

A Postcolonial Reading of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

The present paper discusses both the themes of colonial mentality in India as well as the American Dream in Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. The aim of this paper is to explore the effects and changes that happened in India in the British colonization of India. The themes of the American Dream, colonialism, race and class will be sketched out through the image of migration and multiculturalism in a postcolonial setting. Also, much attention is paid to such issues as the questions of discrimination and oppression, which are inevitably related to all of the aforementioned themes. Chapter I discusses Judge Jemubhi's colonial mentality and his attachment to the west and the causes that led him to this situation. Chapter II focuses on Biju's American Dream and his immigration experience where he faces racism and discrimination because of his eastern origin, and how he react to these issues different then the Judge did. The objective of the study is threefold. First, it aims at validating the existence of the identity problems in relation to colonialism. Second, it raises awareness and draws people's attention towards the identity crisis in modern societies. Third, writing about such issues stands as a motivation for whoever fails to pay attention to the extent of the dilemma. However, this paper

was meant to be a wakeup call for anyone who considers moving to the west. It aims to discover the proper means and solutions that would eliminate the effects of the identity dilemma to help the people under discussion realize the importance of creating a balance between their multiple identities.

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A Postcolonial Reading of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Arts Degree in English Literature

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, all thanks to Allah, the Almighty for all the blessings He bestowed on me, to have the strength, ability and patience to complete this paper. I offer my sincerest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Sayed M. Youssef, for his support during the composing of this work, which without his cooperation would not have been accomplished. My heartfelt gratitude goes to my parents, my beloved mother who I dedicate all my accomplishments in life. My father, Dr. Fahad Alkhodairy, for his untiring efforts, guidance, encouragement and support. I offer my regards and blessings to my husband Dr. Abdullah Alribdi and my father in-law Dr. Mohammad Alribdi, who both had supported me in a number of ways, their faithful prayers, consideration and encouragement.

ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses both the themes of colonial mentality in India as well as the American Dream in Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. The aim of this paper is to explore the effects and changes that happened in India in the British colonization of India. The themes of the American Dream, colonialism, race and class will be sketched out through the image of migration and multiculturalism in a postcolonial setting. Also, much attention is paid to such issues as the questions of discrimination and oppression, which are inevitably related to all of the aforementioned themes.

Chapter I discusses Judge Jemubhi's colonial mentality and his attachment to the west and the causes that led him to this situation. Chapter II focuses on Biju's American Dream and his immigration experience where he faces racism and discrimination because of his eastern origin, and how he react to these issues different then the Judge did.

The objective of the study is threefold. First, it aims at validating the existence of the identity problems in relation to colonialism. Second, it raises awareness and draws people's attention towards the identity crisis in modern societies. Third, writing about such issues stands as a motivation for whoever fails to pay attention to the extent of the dilemma. However, this paper was meant to be a wakeup call for anyone who considers moving to the west. It aims to discover the proper means and solutions that would eliminate the effects of the identity dilemma to help the people under discussion realize the importance of creating a balance between their multiple identities.

ملخص البحث

دراسة ما بعد الاستعمار لرواية كيران ديساي "ميراث الخسارة"

تهدف هذه الرسالة الى تحليل العقليه الاستعماريه في الهند وكذلك موضوع الحلم الامريكي في روايه كيران ديساي "ميراث الخسارة". ويهدف هذا البحث استكشاف الآثار و التغيرات التي حدثت في الهند خلال الاستعمار البريطاني وتم التطرق الى موضوعات الحلم الامريكي , و الاستعمار , والعرقيه و والطبقه الاجتماعيه من خلال وصف الهجره و التعدديه الثقافيه في بيئه ما بعد الاستعمار البريطاني. وتم تركيز الكثير من الإنتباه على قضايا مثل مسائل التمييز و القمع, والتي ترتبط بكل من المواضيع المذكورة أعلاه.

الفصل الاول من هذا البحث يناقش العقليه الاستعماريه للقاضي جمباهي والأسباب التي دفعته الى التعلق بالغرب. ويركز الفصل الثاني على شخصيه أخرى تدعى بيجو و حلمه الامريكي و تجربته هجرته الى امريكا؛ حيث واجه العنصريه و التمييز بسبب أصله الشرقي. وكيفيه تفاعله مع هذه القضايا بطريقه مختلفه عن القاضي جمباهي.

وفي هذا البحث ثلاثه أهداف: أولاً, التحقق من وجود مشاكل في الهوية بسبب الاستعمار. ثانياً, نشر الوعي ولفت الإنتباه تجاه أزمة الهوية في المجتمعات الحديثه. ثالثاً, طرح هذه المواضيع هو بمثابة الدافع او المحفز لمن فشل في إدراك مدى خطوره هذه القضيه. ومن المفترض أن يكون هذا البحث بمثابة جرس إنذار لمن يفكر بالانتقال إلى الغرب؛ بعدم نسيان مجتمعك أو من تكون. ويهدف هذا البحث ايضاً إلى اكتشاف الوسائل المناسبه والحلول التي من شأنها أن تزيل آثار معضلة الهوية الشخصيه بعد الاستعمار؛ ومساعدة هؤلاء الاشخاص إدراك أهميه خلق توازن بين هوياتهم المتعدده.

