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Echoes of Displacement: Cultural Alienation and Existential Struggles in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract: *“The present changes the past. Looking back you do not find what you left behind.”* Kiran Desai. ‘The Inheritance of Loss’ is an insightful exploration of cultural displacement and identity crisis. Its beautifully crafted narrative touches upon universal themes that resonate with readers on a profound level. This research paper delves into the intricate themes of cultural displacement and the quest for identity in Kiran Desai’s acclaimed novel, ‘The Inheritance of Loss’. Through a comprehensive analysis of the characters and their experiences, this study aims to shed light on the profound impact of migration and cultural conflict on individual identities. The paper examines the lives of characters such as Biju, Sai, and Gyan, who find themselves caught between multiple worlds, grappling with the challenges of cultural displacement and the subsequent identity crises that arise. It explores how their journeys reflect the broader issues faced by individuals in a globalized world, where borders are blurred and cultural assimilation becomes a complex process. Drawing upon literary theories and close textual analysis, the novel investigates how Desai portrays the struggles, conflicts, and transformations of her characters. It explores the themes of cultural assimilation, loss of heritage, and the search for belonging, highlighting the impact of historical, social, and political contexts on individual identities. Examining the nuanced portrayal of cultural displacement and the quest for identity in ‘The Inheritance of Loss’, presents a deeper understanding of the complexities of migration, cultural conflict, and the human experience in a rapidly changing world. The novel deals with chaos, despair, ethno-racial, and historical relationships between people from different cultures and backgrounds. Love, longing, and losses are dexterously handled in a humane manner articulating the diasporic experiences of the novelist who is an Indian citizen but a



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permanent resident of America. Kiran Desai is deeply interested in India- the India of the 1980s which honestly represents a mixed image. Desai observes everything through the 'lens of being Indian,' without that perspective, she acknowledges that she can't write. *The Inheritance of Loss* is a novel of implacable bitterness and despair. Full of pathos and tenderness the novel presents its characters as ultimately frail human beings struggling in search of their identity. It was the feeling of being caught between two continents that infuses *The Inheritance of Loss* — a story replete with sadness over globalization and with pleasure at the surviving intimacies of Indian life. "The *Inheritance of Loss* is not only a story, it is, a perspective, an inside look into post-independence India, with its roots dug in colonialism, its branches embracing Americanism, but its leaves brown and dusty with the age-old prejudices that govern people's minds; an India where a class of people still speak only English and squirm at the mention of their mother tongues; where a mother is proud because her daughter has chosen to marry an Englishman: where a foreigner is treated suspiciously despite his honest efforts to lay foundations of indigenous industries; where thousands of Indians enter America as illegal immigrants in the eyes of their families, they are the heroes, but in reality, they sleep with mice on the kitchen floors of restaurants or in squalid suburbs of big cities".

Keywords: Post colonialism, diasporic chaos, globalization, loss.

Introduction

In the captivating realm of literature, certain works possess the power to transport us to distant lands, immersing us in the intricate tapestry of human experiences. Desai's masterpiece, 'The Inheritance of Loss', stands as a testament to this profound ability. Within its pages, Desai weaves a tale that delves deep into the complexities of cultural displacement and the relentless quest for identity. Like a skilled artist, Desai paints a vivid portrait of characters grappling with the weight of their heritage, caught in the tumultuous currents of societal upheaval. Through her poignant prose, she unravels the threads of their lives, exposing the raw emotions and profound struggles that arise when one's cultural roots are uprooted, and a sense of belonging becomes elusive. Within the backdrop of the majestic Himalayas, Desai's narrative unfolds, traversing the boundaries of time and space. As readers, we are invited to witness the collision of cultures,



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the clash of traditions, and the ensuing identity crises that ensnare her characters. Through their journeys, we are compelled to confront our notions of self and the intricate web of influences that shape our identities. This research paper embarks on a profound exploration of 'The Inheritance of Loss', peering beneath its literary surface to unravel the layers of cultural displacement and the relentless quest for identity. By delving into Desai's masterful storytelling, we seek to illuminate the profound impact of migration, the erosion of cultural heritage, and the indomitable spirit that emerges amidst the chaos.

