

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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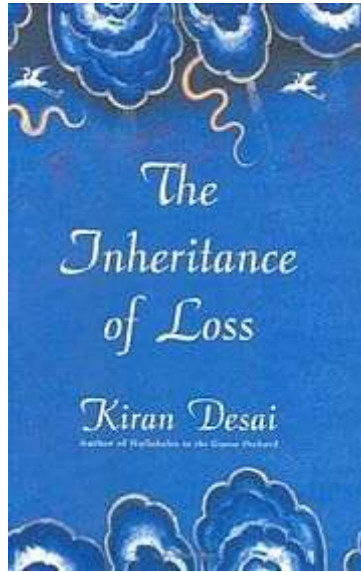
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## Father - Son Bonding in Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss*

Shivani Vashist, Ph.D.



### History of Patriarchal Bonding – Stories in Indian Literature

The history of strong patriarchal bonding dates back to the age of Ramayana and Shraavan. King Rama having deep respect and love for his father King Dasaratha, agrees for exile of fourteen years. He is pictured as the ideal man and the perfect human. For the sake of his father's honour, Rama abandons his claim to Kosala's throne to serve an exile of fourteen years in the forest. His wife and brother Lakhman, unable to live without Rama, decide to

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join him, and all three spend the fourteen years in exile together. The *Ramayana* describes the relationship between the brothers as intensely loving and devotional, although Rama and Lakshmana share a special, inseparable bond, while Bharata is especially close to Shatrughna. The four brothers enjoy an indiscriminating love from Dasaratha and his three queens, but Dasaratha's main affections are affixed upon Rama. As Ram leaves for exile, the people of Ayodhya are deeply saddened and angered at Dasaratha and Kaikeyi. Dasaratha's heart is broken and he collapses and dies by the next day, unable to bear the agony of separation from Rama.

We all are aware of the story of the obedient Shraavan Kumar who belonged to the time when King Dashratha ruled Ayodhya. Though born of poor and blind parents, he was brought up by his parents remarkably well. Through generations he is remembered for being honest, bearing a good character and having respect for his parents. Being dutiful and the only son of his blind and helpless parents, he worked hard to make his parents life as comfortable and happy. He strived hard to make his parent wishes come true. When they expressed their desire to visit places of pilgrimage which would make them fully satisfied and give them abundant peace of mind, Shraavan Kumar decided to place his parents in two baskets and carry them on his shoulders. In this manner he started on the pilgrimage to make his parents happy and contented. Thus both the mention of Shraavan Kumar and King Rama emphasize the existence of strong bond between father and son from time immemorial. The same has been distinctly mentioned by D. Charles Williams, an esteemed member of Georgia Psychological Association. He states that the son's 'idolize' their fathers and as they become mature, the sons go through the age of "acceptance" wherein they admire their father's qualities. At this age they become their friends and share common interests and express opinions with each other ([www. Gapsychology.org](http://www.Gapsychology.org)).

### **Father-Son Relationship Described Elsewhere**

Not only is our literature replete with instances about firm father-son relationship, but also this theme has surely fascinated our literary writers from a long time. The memoir *Night* by Elie Weisel also describes the emotional attachment of Eliezer with his father, Chlomo. Eliezer is disgusted with the horrific selfishness he sees around him, especially when it involves the rupture of familial bonds. On three occasions, he mentions sons horribly mistreating fathers: in his brief discussion of the *pipel* who abused his father; his terrible

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conclusion about the motives of Rabbi Eliahou's son; and his narration of the fight for food that he witnesses on the train to Buchenwald, in which a son beats his father to death. All of these moments of cruelty are provoked by the conditions the prisoners are forced to endure. In order to save themselves, these sons sacrifice their fathers.

Despite the love and care he has shown his father, Eliezer feels that he has somehow sacrificed his father for his own safety. Eliezer's descriptions of his behavior toward his father seem to invalidate his guilty feelings. He depends on his father for support, and his love for his father allows him to endure. During the long run to Gleiwitz, he says, "My father's presence was the only thing that stopped me [from allowing myself to die]. . . . I had no right to let myself die. What would he do without me? I was his only support." (Wiesel, 82). Their relationship demonstrates that Eliezer's love and solidarity are stronger forces of survival than his instinct for self-preservation.

### **Hamlet and Father and Son Relationship**

I cannot fail to make mention of Hamlet—Shakespearean Hero and son of a murdered Danish king to bring forth my emphasis on intense bonding of father and son. Hamlet undergoes mental anguish over his father's death. He experiences a clash between his moral sense and his desire for revenge against his father's murderer. Such is his love for his murdered father that he poses as a mad man to find the truth.

### ***The Inheritance of Loss***

*The Inheritance of Loss*, a novel written by Kiran Desai is indeed replete with moments displaying exposure to human relationships. Though there are many themes in this novel; but the most interesting theme is the father-son relationship. This theme can be seen throughout the novel. Biju has a very strong relationship with his father. The story moves back and forth, story of the judge, cook and Sai. In a crumbling, isolated house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga lives an embittered old judge who wants to retire in peace when his orphaned granddaughter Sai arrives on his doorstep. The judge's chatty cook watches over Sai, but his thoughts are mostly with his son, Biju, who keeps on drifting from one New York restaurant job to another.

### **Strength of Human Bonding Portrayed**

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The novel portrays the strength of human bonding by presenting the father-son relationship of cook, the father, and Biju, the son. In the initial few pages of the novel we get to know that Biju's mother is not alive and was long dead: "She had died seventeen years ago, when Biju was five, slipping from a tree while gathering leaves to feed the goat." (14). Biju was his only son and he loved him dearly. The cook as a concerned father is always advising his son, Biju at every step. "He wrote back carefully so his son would not think badly of his less educated father: "Just make sure you are saving money. Don't lend to anyone and be careful who you talk to. There were many people out there who will say one thing and do another... Remember also to take rest. Make sure you eat enough. ..." (18).