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INTRODUCTION:
COLONIALISM AND ORIENTALISM

The present paper discusses both the themes of colonial mentality in India as well as the American Dream in Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. The aim of this paper is to explore the effects and changes that happened in India in the aftermath of the British colonization. Such themes, along with a thorough analysis of settings and characters, are discussed in some detail so as to find out how they are related to one another and how the lots of characters portrayed in the novel are much affected by such things as the social class in India. The themes of the American Dream, colonialism, race and class had been sketched out in the novel through the images of migration and multiculturalism in postcolonial settings. Also, much attention was paid to such issues as the questions of discrimination and oppression which are inevitably related to all of the aforementioned themes. Similarly, the reason *why* some people in large parts of the world were, and still are, discriminated and the way literature represents this thorny issue is discussed right here with special reference to Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. Nevertheless, the main focus will be on the relationship between the East and the West and how the connection between the colonizer and the colonized has influenced the situation. This way, this article is expected to examine Desai's approach to those themes of race, colonial mentality, the American Dream and class in order to observe if and how these themes are linked together.

When it comes to the significance of raising such issues, the purpose of choosing this topic is simply to raise the voice of the individual, and to assist in bringing out peace to the self inside and out. In highlighting an Indian's identity dilemma in Desai's novel is one of the important ways which fictional prose can be used to

eliminate any chance of developing similar cases in the world. Also, presenting such analysis will spread awareness and draw people's attention towards the identity crisis in modern societies. Also, writing about such questions stands as a motivation for whoever fails to pay attention to the extent of the dilemma. To rephrase, this novel's analysis presents a warning sign to many institutions and organizations, in the East or West that endeavor to aid the human well-being. Furthermore, committing it to writing encourages the people to work together and helps resolve the identity crisis's victims. However, this paper was meant to be a wakeup call for anyone who considers moving to the west; to not to forget your society, or who you are. By reading this paper, the reader will become aware of the identity crisis that may effect having a flourishing future. These points will be helpful among many others within the boundaries of the mentioned aspects in the novel.

In his book *Postcolonial Indian Writing: Between Co-option and Resistance*, Meenakshi Sharma argues that the conquest of India by the British Empire had become also a conquest of narrative authority. The educated Indians (such as the judge Jemubhi in the novel, who had his education in England) were involved in the colonial process in many ways, but in many cases they employed the knowledge and “control” of the English language to regain narrative control and resist the essentialised representation and containment of India in colonialist discourse. He continues to argue that mastering the English language and creating literature with it could be used to assert equality with the English that many Indians desire. One of the uses of spreading the English language was for the purpose of facilitating the British governance over India “language as command was not only a domestic or personal matter, but a matter of state” (10). Furthermore, Sharma explains that “the use of the language as the key to understanding Indians, hence being able to control them” (10).

Desai emphasizes on this point in her novel, for example, in the case of the character of the judge Jemubhi, who was highly educated (by the English) and, therefore, easily affected by the British Empire. On the other hand, Biju, the son of the cook, was not educated enough, so he held on to his traditions and beliefs and didn't accept the temptations around him due to his strong attachment to his culture:

The contradictions between the ideals of English education and the political and social reality of the British rule also resulted in ambivalent attitude of various classes of Indians to England. It had varied from an Anglophilia bred on English literary texts, to that of hostility and hatred for England and the English. (Sharma 17)

Indian writing in English is especially interesting because the language in which this literature is written is introduced to Indians through the experience of colonization. So, writing in English is considered a postcolonial effect. Kiran Desai, as an Indian writer, writes her novel from her own view of the inside of her own society. She describes each individual experience, the lost traditions, the fragmented class system, and their lost identities. Also, she illustrates how each character struggles between two worlds, not able to belong to one of them—i.e, the Indian and the British.

In *The Inheritance of Loss* Desai gives vivid descriptions of multicultural societies from the whole world. The novel starts with the story of Sai who lives with her grandfather, a retired judge, in Kalimpong on the Indian side of the Himalayas at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga. At the same time, Desai reveals the life of Biju, the cook's son in the judge's household, who works as an illegal immigrant in New York. Apart from these settings, the reader is introduced to innumerable countries and peoples. Furthermore, the character of Gyan introduces the reader to Nepal and its

history. Thus, the novel is set in both the East and the West, which will be of major significance for this analysis. Moreover, the problems between these different parts of the world will be in focus and linked up with the three major themes of colonialism, race, American dream and class.

As illustrated before, *The Inheritance of Loss* belongs to the postcolonial period. For any informed reader or analyst of this literary aspect, there are many definitions for this complex period. However, the definition given by the Indian-American postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha seems more useful and suitable for this paper:

Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of “minorities” within the geopolitical divisions of east and west, north and south. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic “normality” to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the “rationalizations” of modernity. (438)

This definition discusses the central themes in *The Inheritance of Loss* as the novel focuses on exactly the uneven development of the East and the West. Furthermore, it includes the important notion of power, “the contest for political and social authority”, which can be linked to the notion of racism, colonial mentality and class system. Finally, it confirms the injustice that is visible in the case of those with no

advantages in countries of the Third World. In his essay *The Survival of Culture*, Bhabha adds, “In this salutary sense, a range of contemporary critical theories suggest that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement—that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking” (438).

Concerning the diction and tone of voice, *The Inheritance of Loss* is written in a simple, everyday language that gives a realistic picture to the various events, which are described. This simple tone of voice is used, even when discussing major universal issues like history, politics, finances, religion and cultural aspects. Furthermore, the tone is undramatic and calm, regardless to the fact that many tragic events were portrayed.