The Inheritance of Loss, a 2006 book by Kiran Desai, explores immigration, identity, and relationships on both the interpersonal and international scales. Spanning India, England, and the United States, the novel details the conflict between traditional Indian ways of life and the shiny opulence of Western nations. Multiculturalism, Immigration, Westernization, Postcolonialism, terrorist- violence, Racial-discrimination, alienation, Eile, etc. To sum up, the novel deals with the conflict of culture, on the global level; and on the personal level it deals with the internal conflict of identity. The novel is a brilliant study of Indian culture- the culture in its transitional phase. Changes are brought out by colonial neurosis, craze for the Western values, manners, language, and glamorous lifestyle; the impact of modernization, consumerism, globalization, and deep-rooted reaction to indigenous values that fail to sustain life. Characters feel inferior, bound, and defeated by their Indian heritage when confronted with colonialism; consequently, they develop grotesque complexes that mar their mutuality and reciprocal relationship. The *Inheritance of Loss*, in Fine, is about a family whose son goes to America to study and suffers from social discrimination over there, and eventually returns to India for a relatively obscure life on the one hand and in a true sense is about heightening the colonial culture *The Inheritance of Loss* is the best prognostication of loss of identity and cultural shock among the people, who adored west blindly. Kiran Desai has portrayed the life of hyphenated people who are in dilemma of their own identity and belongingness due to the influence of Western dogma. The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is rendered with two kinds of Diaspora – that of undocumented and exploited blue-collar immigrants in New York and an aged Judge who settled after his retirement in a remote Gorkha hill station. Through this novel, Desai reveals new different parts of the world. *The Inheritance of Loss* requires background information on two major historical movements



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in India. The first is British colonial rule in India and eventual Indian independence. At the end of the 16th century, the British aimed to challenge the Portuguese monopoly of trade with Asia.

The Inheritance of Loss, A non-descript term, identity suggests our thoughts and feelings, our psychic presence, our place of habitation, and even our longings, dreams, and desires. The individual identity, like the national identity, is formed through a series of random and frequently bizarre accretions. In the formation of the individual identity, several factors come into play. One is the cumulative offspring of all these diverse and divisive forces. A formative and not an innate product, one's identity is determined by three factors. Firstly, childhood impressions and aspirations play a vital role in deciding it. An individual has to break off most of his reliance on his parents and become free enough to leave home and develop ideas and aims of his own which will give him a distinct identity. How strong the rebelliousness in each individual is, and what form it takes, is the second element in determining identity. The third element is the zeitgeist. These call on the youth to develop different qualities in different historical periods. But it is not only the spirit of the times but also the biological trait within the character, the inner drive and motivation which equally contribute to one's identity. Our desire for separate cultural identity is the offspring of our being alienated from the concept of unity in diversity. A crisis of identity occurs in the state in which the individual acts not by the dictates of his "core self" or "inner conscience" but as per the promptings of the "other self" and "outer conscience,". In this state, there is total disgust and discord with the inner life and hence the alienation of the self. Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* has superbly dealt with the theme of identity crisis through the characters of her novel in a bewilderingly fascinating style of her own. She has profoundly unfolded the vicious and tragic shades of her theme (identity crisis) in a captivating fashion. The title itself foreshadows the synesthetic commingling of positives and negatives like 'Inheritance' and 'Loss.' But at a much more profound perception than the more superficial narrative of the story, one may unequivocally rather arithmetically, say that *The Inheritance of Loss* is equal to the disinheritance of gain--a life full of a strange 'emptiness' and 'solitude' of the sense of ultimately losing whatever one has, of the sense of alienation from society and self-perceived to be arising out of double selves and rootlessness. Despite political freedom, cultural slavery is directly manifested through the



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characters. They are in a 'to be or not to be' position, fail to assimilate, and give up their original culture in totality. There remains an identity crisis that most Indians face despite postcolonial reactions in which endeavour is to revitalize indigenous culture and its values. Set partly in India and partly in the U.S.A. The *Inheritance of Loss* explores with uncommon intimacy and insight some of the very pertinent issues of today's globalized world. It deals with the quest for individual identity and the struggle for self-determination of an ethnic group that results from despair and a sense of deprivation and that uproots a settled order of life and leads to displacement, exile, and loss. The *Inheritance of Loss* draws on Kiran's own experiences of leaving India. The novel is certainly not an autobiography of Kiran Desai or an autobiographical novel, but it seems to provide a fictionalized version of her journey from East to West. Kiran was born in India where she spent the first fourteen years of her life before migrating to England and then to America for higher education. In this book she takes a literary route to revisit her past and her ancestral history in Gujarat (the place from where her father and paternal grandfather came) and Kampong (the home of her aunt). This search for personal and familial roots is inextricably linked up with many larger issues of India's colonial and post-colonial history, which also includes the history of a thriving Indian diaspora and its amazing story of continuous displacement, migration, and, return.