The cook has a fetish for westernized modern culture. Since the cook himself never got an opportunity to move out of the small place, Gorkhaland, he tries hard and plans to move his son away from the village environment and be established in an advanced nation. He hopes that his son, Biju in abroad shall lead a progressive life that shall be made easy with high tech gadgets. "This the cook had done for Biju, but also for himself, since the cook's desire was for modernity: toaster ovens, electric shavers, watches, cameras, cartoon colors" (55). Cook with a desire for modernisation had spent his whole life serving the judge in a place severed from the pace of modernisation. Cook was hired by the judge when he was mere fourteen years old at a salary of twelve rupees a month.

As a concerned father, he desperately waits for his son's letter. His life in-fact was woven around the arrival and dispatch of Biju's letters. The father anxiously waits for Biju's letters and reads them with curious mind: "... the cook settled down at the end of the bench, donning his spectacles to read the letter from Biju that had just arrived: "I have a new job in a bakery and the boss leaves us in complete charge..." (83).

Biju leads an unstable life, always changing his work place. His letters keep the cook updated on the new job he undertakes. "But although Biju's letters traced a string of jobs, they said more or less the same thing each time except for the name of the establishment he was working for" (17).

Though the father is aware of Biju's financial condition and his frequent shifting of jobs, he still boasts about his son to all the villagers and his acquaintances in Kalimpong: "My son works in New York," the cook boasted to everyone he met. "He is manager of a restaurant business" (82).

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## **Biju's Experience and Jobs in USA**

Biju's first experience as a waiter job was in New York. The cook takes pride in his son serving food not to Indians but only to Americans. However Biju had a terrible time in the restaurant standing whole day at the counter. He starting working quite early and often felt intimidated by his colleagues who were elder to him. "They were men; he was a baby. He was nineteen, he looked and felt several years younger" (16). As a true father, the cook took pride in the work of his son and held him in high esteem. "... and was sure that his son was cooking English food, he had a higher position than if he were cooking Indian" (17).

Cook as a possessive father keeps all his letters safely in the correct envelopes so that Biju may "have a record of his journey and feel a sense of pride and achievement" (20).

## **Hard Life and Change in Moods**

Biju had a feeling of reverence for his father, but at the same time he felt angry at him for sending him all alone to an alien place. " Biju couldn't help but feel 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"( 82).

## **Worry about the Father**

Both Father and Biju continue to live in their respective places till Biju gets worried about the safety of his father as he keeps on hearing the news of strikes and bandhs in demand for gorkhaland. The Gorkha National Liberation Front is fighting for independence, which results in neighbour turning against neighbour. Though initially he blames "usual disruptions- bad weather, incompetence- for the break in his father's correspondence" ( 228). However later he gets apprehensive about his safety and well- being and after taking time out of his job makes a call to his father.

The scene of the cook receiving his son's call has been elaborately depicted by Kiran Desai. The whole episode of phone call emphatically delineates the eminent filial relationship between father and son:

"WHAT IS HAPPENING? ARE THERE RIOTS? STRIKES?"

"NO TROUBLE NOW".( Better not worry him now). "NOT NOW!!""(231)

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The sudden phone call from his son and talk with him left the cook in turmoil and in emptiness. "... the phone went dead and they were stranded in the distance that lay between them" ( 232).

### **Emptiness of Life Abroad**

The conversation with his father puts Biju in introspection and he realizes the emptiness of his life. He feels the pang of parental love and its shelter. "If he continued his life in New York, he might never see his *pitaji* again. It happened all the time, ten years passed, fifteen, the telegram arrived, or the phone call, the parent was gone and the child was too late. Or they returned and found they'd missed the entire last quarter of a lifetime, their parents like photographs negatives. And there were worse tragedies. After the initial excitement was over, it often became obvious that the love was gone; for the affection was only a habit after all, and people, they forgot, or they became accustomed to its absence. They returned and found just the facade; it had been eaten from inside, like Cho Oyu being gouged by termites from within." (233)

### **Return to Be with the Father – Horrible Experiences in India**

Biju is determined to come back to India and to stay with his father in Kalimpong. The situation in Kalimpong is quite tense, with the whole area under curfew and under supervision of the police after incidents of procession on the road. However despite the tense situation in the area, Biju is adamant to reach the place. He waits for four long days to take on his journey to Kalimpong by GNLFF. Finally Biju reaches his destination but en route he is robbed of all his possessions and is left without clothes.

The novel ends with the meeting of the father cook with his son and the same has been very emotionally portrayed by Desai. Their meeting coincides with the appearance of Kanchenjunga, rising above the clouds, clear and distinct.

"Kanchenjunga appeared above the parting clouds, as it did only very early in the morning during this season. "Biju?" whispered the cook-.....Sai looked out and saw **two figures leaping at each other...**" (324, my emphasis).

### **To Conclude**

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Thus the longing of the cook is over and he is able to meet his son who is left with nothing” - without his baggage, without his savings, worst of all, without his pride. Back from America with far less than he’d ever had” (317). One may like to think that Biju’s firm bonding with his father compels him to come back to India and stay with him.

The novel from beginning to end keeps the readers engaged with the instances displaying vivid sticking together of father and son. Biju’s homecoming provides satisfaction to the cook and the cook realizes the fulfillment of his role as a father.

The novel certainly ends in a series of events that should be labelled real: loss of everything material and regaining the precious intimate Father-Son relationship.

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