The use of the senses, figurative language and the use of sounds and scenery to describe characters and themes are some of the aspects that characterize the style of Desai’s novel. First of all, she uses the senses of the characters to enhance the moods and thoughts. For example, Biju can smell “home” when he misses it. This technique makes the language graphic and emphasizes the characterizations and themes. Also, Desai uses many examples of figurative language in her novels. The judge is described as a lizard: “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” (33). In this comparison between the judge and a reptile, the unsocial and the natural features of the judge, shows his hidden selfish, creepy feelings. Finally, the use of scenery, in particular the constant repetition of the visualization of Kanchenjunga Mountains, captures important images of Desai’s novel. These mountains are strong, everlasting and beautiful which

represent something essential and positive. Furthermore, Kanchenjunga is mentioned both on the first and the last pages, something that frames the plot or the storyline of the novel.

Moreover, the title of *The Inheritance of Loss* is informative and realistic which fits the content of the text. So, it is complex, if not informative and realistic. First of all, the title can be related to the loss Sai feels as an orphan. Hence, Sai's father experienced a corresponding loss when his mother, Nimi, died when he was a child. Furthermore, it can also be taken in a different way. The novel shows that it discusses themes related to the postcolonial period, and that it explores the inheritance left by the British Empire in India. It also tells the story of those who lived in India and those who migrated. However, the title gives a negative sense because of the use of the word "loss", which shows an important aspect of the novel: "Could fulfilment ever be felt as deeply as loss?" (2). The theme of loss is seen throughout the novel, especially in the sense of losing one's pride and respect. It gives a hint of what comes next. By the end of the novel, most of the characters lose what they had in the beginning.

The techniques used to analyze *The Inheritance of Loss* are mainly close reading and comparative methods. Close reading has been absolutely necessary when exploring the novel as it is contemporary and only small amounts of secondary material exist. This way, secondary materials on postcolonial theory and orientalism are used instead, since these materials have been useful in terms of expanding knowledge of the themes and definitions cited right here. The major focus here has been on such magnates of postcolonial theory like Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Likewise, my literary analysis is based around using quotes from the texts, and searching for meaning within the text itself. This technique doesn't only include the understanding of the text, but it also demands recognition of the author's message to the reader. This message may be supported by the use of the senses, vocabulary, imagery, characterizations, how the story is told and the importance of the plot and settings. Regarding the structure, two themes related to post colonialism are discussed, which are colonial mentality and American Dream in separate chapters. Each chapter starts with a brief introduction to the theme in question in order to clarify central terms and aspects, followed by a thorough analysis of the theme.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Disai captures the concept of colonialism in the experiences and character of both Jemubhai and Biju. It is through Jemubhai's personal experience that the reader recognizes a pattern of white, imperial superiority, power and how people from colonized countries are not accepted or welcomed into the western culture. In the same way, Jemubhai suffers from discrimination because of his dark skin and Third World origins, which shows how the white Europeans continually prove their superiority in a universal perspective. The whites gain power and dominance over the poor and the downtrodden, and they demand, if not order, others to treat them with much respect and dignity. On a universal level, this leads to poverty, humiliation and discrimination of people from colonized countries. Many critics have been interested in these crucial, typical postcolonial views which show that the white, powerful and rich west feels superior to the submissive and poor Third World countries. Said's renowned 1978 book *Orientalism* is one of those books that deals with such matters. As early as the introductory part of this book, Said writes,

My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage-and even produce-the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. (3)

The concept of Orientalism is actually very wide to discuss in detail in this paper or even in this non-thesis paper of a few pages. However, a brief definition of the terms “orient” and “oriental” will be relevant and useful right here. The term “Orient” can represent what is “not Europe” but rather the “Other”. To quote Said's very words: “The Orient is...the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (*Orientalism* 1). Furthermore, it is important to be aware that the West has needed the Orient not only for military and financial purposes, but also as a dream of the dangerous, romantic, mystical and sensual—a place where rich people from the West could go to develop their personality (*Orientalism* xv).

CHAPTER I:
JUDGE JEMUBHAI AND HIS COLONIAL MENTALITY

The idea of colonial mentality is one of the major issues discussed by Kiran Desai in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. It is presented through most of the characters, more specifically the character of the retired Judge Jemubhai Petal. Thus, for a better understanding of this point, it is necessary to have a closer look on how the term “Colonial Mentality” is defined. Colonial Mentality is defined by Nadarajan as,

Acceptance of foreigners (the westerners – the whites) and their ways as superior; attempts to mimic a foreign culture with the hope of becoming superior like them; at extreme ends, attempting to absorb the whites culture and way of life physically, culturally and intellectually, in order to become superior foreigners in ones’ native country. (1)

So, it involves an automatic and unreasonable rejection of anything native and an instinctive and uncritical preference for anything Western or foreign. As a result, when there is a rejection of one’s cultural identity as inferior in comparison to foreigners (the westerners – the whites), it may lead to a cultural identity crisis, this is exactly what happened with Judge Jemubhai Petal in the novel.

From the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to the house of Judge Jemubhai. Through the eyes of the Nepali gang, who invaded the house to rob it because they were fooled by its appearance, it is described as a large house with great gates, gardens of different kind of trees and spacious rooms. But they were shocked as soon as they got in by the poor conditions of the house. Anyone who

explores the judge's house will notice that there is something strange about it: it doesn't suit such a person as Judge Jemubhai. He is trying to be someone other than himself, and the atmosphere is filled with depression caused by his failure to accomplish that.