The text of the novel is set at Kampong, a beautiful mountain range on the outskirts of the Nepal border. A retired judge Jemubhai resides there supported by one of his family cooks Panna Lal and his pet dog Matt. The plight of the life of immigrants is projected through the life of the cook's son Biju, who has gone to America to accept the job of a cook in an English restaurant. Desai exhibits her concern about how growing awareness about ethnic identity is posing a great hazard. The novel describes two parallel stories. The Indian part deals with the story of a makeshift family comprising a retired judge, his granddaughter Sal, his old and loyal cook, and his pet dog Matt. The American section deals with the story of Biju, the son of the judge's cook who struggles to survive as an illegal immigrant worker in New York, moving from one ill-paid job to another and is compelled to experience the anxiety of being a foreigner as well as the unfairness of a world in which "one side travels to be a servant, and the other side travels to be treated like a king". The two strands of the narrative are linked by the cook Panna Lal. What connects these dis-



similar characters is a shared historical background and identical experiences of humiliation and loss. Kiran Desai creates an elegant and thoughtful study of families, the losses each member must confront alone, and the lies each tells to make memories of the past more palatable. The leading question at the very beginning of the novel- “Could fulfilment ever be felt as deeply as loss?” (2) sets the introspective and sombre tone of the novel. The Kalimpong house of Jemubhai is a symbol of retreat from the strain and stress of human existence - a self-created asylum of an old alienated bloke. His unusual expression of love and attention for Matt, the she-dog is essentially a camouflage to conceal his complete alienation from his original roots, environment, and people, especially his abandoned wife Nimi, whom he neither loved nor despised. Unable to cope with the conflict of identities, Jemubhai was consumed by self-loathing. Jemubhai’s relationship and treatment of his wife appear to be a combination of both class and gender issues. Jemubhai looks down upon his wife not only because she is a woman and therefore is a subject for subjugation, but also because she represents the non-transformed Indian self Jemubhai himself is and which he despises so much. Kiran Desai describes how immigrants like Biju cling to their religious faiths and cultural taboos so that they “might not fall through the filthy differences between nations”. It is interesting to note that India was the place that Biju, like many others, had dreamed of leaving for its backwardness and loss of opportunities. She exemplifies the bitter experiences of the immigrants. Biju spends his early days working as a waiter in New York. But he is frightened to see a lot of immigrants. He is overwhelmed by his fugitive role, nostalgic reminiscences, and racial discrimination; soon he is disillusioned by the West. The painful experience of immigrants is embittered by racial discrimination. In his encounters with the working conditions and immigration laws, he discovers authentic colonial experiences that how Third World natives are exploited and humiliated in the West. The cook, however, was not aware of the exact nature of Biju’s work abroad. He was contented with whatever his son had achieved, little realizing his real condition there. Biju, embroiled in this typical predicament had no standing and identity of his own. Like a fugitive on the run, he had to switch from one job to another. Biju very soon realized that the people from the Third World countries were engaged in a losing battle for existence. Alienation, estrangement, humiliation, and bone-chilling frost, all contributed to the sense of utter loneliness experienced by Biju abroad. In New York, he was not immune to nostalgia. Lying in his



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basement bed, Biju dreams of home, of the village, of his father and his grandmother. It is not only a romantic nostalgia but an unrest need and passionate desire with these sojourns to relocate the philosophy and vision of the homeland amid alien cultural surroundings. Biju finds it difficult to accommodate these adverse conditions in the company of rig rags coming from all corners of the world. The Inheritance of Loss justifies that Kiran Desai's approach to the matrix of immigrant experiences is rational and practical than being sentimental. Assimilation and acceptance of diversity are essential but the ideal for making spaces in other cultures is a complex phenomenon and its manifold paradigms can't be estimated within the sympathetic socio-cultural dynamics. Therefore, there is always a crisis of identity. People from every corner of the globe rush to America to pursue their dreams of a better and more comfortable life. Kiran Desai depicts how a section of Indians demean themselves for a chance to escape to America. They falsify documents and behave like beggars to get a tourist visa. They are prepared to risk death and suffer all sorts of humiliation to gain access to the new El Dorado, the land of plenty and wish fulfilment. But what they achieve from the painful migration is the loss of human dignity and freedom. It is this darkness at the bottom of prosperity and development in the age of globalization that Kiran Desai illuminates in her novel. Kiran Desai's vision of immigrants' experience has a comprehensive canvas including the socio-cultural perspective, socio-economic arguments, and the awareness of the matrix of home and homelessness. The distortion of oppression is rooted in the psyche of immigrants in which there are few possibilities of escape from politics of dominance and subversion. The romantic quest marked by nostalgia, glorification of native tradition, lingering shadow of lost relationship, and an urge for native food, language, and habits, are not the ultimate periphery of the immigrant experience reconstructed in the text of *The Inheritance of Loss*. We feel inclined to believe that the crisis of identity in the novel appears at different levels. Firstly in the case of Jemubhai, the process is painful and he never acquires either the right accent or the polish of a young sophistication. There is a domain of self-hate, where he is at odds with himself. He banishes his innocent wife to her home. Sal's arrival is also an unhappy accomplishment for him but he reconciles himself to her presence for though he had never properly admitted the fact to himself, he knew he had to make amends for his behaviour in the past and this was a chance to balance the scales at least somewhat. Thus he persuades himself that since he had been remiss as a father, he was finally doing his duty as a



