusionment. The uneducated cook prepares Western food for him and serves in the Western style but often fails to adjust with the Judge. Jemubhai's introspection reveals his embittered heart, the judge could live

here, in his shell, this skull, with the solace of being a foreigner in his own country" (29 *The inheritance of Loss*). He relies on Calmpose pills for sleep and mental peace. The pang of the dispossessed continues, he keeps this hatred. "He retreated into 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 Inheritance of Loss*). The arrival of his granddaughter takes him to the burning memories of his beginnings"). The pet dog Mutt is the only solace for the Judge. Sai comments, "Grandfather more lizard than Human, Dog more human than dog"(32 *The inheritance of Loss*). The judge even hates his granddaughter because of his cultural trauma.

The second wave of immigrants takes to Europe in quest of better living. They fall under two categories. The Green Card holders and illegal migrants. Biju, the cook's son, gets down at New York as an undocumented immigrant. Kiran Desai portrays the difference between these two sets; there is a wide gulf.

Harish Sawhney opines:

Desai portrays migration as a universal, multifaceted experience, rescuing it from the clutches of myth and fetishism. Almost fifty years after the Judge went to England, Biju, the cook's son Leads a grueling existence as an illegal immigrant in New York.

Diasporas have often been viewed as problematic, the diasporic community experiences the pangs of oppression, dispossession and displacement from their motherland Desai depicts the overwhelming feeling of humiliation experienced by the people who reach America in search of a better future. Biju's experiences are reflective of the 'shadow class' of illegal migrant workers condemned to constant movement as they evade immigration authorities.

Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Home sickness or homelessness, the rejection of home or the longing for home become motivating factors in

this rewriting. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it.

While analysing immigration and its associated problems it must be understood that new immigrants come from a society where they had been part of the whole community. Once these people leave their original homelands they experience the pangs of alienation; the outcome of their deliberate choice is dispossession and displacement. The immigrant has to deal with various types of people; he has to face unfamiliar problem; has to taken in alien views and foreign languages. It has been observed that as the most society-oriented genre the novel illustrates the true history of mankind. It represents the changing phenomenon of life and reality artistically. As a work of art it manifests the social, political, cultural and spiritual ethos of the people of contemporary society. The interrelation between novel and society is essentially identical and reciprocator.

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