The house, located at the village of Cho Oyo, was built a long time ago by a Scotsman who was so passionate for the Indian Alps: "His true spirit had called to him, then, informed him that it, too, was wild and brave, and refused to be denied the right to adventure"(12). The price for such an adventure, as always, was paid for by the Indians—the natives:

Porters had carried boulders from the riverbed—legs growing bandy, ribs curving into caves, backs into U's, faces being bent slowly to look always at the ground—up to this site chosen for a view that could raise the human heart to spiritual heights. Then the piping arrived, the tiling and tubing, the fancy wrought-iron gates to hang like lace between the banks. (19)

It was built so perfectly to fit the English lifestyle on the expense of the natives, by enslaving them. It has a ballroom, a drawing room, a tea room, and "large windows placed for snow view" (14), all of which the judge or any Indian in fact doesn't need. This raises many questions: why is he maintaining such an expensive house with all these extras when he cannot afford it? Is he trying to satisfy something inside him by living a false life, having an English style home, a cook, etc.? The answers of such questions are given through his past as the novel progresses. From start to finish, the retired Judge is seen trying to act like white men which leads to his downfall afterwards. He is a retired Chief Justice for the

ICS¹. He is referred to as the Judge throughout the book. He grew up in a household that sacrificed everything so that he could study in England. His sisters went without any luxury and were given only the basics for survival. He was admitted into a British college, and there was immense pressure from his family, but more from himself, to graduate and land a position with the ICS.

Although the flashes of his past in England passed his mind, the feeling of hate had been present in every moment of his adult life. In his painful moments Jemubhai recalled his past, and the reader discovers gradually his life and understands how and why his life turned out the way it did. Through Desai's description of Jemubhai's life, the reader can see how colonialism can affect and harm the life and personality of an innocent and naïve young man.

The major change in Jemubhai's life was when he moved to Cambridge to study for five years. It is during this period of time that he learnt what hate and racism were. He went to study at Cambridge University with a dream of gaining respect, wealth, and high position in his society. He always hated being an Indian, and felt inferior to his white companions. When he was on the train to England, "He felt a piercing fear, not for his future, but for his past, for the foolish faith with which he had lived in Piphit"(36). At the beginning, Jemubhai's hatred was pointed towards everyone around him, but, later on, his feelings of hatred extended to include himself and his own personality. The overwhelming feeling of hate transformed him into a cruel man. Likewise, his feeling of inferiority made him ashamed of his own father: "Jemubhai looked at his father, a barely educated man venturing where he should not be, and the love in Jemubhai's heart mingled

¹ The Indian Civil Service (ICS) for part of the 19th century officially known as the Imperial Civil Service.

with pity, the pity with shame. His father felt his own hand rise and cover his mouth: he had failed his son” (37). His goodbye to his family before he left India foreshadows what will come after it. As the author states, “Never again would he know love for a human being that wasn’t adulterated by another, contradictory emotion” (37). He never respected his family nor his society or their traditions, since he looked upon them as uncivilized and illiterate people.

Because of his intelligence and cleverness at school along with the dowry he got from the family of his new wife, he had the chance to study law in England. Of course, England was a cultural shock to him: “He had expected only grandness, he hadn’t realized that here, too, people could be poor and live unaesthetic lives” (38). As all colonized people who believe that the colonizer is great, divine, superior and that their colonized nation is inferior, he couldn’t defend himself against their mistreatment of his race or even see the harm and destruction they did to his homeland.

On their part, the English people found it difficult to accept a dark-skinned young man with an alien cultural background and a peculiar accent. In 1939, India was still dominated by the British Empire, and in the same way Jemubhai’s English fellow students felt themselves superior to him on the individual level. However, Jemubhai arrived to England before the stream of immigration from earlier colonized countries started. His first encounter with the English people wasn’t as he imagined when he left India. He found it much difficult to rent a room in England and when he managed to find one, the landlady was reluctant enough to rent her room to him:

He visited twenty-two homes before he arrived at the doorstep of Mrs.

Rice on Thornton Road. She didn't want him either, but she needed the money and her house was so situated—on the other side of the train station from the university—she was concerned she wouldn't be able to find a lodger at all. (38)

So he wasn't her better choice, but she agreed to take him out of need. Also, she took the liberty of calling him "James" as if she were consoling herself for taking in a colored foreigner.

After feeling rejected, he soon withdrew from all social activities and preferred to be alone: "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). After a while, he also became a stranger to himself: he saw his own skin color odd, felt ashamed of his unpleasant accent, and was terrified by the thought of being different. As the author puts it, "Eventually he felt barely human at all" (40). This way, he became a stranger to himself as he was to those around him. He forgot how to laugh, and if he ever did he "held his hand over his mouth, because he couldn't bear anyone to see his gums, his teeth.... In fact, he could barely let any of himself peep out of his clothes for fear of giving offence."(40). He accepted their views, opinions about himself, and he generated a new self that he thought would help him become more civilized.

Afterwards, Jemubhai started learning and accepting the standards and attitudes of the English society in which he lived. He began to understand how such issues could be helpful to his life, and finally he considered them as his own points of view. As a result, he became a victim of internalized oppression and began to believe that the discrimination against him was justified. In the same way, he started to use the ways

of his oppressors towards himself.

