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Kiran Desai's Portrayal of Twentieth Century Female Education in *The Inheritance of Loss :* A Postcolonial Examination

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There are many Indian women writers both novelists and poets, based in the USA and Britain. Some like Jhabvala and Anita Desai are late immigrants while others, like Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to the second generation of Indians abroad. Most expatriate writers have a weak grasp of actual conditions in contemporary India, and tend to recreate it through the lens of nostalgia. Their best works deal with the Indian immigrants, the section of society they know at first hand. Sunithi Nam Joshi, Chitra Benerji, Divakarvas and Bharathi Mukherjee are the oldest, and naturally, the most prolific. Writers like Jumpha Lahari, Manju Kapoor, Kiran Desai, and Arundhati Roy too have written novels of Magic Realism, Social Realism and Regional fiction, and benefited from the increasing attention that this fiction has received National and International awards. They have probed into human relationships, since the present problem is closely concerned with mind and heart and the crusade is against age-old established systems. In order to make the process of changes smooth and really meaningful, women writers have taken upon themselves this great task. Away from this line of writing the lives of women, the most successful of the Indian women writers is Jhumpa Lahiri who created the difference among all the Indian women writers. She is a dazzling storyteller with a distinctive voice. She is different from other Indian writers writing in English. Most of the first generation writers of Indian fiction are born and brought up in India. But Jhumpa Lahiri‟s connection with India is through her parents and grandparents.

Anitha Desai is the best known of the contemporary women writers. Of all the contemporary novelists, she is indisputably the most popular and powerful novelist. She has made commendable contribution to the Indian English fiction. She is a novelist of urban milieu and is a fine mixture of Indian European and American sensibilities. She is essentially a psychological novelist. She claims that her novels are not reflection of Indian society or character. She does not reflect on social issues in her works like Mulk Raj Anand.

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Kiran Desai, the daughter of the renowned fictionist Anita Desai, who explored in the Indian English novels concerns like socio-political, moral, racial, cross-cultural, psycho-analytical as well as essential man-human-relationships in the post-independence era, emerged on the Indian English landscape in late 1990s. In the series of Booker Prize winners after Ruth Prawar Zabwawla, Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy; Kiran Desai has fêted her name and smothered away the anonymity and despondency in the family surroundings which had anticipated her mother to be triumphant over the coveted honour.

Kiran Desai won the inheritance of her novelist mother Anita's loss by accomplishing the world's most prestigious literary award, the 50,000 pound prize money, the prospect of soaring global book sales and a passport to the most glittering place of them all– the galaxy of Indian literary star chroniclers of cultural confusion and hybrid hyphenated immigrant identity. Kiran Desai is a much-preferred sizzling author of the first decade of the twenty first century. It will be no exaggeration to project her in Indian English scenario to be a well accepted, avowed and broadly studied authoress. So, before moving directly to my venture, I'd like to enrol the works ended yet on Kiran Desai, which, no doubt, has created multiple possibilities in articulating my thoughts to find out which areas are yet to be unexplored. In the scholarly paper, Globalization's Discontents: Reading 'Modernity' from the shadows, Melissa Dennihy, discusses the issue of globalization and multiculturalism taken up by Kiran Desai in her novel, The Inheritance of Loss. Desai, writing her novel on the behalf of the 'shadow class' sheds light on the oppression meticulously heaped on the lower class people, while the upper middle class are enjoying the benefits of 'modernity' causing shame, self-loathing, and solitude for others

Published in 2006, novelist Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* presents several interrelated stories exploring Indian characters' relationships with the West. Often categorized as a diaspora novel, The Inheritance of Loss received immediate critical success, winning both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Man Booker Prize in 2006, the latter of which distinguished Desai as "the youngest female winner of the prize" at the time1 ("Kiran Desai Claims Booker Title"). Since the novel's publication reviews have praised Desai for her realistic yet "unflattering view of the First World" and for her portrayal of Indian anglophile identities (D'souza). Literary critic Krishna Singh calls The Inheritance of Loss "a brilliant study of Indian

culture," emphasizing Desai's portrayal of her Indian characters' "craze for the Western values, manners, language and glamorous life style" and the realistic way in which she shows her characters "inferior, bounded and defeated by their Indian heritage" (Singh 55). Singh's argument examines the novel in terms of Western and Eastern binaries that exist solely in conflict with one another. By emphasizing the differences between the West and the East, he views the relationship between the Western world and India as that of a colonizer and the colonized in which the colonized aspires to become just like the colonizer. However, in a 2008 interview, Desai claimed that she did not aim to present a specific image of the "First" or "Third" world. Rather, she argues that the novel's story comes as "the result of many generations having gone back and forth between east and west, to the point that I don't really think you can talk of the east and the west in blunt terms any more" (Desai, "Desai: If Only Bush Read Books!").