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grandfather. Inevitably Sai's presence forces him to revisit his past. Her questions trigger memories, which all these years he has tried to keep at bay. Secondly, in the case of Sai, who crosses over from the confines of the convent to the world outside. Her parents had been killed in an accident. The orphaned Sai is sent from Dehradun to Kalimpong. The two worlds are completely different from each other as are the people who inhabit them. She sat quietly awaiting her fate. The season changed and along with it changed Sai's state of mind as she fell in love with her tutor Gyan. But their love affair suffered a jolt as Gyan in an argumentative mood picked up a row with Sai. The hatred was palpable. Despite Sai being a temptress, rage and irritation were on the rise. The resentment and disparity in their status incited Gyan to betray Sai. The cumulative effect of all this on Sai's psyche was terrible. Sai is not able to make sense of anything. All her concepts about herself are destroyed. She realized how all lives were essentially connected and affected one another. She appeared as a puppet in the hands of destiny. Thirdly, identity crisis also arises on account of maladjustment of the social matrix between the tradition of the country of origin and the country of adoption. The identity and self-image belong to concrete situations of history and to those preoccupations and manifestations that have relevance in a given concrete situation. Cultural expressions translate across genre and group boundaries, resulting in the global existence of qualities or conditions that resist such translations and implications for identity formation. The struggle of Biju develops rightly from this local to the global question of migration and conflict of survival and ambition in the global aspect of fulfilling dreams. *The Inheritance of Loss* has a wider canvas, bringing the whole world together, globalization and multicultural plethora have created insecurity, crisis of identity, and rootlessness. No one can escape from the psycho-modernity where capital supremacy has become an eye opener to control the moves and minds of people. Moving towards the question of the human sense of identity, it is soon realized that one lives in the world of others. It is about 'others'- to the society and the environment in which one lives- that one's own identity is formed. Moving from the inner to the Global self poses the question of conflicts. Each character is a living identity, constantly examining himself/herself within the given contexts. Each one represents a different "society" though most of the time they belong to the same one. This 'inner society' has different meanings for the Judge, Sai, Cook, his son Biju, and even for Gyan. Each one is living with an inner self against the outer image of societal conflicts. According to the rules of



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plurality, like a mirrored corridor, it multiplies. The conflict is generated in the novel when the characters don't use the same level of knowledge for others, that they use for themselves. A displaced judge has a different outlook for Sai. Inevitably similar situations lead to hatred instead of sympathy. A self within self refuses to live in isolation and the cook's son, Biju becomes as much a victim of this collective attitude as Sai. Hence within the framework of a civilization, the dilemma of being presents deeper conflict. Sai and Gyan belong to two entirely different cultures, and even after they are in love, their love suffers the conflict of cultures. The personal and collective consciousness of the culture clashes and from here the question arises as to what is a local identity which ultimately becomes a global identity. Each character in *The Inheritance of Loss* has set up a category of identity in the world. Each one of them portrays their singularity by presenting itself in the contrast of otherness. Both identity and otherness have been the process of development. Here with Kiran Desai, they get the meaning within the contexts of race and ethnicity.

Conclusion

To conclude, we finally derive the fact that throughout the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, the victory of Indian culture and values is celebrated. The novelist proved that wherever one goes, one's culture always follows and it is one's strong values that finally help to overcome the status of cultural shock. Analyzing the conflict in one's way creates an identity. In complex situations, where the level of personal and collective consciousness meet and the quality of the answer provides to the dilemma, the conflict becomes the executor of identities. The title itself is a journey to understand the loss after conflict. The loneliness does not come as a shock rather it is a revelation of the same fact that each character knows but is afraid to bring to the light. In the process of understanding peace, each one seems to be studying conflict. These paradoxical interrelationships are so relevant that ultimately individuals lose their identity in groups and vice versa. Kiran Desai's realistic portrayal of life demonstrates a deep concern for the human condition. Desai observes the crisis of identity in diasporic society and narrates it in terms of self and place. So, what Desai does is that she presents, through her intertwined narrative, the inner mindscape of every character which is a darker territory. In her novel, every space collides with each other and every space is competing



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with others. It illumines the reader regarding the problem of local which becomes global and places the reader in front of the unresolved question of identity, both individual and national.

A man wasn't equal to an animal, not one particle of him. Human life was stinking corrupt, and meanwhile, there were beautiful creatures who lived with delicacy on the earth without doing anyone harm. "We should be dying. (Desai)

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