Being ignored and humiliated, he lost his self-esteem and started to hate his own body and personality. He started to powder his face in a white/pinkish color makeup to hide his dark complexions because of the fear of being different. His loneliness and self-hatred developed to a mental instability, and his mind was confused and hurt. This habit became an obsession for him for the rest of his life. This uncontrollable routine is important because it shows that Jemubhai began to hide his true identity and take on a new one. He got used to wearing a mask of whiteness and cruelty. This way, he started to adopt the characteristics of the white man whom he admired his whole life. After the whites had discriminated and humiliated him, he started reproducing that cruelty of those people who had been cruel to him. Also, the race discrimination that Jemubhai encountered during his years in Cambridge hurt him for life, as he turned it all inward, his mixed feelings may never recover.

When Jemubhai returned to India after five years in England, he was feeling like a stranger: “He was a foreigner-a foreigner-every bit of him screamed” (166-167). He was ridiculed because of his westernized way of life and, in particular, for the obsession with powdering his face. He was unable to hold or accept his negative feelings and experiences, and he was eager to see the same pain he felt on someone else. In psychological terms, this act is often referred to as projection. According to Bhatia,

Unconscious defense mechanism in which a person conceals from himself that he has a trait or disposition of which he is unconsciously ashamed, by falsely seeing its presence in others. Projection protects the person from anxiety

arising from an inner conflict. By externalizing whatever is unacceptable the person deals with it as a situation apart from himself (326).

This way, Jemubhai started to transfer his misery to his nineteen-year-old wife Nimi. He thought if he acted that way it would make him feel better. Their marriage became a challenge for both of them. His frustrations, his anger and his feelings of hatred had destroyed Nimi's life. After he had returned from England, he started his sadistic mistreatment of Nimi. One may claim that he decided to "teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself" (170). He also abused her mentally by giving her an English name in an attempt to change her identity. Furthermore, he was seen forcing her to learn English and behave in a western manner: "Yet he repeated the gutter act again and again...cruelty to her became irresistible" (170). Her refusal to conform to his commands drove him into rage, and he gradually broke her down when she decided to end her life. In spite of the fact that Jemubhai always disguised his terrible behavior, "the grotesqueness of it all shocked him" (169-170). Once again, Desai stresses the terrible consequences of race discrimination and the problems it entails, which are related to colonialism, more specifically the question of identity. Jemubhai's confusion regarding his own identity is evident, and consequently he gave himself an alternative name with the same initials as his own—i.e., "James Peter Peterson" (171).

The author describes the character of the Judge as complex and dynamic enough, a representative of the Indian colonial figure who is much influenced by colonialism. Also, it is through that character that she speaks of such a theme as the social class system, which is one of the effects of the British colonization. As illustrated in the novel, the members of the upper class in India speak English and behave like Englishmen. Although England left them after India had declared its independence, its

presence was still seen there: “One result of the colonial educational policies in British India was the emergence of class of Indians who were “English” in all but skin-colour, with well-entrenched ideas and ideals about England and Englishness acquired from English texts” (Sharma 16). He who speaks English is admired and respected, and those speaking Indian are considered illiterate. When Sai, the Judge’s granddaughter, came to his household, he didn’t want to send her to the public school. He was afraid that she would mix up with the natives as he considered her as an elite because her mother was Russian and she was taught by the English nuns. So he hired his neighbor Noni to tutor her (as she shared his Englishness).

The fact that Desai had named the characters by their professions clearly emphasizes the social class differences and the master/slave relationship between them. It is obvious that the cook is the servant and the Judge the master. Nevertheless, by naming these characters by their profession, Desai wanted to emphasize the social class difference between them. Also, the concept of class was noticed as early as the first page and continued throughout the novel. The cook was a poor man who lived in a bamboo hut on the Judge’s property. When Sai went to his hut for the first time, she noticed that he had nothing: “It pained Sai’s heart to see how little he had” (20). He had only one extra shirt and few other personal belongings. We are told that he started to work when he was ten years old and was hired by the Judge at the age of fourteen. From that time onwards, the Judge and the cook had been living together. The Judge had been the powerful master, and the cook the submissive all-around servant doing his best to fulfill the demanding tasks of his master with primitive facilities: “Only a corner of the kitchen was being used, since it was meant originally for the slaving minions, not the one leftover servant” (7). The low position of the cook further mirrored how he saw himself: “He was a powerless man, barely enough learning to

read and write, had worked like a donkey all his life, hoped only to avoid trouble, lived on only to see his son” (11). In a conversation with Noni, Sai described him and his son as “the poorest family in the village” (67).

The communication between the Judge and the cook is very limited to only necessary information and instructions. When the police arrived to investigate the robbery, the cook tried to talk with them and provide information, but this annoyed the Judge who snarled: “Go sit in the kitchen. Bar bar karta rehta hai” (11). This situation shows clearly the difference in levels between them. In fact, the Judge deliberately ordered the cook in two languages to emphasize on the cook’s social class and to put him in his right position. His use of the English language suggests loyalty to the British colonizer and the West, while the Indian phrase is used to show the differences between them regarding cultural belonging and identity. This maintains the class distinction between them and shows that the cook understood the message of his master.

Another example took place when the cook once asked the Judge for a salary raise as his salary had not been changed in years. He had been working for the Judge for him almost his entire life and his salary grew inadequate. On his part, the Judge didn’t like the idea and refused his proposal. He regarded the cook’s salary only as “pocket money”. To quote his very words to the cook: “All your expenses are paid for—housing, clothing, food, medicines. This is extra” (54). This shows how it is easy for the educated people of high rank to manipulate and take advantage of people from lower classes in society. Likewise, when Sai arrived to Cho Oyu, the cook wasn’t informed of why she had arrived or that her parents were dead: “I’m never told anything” (25). Hence, there was no kind of friendship or understanding in the

relationship between them. The only thing was a master giving orders to his servant who was asked to obey his demands.