Desai's Indian-American novel takes place in postcolonial India, an India still tied to the Western world. The Inheritance of Loss focuses on two Indian characters in 1986: Biju, an illegal immigrant in America, and Sai, a formally educated teenage girl in India. The characters' respective location highlights the complexity of the relationship between the east and the west because neither character fits into the clear cut mold of their location. Although Biju's story takes place in America, he speaks little English and refuses to work in any restaurant that serves beef because it conflicts with his religious beliefs. Sai, on the other hand, lives in India but prefers English to Hindi and cares little about visiting religious temples outside of studying their architecture. Their locations play an important role in unpacking how Desai represents Indians who live in a postcolonial world. The novel's narrative alternates between the events surrounding Biju and Sai's life, between the events that take place in America and India, which allows the novel to tell two separate yet related stories. Sai's half of the novel focuses not only on her story but also on the stories of several Indian characters with whom she has long established relationships. Although Biju develops new relationships in America, most of these relationships stem from whichever job he has at the moment. He forms no long-term or deep connection and his half of the novel focuses solely on his story. His solitude highlights a sense of isolation associated with first generation immigrants who must learn to adapt to life without their friends, family, and native culture. Thus, on the surface level, Biju and Sai's stories connect only through

their separate relationships with Biju's father, "the cook," who works for Sai's grandfather, Jemubhai, "the judge." In an interview with BBC's World Book Club, Desai emphasizes how she constructed no driving "plot" to unite the two stories ("Kiran Desai - The Inheritance of Loss"). Instead, she claims that Biju and Sai's narratives are two separate "stories" joined together by common themes, themes of generational differences, literacy and education, identity and place, and, most importantly, themes of Western-Eastern conflicts.

At the beginning of the novel, Sai introduces the title theme when she ponders, "Could fulfillment ever be felt as deeply as loss?" (Desai, The Inheritance of Loss 3). This central character's question sets the stage for "the inheritance of loss," that is, the question concerning generational growth: are the freedoms that the protagonists inherit worth the cultural loss they pay? The more each character inherits freedoms and ties to the West, the more he or she loses a connection with their Indian heritage, the culture of their parents and grandparents. This question is particularly complicated in relation to twentieth century India because Biju and Sai, who were born in the 1960s and 1970s respectively, only experience India as an independent nation. Their parents and grandparents, however, were born when India was still a British colony, and Jemubhai's story includes flashbacks that begin in 1919 and span past Indian independence in 1947. Thus, even though the novel takes place nearly forty years after independence, "the inheritance of loss" must be approached in relation to the effects of colonization.

The novel, therefore, presents two postcolonial stories that examine the aftermaths of colonization in modern India. While Biju's story portrays an Indian immigrant's struggle for a better life in the Western world, Sai's story demonstrates how, even after independence, England's influence remains present in India. The binary-like differences between Biju and Sai paradoxically unite their narratives together. Their differences are most apparent in their relationship to gender and education: while Biju comes from a socially lower class and illiterate family, Sai comes from a higher class family whose stories revolve around education, particularly the tensions between formal and informal education. Both Biju and Sai's stories are, therefore, linked because both are driven by the stories of their parents and grandparents, which emphasize the importance of generational transitions. Additionally, Desai links their postcolonial stories by each character's response to the West and its influence on India, and to Indian

nationalism. While Biju finds his love for his Indian culture in New York City, Sai becomes more aware of her western traits and upbringing as she witnesses Nepali nationalist rebellions in Kalimpong, India. However, both Biju and Sai simultaneously respond to the same issues while in different parts of the world, which highlights that the effects of British colonization play a role in Indian life regardless of Western or Eastern locations or identities. Desai creates these two very different stories, which focus on almost binary characters, to exhibit how the West presented opportunities to Indians, but also to emphasize how those opportunities come at a cost.

