

## The Theme of Alienation and Identity Crises in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Kiran Desai

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### Abstract

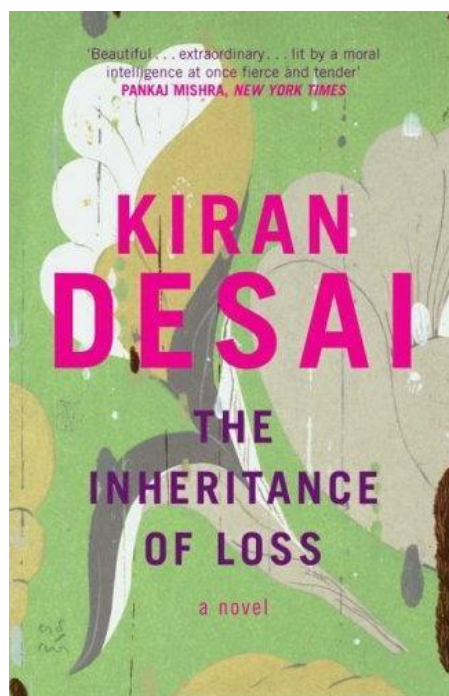
Kiran Desai, the winner of the prestigious Man Booker prize, 2006, for her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. *The Inheritance of Loss* can be viewed as a Diasporic novel. The various themes which are intertwined in the novel are identity crises, alienation, multi-culturalism, isolation and loss of identity. The story is centred on two main characters, Biju and Sai. Biju is an illegal immigrant living in

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the United States. He is the son of a cook working for Sai's grandfather. Sai is a young girl living in mountainous Kalimpong with her maternal grandfather Jemubhai Patel, the cook and a female dog Mutt. Desai switches the narration between both points of view in the novel set in 1986 in the backdrop of the Gorkhaland Movement. The present paper analyzes the identity becomes the core issues in any exploration of diaspora, especially diasporic identity that is composed of various factors and sub-factors.

**Keyword:** Diaspora, Alienation, Identity crises, multi-culturalism, immigrant, and loss of culture.



## Introduction

Kiran Desai's second novel is about the rigid class systems that exist in India and abroad among Indians, and the struggles that the people face within these classes after colonialism. The novel presents us with a three-way narrative split, relating the stories of the sixteen-year-old Sai, her bitter grandfather and Biju, their cook's son, who tries to make his way as an illegal migrant worker in New York.

## Different but Same!

This narrative provides us with an interesting vantage point from which to view two very different sides of the same issue, as Biju's negotiation of his identity as an illegal immigrant in a foreign city is contrasted with the more complex situation of Sai and her grandfather who find themselves as

strangers in their homeland due to their education, language and wealth. On two opposite ends of the globe, in two vastly discrepant modernities, these characters are at odds with their surroundings and effectually in similar positions of marginality and strangeness.

### **Sufferings of Illegal Immigrant**

In New York, Biju finds himself cast in a strange world, a world where sympathy, fellow feeling and peaceful co-existence does not seem to exist. He spends his time changing jobs, enduring deplorable conditions and trying to dodge the immigration authorities of the United States. As he is an illegal immigrant, he is forced to work for very low wages and experience extreme servitude to his employers. At one point of time, fed up with the meanness of his various employers, he makes a pathetic appeal to his current employer, Harish - Harry to sponsor him for a Green Card,

Without us living like pigs, said Biju, what business do  
You have? This is how you make your money, paying us  
Nothing because of you know we can't do anything,  
Making us work day and night because we are illegal.  
Why don't you sponsor us for our green cards? (188).

### **A Profound Chasm**

Even though Biju is desperate for a green card, at the core of his heart, he is crying for India and its soothing familiarity. America has created a profound chasm in him. When Biju makes telephone calls to his father in India, his imagination vividly recreates the atmosphere of Kalimpong where his father resides. He can, “feel the pulse of the forest, smell the humid air , the green-black lushness; he could imagine all its different textures, the plumage of banana, the stark spear of the cactus, the delicate gestures of ferns...” (230).

### **Difficulties Faced by Immigrant**

Sai is main female character in this novel. She is studied in a convent school where English was the medium of teaching and consequently she learnt English and English Culture. After coming to live with her father, she meets Gyan, the Nepali tutor. Their different attitudes towards the western culture threaten their relationship. Sai eats with a fork and Gyan uses his hands as he is not

aware of the western ways of eating. Later when he has a dinner with the judge, his discomfiture with the fork and knife is shown again. But, interestingly, when he dines at the judge's house later on, he feels embarrassed for the way he uses the fork and the knife. He suffers from an inferiority complex but later on he refuses to adopt the western culture and retreats to his own culture.

### **A Sense of Recognition**

Gyan joins 'Gorkha National Liberation Front', he admits to "the compelling pull of history and found his pulse leaping to something that felt entirely authentic" (160), and recovers a sense of recognition by mocking at the judge's mimicry of the western lifestyle but such attempts are nothing than illusions as Ashcroft maintains "within the syncretic reality of a post-colonial society it is difficult to return to an idealized pure pre-colonial cultural condition" (Ashcroft 108). The fact that today the whole world is toward a 'Global Village' makes cross-cultural exchanges and influences inevitable. Grown up in a convent school, is influenced by western culture and impressed by her grandfather's use of better English than other people but the idea that the Indian culture is inferior is intolerable to her.

### **Conclusion**

Kiran Desai successfully describes the Alienation and the encounter of east and the west with the help of two characters. Both, the Judge and Biju have been immigrated to west in the hope of their better life. The Judge after a career in the Indian Civil Services that followed his education in Cambridge in the 1930s settles in Kalimpong. His own feeling of hatred for his skin colour, family, community and traditions makes him an insignificant character. Another is Biju, the cook's son, struggles as an illegal immigrant in America, and the only character in the book who is unwanted in the country he lives in. In the whole journey for success, this exploited, poor, homeless character struggles for his identity which makes him able to save himself from being an inconsequential character. Thus, the feeling of being marginalized compels them to come back to India. Kiran Desai weaves a story full of juxtaposition that is both heart breaking and full of hope.

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### **Works Cited**

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