However, as the novel gradually progresses the reader discovers the cook's other side. He was both creative and could show initiative. Regardless of his low social status, he was one of the few poor people in the village who had finally been able to send their children abroad. His son left for America. Also, he had started his own business selling his own liquor. This small business had irritated the Judge who felt that his high position was threatened by the cook's success: "It was his habit to be a master and the cook's to be a servant, but something had changed in their relationship within a system that kept servant and master both under an illusion of security" (209). It is through this description that Desai illustrates that the cook could have made much more out of his life if he was given the opportunity. She also points out how hard it is for a member of the lower class to improve his situation.

If we look at the situation from the Judge's perspective, the cook is representing everything he hates and cannot tolerate: he is Indian, uneducated, submissive and belongs to a low class in society. The Judge felt superior to him both professionally and personally, and considered that it was his right to take advantage of the situation. The Judge's behavior with the cook was based on his own insecurity, his lack of confidence and his identity problems.

On the other hand, from the cook's perspective, working for the Judge had been a disappointment. The cook was brought up in a society where the English had been those with privilege, wealth and power. Affected by this, along with his low self-esteem, and his insecurity he felt less successful than his father: "A severe comedown, he thought, from his father, who had served white men only" (63). Moreover, the

relationship between the Judge and the cook shows how imperialism and the Western dominance had affected the social structures of India.

However, the most humiliating scene takes place when the Judge's dog, Mutt by name, was lost in the end of the novel. The idea of losing the dog was unbearable to the Judge, who loved the dog more than anyone else in his life. The scene was fundamental for the cook whom the judge threatened to kill if he didn't find the dog. The cook's position as a servant and his low self-esteem made the guilt grow inside him, and he started to blame himself for not having done his job properly. Drunk and in a low psychological state, the cook knocked on the Judge's bedroom door at night asking for forgiveness and punishment. Also, he confessed the mistakes he felt he had made over the years. This made the Judge explode with anger, and a horrific and humiliating scene took place. The Judge, blind with his anger and hatred, "was beating with all the force of his sagging, puckering flesh, flecks of saliva flying from his slack muscled mouth, and his chin wobbled uncontrollably. Yet, that arm from which the flesh hung already dead, came down, bringing the slipper upon the cook's head" (321). The cook, on the other hand, was pleading to be punished and even killed: "I'm a bad man...I'm a bad man, beat me, sahib, punish me" (319). Sai could not tolerate the Judge's torture of his cook and asked him to stop that, but the cook insisted: "Let him. He wants to kill me. Let him kill me. What is my life? It's nothing. Better that it's gone. It's useless to everyone" (320). This quote is significant enough as it manifests the big dichotomy between the Judge and the cook. It shows the notorious master/slave relationship in society. Desai comments, "The Judge and his cook had lived together for more years than they had with anyone else, practically in the same room, closer to each other than to any other human being and-nothing, zero, no understanding" (313). His contempt of the cook has something to do with the

latter's race and class, which had been brought up to the surface. Due to the Judge's social snobbery coupled with his illusion that he was far better than his cook, he felt that he had the right to punish the cook in that cruel way. He had been cruel enough towards his wife many years ago whom he had objectified or considered as no more than an object. Once again, he represented the “white” western-oriented man who used his position to oppress others to maintain his personal intentions. The cook, on the other hand, played the role of the submissive and poor man from the East. Again, Desai shows a parallel to the relation between the East and the West in accordance to postcolonial theories.

In the end, Desai stresses several points in her characterization of Jemubhai and the discrimination he suffered in England. She captures how racism and discrimination are horrible human acts that can cause unforgivable consequences on the life of the person who suffers. Also, she illustrates how Jemubhai is a victim of colonialism, who is simply fooled by the wealth and power of the British. When he went to London he was treated with prejudice and intolerance, which made him realize that he would never be welcomed in such a foreign land as Britain. Later, his loyalty to them costs him dearly both socially and professionally.

On the other hand, if we look at this issue from the perspective of the English people themselves, they felt it was natural to oppress people like Jemubhai and consider him as inferior to them because of their colonial situation. So, they viewed him as an intruder who wanted to benefit from their powerful wealthy nation. This concept is, of course, unreasonable and unacceptable as they were the reason behind the Indians' misfortune, being powerless and submissive. India had been colonized, its treasures stolen, its people stripped of their dignity, and when it was finally left, it turned into a submissive poor third world country. When the Indians, like Jemubhai

right here, left for England for education or anything else, they were mentally and psychologically broken. Jemubhai suffered as an individual, who was entirely unable to improve his situation which made him angry and full of hatred. As a result of his being shocked by the mistreatments of “the whites” to him, he started questioning who he was, his whole dreams of the future shattered. As the author comments, “Jemubhai's mind had begun to warp; he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely manage to lift his lips in a smile” (40). Likewise, his personality had changed, and he felt he was not the same as before. To put it simply, he had lost his confidence: “He began to wash obsessively, concerned he would be accused of smelling...To the end of his life, he would never be seen without socks and shoes and would prefer shadow to light, faded days to sunny, for he was suspicious that sunlight might reveal him, in his hideousness, all too clearly.” (40). He was deeply depressed due to hating himself, his people and his nationality. Nothing mattered any more. Such incidents had scared him for years to come by.