Biju immigrates to the famous and populated New York City, and while it is a city known for attracting immigrants, Biju quickly learns that the "innocence" of the American dream "never prevails" there (Desai, The Inheritance of Loss 89). The idea of the American dream, wherein anyone can raise his or her status and become successful, plays an important role in Singh's interpretation of the novel, which emphasizes the "craze for the Western values, manners, language and glamorous life style" (Singh 55). Although Biju migrates to America rather than England, India's colonizer, his immigration still emphasizes the idea that only the West holds the key to freedom and new opportunities. He has opportunities in the West that would be denied to him in India, which would not be denied to him in the West where the idea of the American dream is so strongly emphasized. This dream, however, falls short for Biju when he finds difficulty maintaining a job without legal residency. Historically, his difficulty aligns with the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which President Ronald Reagan signed in 1986. While the law provided "a legalization program — and a possible path to citizenship — for those who are in the country illegally," the process was ultimately ineffective and failed to legalize the majority of the illegal immigrants in the country (Tumulty). Desai demonstrates this difficulty through Biju, who cannot even apply for a green card as "Indians were not allowed to" because "the quota was full" (Desai, The Inheritance of Loss 90). He lacks any legal opportunity to raise his social status because of his race. Furthermore, the law also took "measures to discourage employers from hiring workers who lack proof of legal residency" (Tumulty). In the novel, these measures either prevent Biju from obtaining jobs or force him to leave jobs when immigration services become involved. His hopes at improving his lower-class status by emigrating to the West, fulfilling the American dream, turn out to be impossible because of the very laws put into

place to help immigrants in his position. In the midst of this realization, Biju strengthens his ties to his religious beliefs, choosing to leave a steak restaurant because, as he decides, "one should not give up one's religion, the principles of one's parents and their parents before them" (Desai, The Inheritance of Loss 151). He values the Indian culture that stems throughout generations and ultimately places that above the idea that the West provides better opportunities for him. His decision comes only half way through the novel, but it already answers the question of "the inheritance of loss" for Biju: the freedoms he inherits as a result of Western influence on India are not worth the cultural loss he must pay. Yet his answer comes as a result of his immigration, which stresses Desai's point that the east and west are not "blunt terms" that stand in opposition because his experiences in the west shape his relationship to the east (Desai, "Desai: If Only Bush Read Books!"). Although he has the ability to leave India, which his father never could, Biju ultimately chooses to return to India.

Sai's story, on the other hand, takes place in Kalimpong, a hill station in West Bengal, a northwestern Indian province. Kalimpong has been known for providing some of "the best schools for the eastern Himalayan region," many of which were formed during the British colonial period (Lama 33). However, the appeal of these schools began to fade in 1986 "due to the political disturbances" that emerged with the Nepali rebellions (33). These rebellions called for Gorkhaland, a separate state for the Gorkha, or Nepali, people of Western Bengal based on ethno-linguistic rights and the desire to identify as Indian Gorkhas. Both the educational emphasis of Kalimpong and the call for Gorkhaland emerge in Sai's story through her relationship with Gyan, her boyfriend and tutor. Sai pays little attention to her Western habits, such as celebrating Christmas, until Gyan criticizes her for "copying" the "West" (Desai, The Inheritance of Loss 180, 179). Gyan's comments align with Singh's idea that emphasizes Indians "craze" for Western lifestyles because Sai prefers Western holidays to Eastern ones. However, Desai refuses to align Sai, even with all of her Western habits, with Singh's emphasis, instead stressing that Sai does not know why she celebrates Christmas instead of Hindu holidays, she just does. Unlike Gyan, a Nepali rebel who is the first in his family to directly associate with the West, Sai's relationship with the West stems back generations because her grandparents had a strong relationship with Britain in colonial India. Although Anglicized, Sai does not actively

distinguish between the west and the east in blunt terms because her generational relationship with the west blurs the lines between the two supposedly binary cultures, which in turn complicate her question of "the inheritance of loss." This question combined with Sai's relationship to the West sets up a complex postcolonial representation of the effects of British colonization in twentieth century India.

However, given the novel's diaspora categorization and its attention to twentieth century illegal immigration through Biju's locationally remote role, critics understandably focused on postcolonial arguments regarding immigrant identity. Oana Sabo, in "Disjunctions and Diaspora in Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss," argues that the novel places importance not only on an immigrant's hopes of reinventing his or her identity, but also on "the costs of dislocation" (Sabo 388). According to Sabo, the novel functions as a way to remind the readers about the struggles and hardships that come with emigrating from one culture to another, including economic struggles, Indophobic attitudes, and myths about the American dream. While not untrue, critics like Sabo base their arguments on a definition of diaspora that Steven Vertovec argues refers "almost exclusively to the experiences of Jews," and thus "connotations of a 'diaspora' situation were usually rather negative as they were associated with forced displacement, victimisation, alienation" (Vertovec 278). Although Biju, like many other South Asians, emigrates to the West out of a felt necessity, he chooses to leave his homeland, which was not the case with the original diaspora. Applying the original idea of the diaspora to general groups of immigrants, refugees, and ethnic and racial minorities and conflates broad categories and "threatens the term's descriptive usefulness" (277). The reader should instead find a different definition or method of approaching the South Asian diaspora.

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