When he returned to India, he was a different person. He believed he changed for the best. Thus, when his family laughed at him for owning a powder puff, he became enraged. He arrived thinking he would be respected, asked about his time in England and treated like a king for being so civilized. Instead, his family members intruded in his life and treated him like any other member of the family. They couldn't understand why he was so infuriated when someone went through his things and found it absurd that he required and expected such great privacy.

All in all, Jemubhai's whole experience illustrates the destructive consequences of colonialism. He was discriminated and treated badly, something that drove him into projecting his feelings of hatred and anger toward the people around him, most

particularly his wife Nimi and his cook.

CHAPTER II:
BIJU AND THE ILLUSION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

It was horrible what happened to Indians abroad and nobody knew but other Indians abroad. It was a dirty little rodent secret. (145)

For many centuries, many people immigrate to the United States of America in search of the American Dream, freedom, equality and the opportunity to achieve their personal goals in life, which they cannot otherwise achieve in their homelands. The American Dream is the pursuit of prosperity and opportunity that drives people to push their own limits and persevere in order to lead successful lives and achieve whatever goals they set. Heather Johnson explains that the American Dream represents a basic belief in the power and capacity of the individual...which the dream promises: a system of opportunity, so that regardless of background each individual has an equal chance to prosper (21). Then, she goes further to elaborate that it is a set of deeply held beliefs, a particular mined-set, and it is a particular way of viewing the world and it is a particular way we want the world to view us (22).

Kiran Desai embodies the theme of the American Dream in many of her characters, but mostly the character of Biju. He is the only son of the Judge Jemubhai's cook. The cook was an old man working for the Judge since his early days. Throughout his life, he was desperate that his son would do better than he did. He didn't want him to work as a servant for the rest of his life. So, he encouraged his

son Biju to pursue his American Dream and travel to America in hopes of escaping poverty and making enough money, and eventually rescuing his father.

Biju went to America as an illegal migrant, working as cheap laborer, restlessly moving from one illegal ill-paid job to another: “Biju changed jobs so often, like a fugitive on the run—no papers.”(10). He was always afraid of being caught by the authorities and sent back to India. He continually lost his jobs and his humiliation continued: “Use the time off to take a bath,” said the owner. He had been kind enough to hire Biju although he found him smelly. (23) Through this quote and many others that Desai emphasizes the white man’s superiority and the discrimination of the third world people. She refers to Biju’s experience in America as the colonial experience for many reasons. First, Biju and his fellow workers, who belong to a large number of nationalities and races, were illegal immigrants who had no right to stay in America and, thereby, could never claim anything as colonized nations are. Second, they are supposed to be invisible while the white man exploits them: “Nothing I can do’, the manager said, pink from having to dole out humiliation to these men... Just disappear quietly is my advice.... So they disappeared” (16). The pink skin color of the manager suggests the dominance of white people in positions like this. They had to make themselves invisible because they were frightened enough, frightened from being caught, sent back home, the home that they ran away from. The last reason is that this fear gave many western people the reason or justification to exploit this type of workers, who had to accept the bad jobs, the unreasonable pay, the poor lodgings and facilities that are offered. Also, in order to keep their jobs, they had no right to complain of or grumble about their deplorable conditions.

The key solution to Biju’s situation was to be legal, which was his dream. A legal immigrant can be visible in public life, can claim his rights, and develop educationally

and professionally. In short, it meant a respectable life. Thus, Biju's wish to get a Green Card became his obsession: "Oh, the green card, the green card" (81). However, he knows that he cannot apply for it because of his race. He was told that Indians were not able to apply. His colleagues told him that Indian applications are not accepted because of the large number of the Indian immigrants: "The line would be stopped up for years, the quota was full, overfull, spilling over" (81). This situation clarifies that people from India seeking a Green Card are discriminated against due to their race and nationality. In a larger and more general perspective, it could also be claimed that westernized countries discriminate against people from the Third World countries by not accepting their applications.

It is then that he felt himself worthless: "Biju was so restless, he could barely stand to stay in his skin."(88). His struggle to maintain his dignity, his national pride that has been neglected and disrespected, his religious beliefs which he was brought up to believe in are all broken and laughed at. For example, when he was working at the Queen of Tarts bakery, he was shocked that they are cooking and eating the holy cow, which is sacred creature in his religion: "Holy cow, unholy cow." (83) Maybe he can give them an excuse for cooking and eating the holy cow "The cow was not an Indian cow; therefore it was not holy?"(83). But eventually, he decided he couldn't tolerate these issues.

Biju was able to change his situation and demand his rights in many scenes in the novel. When he first went to America he was loyal to his employers, but as time went by, he noticed that he didn't have to take in all the humiliation and the bad treatment. This drove him to change his jobs. Another thing he decided he couldn't tolerate was working in a restaurant that served cow meat, which he left for an Indian restaurant.

Such things made Biju seem happier than. This emphasizes the importance of being able to stay loyal to one's own culture, religion and customs. So, he was careful enough to find a way to cope in his foreign environment, without losing his pride for his Indian culture and religion.

However, another scene from this restaurant gives a different picture of his now superficially "good" working conditions. One day Biju hurt his knee badly at work, and in great pain he asked his owner to send for a doctor. Biju also told him that he held him responsible for this as the injury was caused by his slipping on some rotten spinach in the kitchen. Biju's relevant questions made the owner furious, and Biju's understood that his Indian boss, in spite of his friendliness at the surface, was just like any owner he met—only interested in keeping the costs down through hiring illegal immigrants. Afterwards, his boss threatened him of transporting him to India. This incident made him much depressed as he felt himself trapped. He knew that a return to India was almost impossible, since his father had asked him not to come back till he got enough money that would secure them both. However, in spite of this, from that time on he kept thinking about the question of getting back.

Biju couldn't help but felt a flash of anger at his father for sending him alone to this country, but he knew he wouldn't have forgiven his father for not trying to send him, either. So he didn't know if his failed journey was his father's fault or his own. He was struggling, confused, and did not want to leave India but he left because of his father whom he had the same dream of the better life. Many a time, his father imagined his son living a prosperous life in Kalimpong, something that would make him much proud and happy: "He imagined sofa TV bank account. Eventually Biju would make enough and the cook would retire. He would receive a daughter-in-

law to serve him food, crick-crack his toes, grandchildren to swat like flies.”(24).

Biju knew that his father shared his dream so he didn't tell him the truth. When he wrote to him, he started to beautify the reality: "I have a new job in a bakery and the boss leaves us in complete charge. . ." (90). He grew big in his father's eyes as a successful man. The cook went to the people in the village to show off his son's success: "My son works in New York," the cook boasted to everyone he met. "He is the manager of a restaurant business" (91). To put it simply, Biju was the dream that made him sleep at night, the only good thing in his life. Nevertheless, Biju finally decided to return home at the end. He found that the humiliation he was exposed to in America coupled with the bad work condition were actually unbearable and that he could survive in India as best as he could.

It is through the character of Biju that Desai speaks of the illusion of the American Dream and the reality of the fantasies every immigrant has of the future in America. Despite his father's pleas along with the advice of his fellow workers to stay in America, Biju courageously enough eventually returned to India. This way, he wasn't like lots of Indians including Judge Jemubhai who were thrilled to leave home and tried to erase every trace of it. Biju finally realized that he could neither be free abroad nor become part of the American society. On the way back to Kalimpong, the road was blocked, and Biju was stripped of his clothes and possession by the revolutionaries. So he had lost every thing he earned in America, but the experience he had there was engraved in his mind. His father was more than happy to see him back again although he was the one who encouraged him to go to America. He was sure enough that leaving his homeland for a foreign country was his biggest mistake. He struggled in the States and was stripped of his pride and dignity. The only thing

that nobody could take away from him was the love he had for his father. His father also shared this eternal love. Through Biju's experience in the United States, Desai criticizes the western society as they considered the eastern immigrants beneath them despite their need for such workers.

CONCLUSION

It is through her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* that Kiran Desai speaks of the detrimental impact of the role of the British Empire in India and the complexity that followed colonialism—both on the global and the personal level. So, she stresses the effects of the postcolonial period, and the fact that colonialism is the reason behind most of the problems which are quite prevalent in the Third World countries. For her, such repercussions had prevented the people of the once colonial colonies, like India right here, from joining the West in their dynamic development and progress. After the retraction of the English in the postcolonial period, countries like India suffered terribly. This period was related with financial and political troubles, corruption in the law system, oppression and violence.

In the case of the immigrants in England and America, Desai describes how some people like Judge Jemubhai and Biju in *The Inheritance of Loss* are oppressed both because of their low social class and race. The novel shifts from India, England and the United States, which has enabled the author to promote the themes of oppression and discrimination in her novel. Her main interest was to illustrate discrimination in relation to the west.

The classic postcolonial view of a powerful and privileged West and an undeveloped and oppressed East is what colonial mentality is all about. In the novel, the characters who were affected by the West were those with financial security. Having money and power are the major stimulation for the continuous struggle in the competitive class system. In many different ways, Desai describes how the various characters fight in the social hierarchy—some for survival alone, and others in order to obtain better conditions in their lives. Desai illustrates this point through the major

contrast in living conditions and power between Judge Jemubhai and the cook in Kalimpong on the one hand, and Biju and the businessmen who visit the restaurants where he works in New York on the other hand. She emphasizes how it is difficult to gain a higher level in the hierarchical system. Even though class belonging in the western tradition is not considered as “a part of the body”, like in the caste hierarchy of India, the changing of class proves to be difficult for the characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*. The exception from this appears when characters from the Third World migrate to the West in order to begin a new life. It looks difficult for those who immigrated from the East to the West to enter the “white” class systems of their new countries. Judge Jemubhai, for example, had succeeded professionally, but the price he had to pay for his financial privilege was much high.

Although there seems to be a pessimistic, if not realistic, tone in *The Inheritance of Loss*, the last pages of it shows glimpses of hope. However, the humiliating scene with Judge Jemubhai beating the cook represents something new. This situation makes Sai, the Judge's granddaughter, realize it is high time she considered leaving and that things ought to be changed around her. She is able to see the true image of herself, her grandfather and the cook and in a larger perspective: “The simplicity of what she'd been taught wouldn't hold. Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it” (323). She also comprehends that she has to make the changes herself: “The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it” (324). Furthermore, even though *The Inheritance of Loss* ends with “losses” in many ways, it also shows glimpses of hope and optimism. Actually we have expected the losses from the very beginning of the

novel as early as the very title itself. Sai loses her lover, but she obtains a higher understanding regarding her future and independence. The cook loses his dignity, but he gets his son back. Biju, too, loses his dignity and all his possessions, but he starts anew and insists on changing himself.

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