

Dawn of the New Indian Novel in English

An analysis of novels post *Midnight's Children* with focus on
The Inheritance of Loss



Objectives

- To identify the significance of *The Inheritance of Loss* to the canon of World Literature.
- To trace the change in pre-occupations of the Indian Novel in English since *Midnight's Children* and to identify *The Inheritance of Loss* as part of this changing literary trend.



Why is ‘The Inheritance of Loss’ important to World Literature?



The Inheritance of Loss

- *The Inheritance of Loss* is the second novel by Indian author Kiran Desai. It was first published in 2006.
- It is the recipient of a number of awards, including the Man Booker Prize for that year, the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award in 2007, and the 2006 Vodafone Crossword Book Award.
- The novel articulates the exile experience and the consequences of globalization from a post-colonial perspective.



The Inheritance of Loss

- The story is set in the village of Kalimpong, in the 1980s.
- The novel explores the lives of characters who are trapped in India's class system—both the lower class and the upper class.
- The characters' hopes and dreams are conveyed in the novel, along with their ultimate dream of immigrating to America and finally escaping the rigid caste system of their homeland.



Sai (16 years)

- Comes to live with Judge Jemubhai Patel when she is orphaned at nine – parents died in Moscow
- Becomes close to Gyan, a Nepali mathematics tutor who is hired to teach her

Judge Jemubhai Patel

- An Anglophile
- Cambridge-educated judge, is left to care for the child he has never fully known
- Has a tortured marriage, is alienated from his world – is only close to his dog, Mutt
- Is never friendly with the Cook

The Cook

- Lives in a hut near the judge's house – kept on meager wages
- Is tremendously proud of his son, Biju, whom he imagines to be wildly successful in America

Biju

- Struggles from job to job as an illegal immigrant in New York City
- Suffers a series of humiliations and trials as he tries to survive in New York
- Returns to Kalimpong when he hears of the political disturbances

Gyan

- Gyan begins the novel as naïve as Sai, but eventually he matures due to the GNLF movement that arises in Kalimpong
- After this political awakening, Gyan becomes frustrated at Sai's innocence and cultural elitism

Lola and Noni

- Lola and Noni are upper-class Bengali women
- They have assimilated many parts of British and Western cultures, such as celebrating Christmas, reading Jane Austen, and listening to the BBC.

"We had better run to the market, Noni. It will empty out. And our library books! We must change them."

"I won't last the month," said Lola. "Almost through," she thumped A Bend in the River, "uphill task—"

"Superb writer," said Noni. "First-class. One of the best books I've ever read."

"Oh, I don't know," Lola said, "I think he's strange. Stuck in the past. . . . He has not progressed. Colonial neurosis, he's never freed himself from it. Quite a different thing now. In fact," she said, "chicken tikka masala has replaced fish and chips as the number one take-out dinner in Britain. It was just reported in the Indian Express"

~ Lola and Noni

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.

~ Homi Bhabha, ‘Freedom's Basis in the Indeterminate’, 1992

Postcolonialism in The Inheritance of Loss

- The best way to approach *The Inheritance of Loss* is to consider it under the rubric of postcolonial diasporic fiction.
- The novel's diasporic location also reveals its cosmopolitan outlook and sensibility.
- The Inheritance of Loss performs a humanizing function superbly well as regards to many of its Indian and non-Indian characters.



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All day, the colors had been those of dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains possessed of ocean shadows and depths. Briefly visible above the vapor, Kanchenjunga was a far peak whittled out of ice, gathering the last of the light, a plume of snow blown high by the storms at its summit.

Sai, sitting on the veranda, was reading an article about giant squid in an old National Geographic. Every now and then she looked up at Kanchenjunga, observed its wizard phosphorescence with a shiver. The judge sat at the far corner with his chessboard, playing against himself. Stuffed under his chair where she felt safe was Mutt the dog, snoring gently in her sleep. A single bald lightbulb dangled on a wire above. It was cold, but inside the house, it was still colder, the dark, the freeze, contained by stone walls several feet deep.

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Globalization in The Inheritance of Loss

- Critiques globalization by articulating a less explored theme of the exile experience in the West.
- Provides a commentary on cross-cultural harmony.
- Argues that multiculturalism (confined to the Western world) does not begin to address the causes of extremism and violence in the modern world.



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You lived intensely with others, only to have them disappear overnight, since the shadow class was condemned to movement. The men left for other jobs, towns, got deported, returned home, changed names. Sometimes someone came popping around a corner again, or on the subway then they vanished again. Addresses, phone numbers did not hold. The emptiness Biju felt returned to him over and over, until eventually he made sure not to let friendships sink deep anymore.

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*“Could fulfillment ever be felt as deeply as loss?”
— Kiran Desai, The Inheritance of Loss*



What are the pre-occupations of the Indian Novel in English since Midnight's Children?



Burden of the Nation

- Writers 'burdened' with a higher degree of self-awareness.
- The guardianship of tradition that seems to have suddenly befallen the Indian writer.
- Realignment of power in the Indian polity - and a subsequent weakening of the center.



Burden of the Nation – Some Examples

- The stoic diagnosis of "history is against our class" in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993).
- The mocking of Oxford-educated Indians (including herself) as 'irrelevant Indians' in Sagarika Ghose's *Gin Drinkers* (2000).
- They (the writers) must yield to the new (and newly relevant) Indians who are now the 'upwardly mobile Dalit intellectuals and the vulgar entrepreneurs' (Sunder Rajan : 2001).



‘Loss of Power of the Ruling Class’ – An Overstatement?

- An awareness of change in status does not necessarily imply complete ‘loss of power’.
- Can a redundancy in the task of nation-building be observed? How does this affect the ‘ruling class’?
- "From its position as a 'proxy' for the nation, this class has now graduated to thinking of itself as a 'portrait' of the nation" (Deshpande: 2003)



A New 'Patriotism'

- An 'exhaustion' with nationalist sentiments and settling into the 'bad habits of nationhood' (Sunder Rajan : 2001)
- *Opposing* the nation, or opposing *this* nation is the new form of patriotism – as said by Arundhati Roy: "I secede. I hereby declare myself an independent, mobile republic" (Roy : 2001)
- Critique of nationalism – always expressed in the voice of an individual.



A 'Workmanlike' Novel?

- One critic says it is "the trial of exile", while another adds: "the world as viewed through the eyes of children" and anti-Americanism (Moseley : 2008)
- Eileen Battersby (commentator at the *Irish Times*) characterizes Desai's work as "solid," "workman like," "earnest, traditional," and she judged that "this year's Booker is one of the more low-key ones".
- 'An exactitude and freshness that resist melodrama' (Moseley : 2008)



A 'Workmanlike' Novel? (continued)

- Removed from the 'political centre' of Indian writing.
- Elicited more response from Nepali readers.
- The novel's criticism of the Gorkhaland insurgency is fraught with difficulties.



The novel's criticism of the Gorkhaland insurgency is fraught with difficulties. Historically, the Subas Ghising-led insurgency was not really about throwing out non-Nepali residents of the hills in spite of its adoption of violent tactics the novel justly criticizes. Instead, its agenda included self-empowerment of a marginalized community by demanding access to state institutions and resources. In addition, the insurgency is broadly understood to have challenged not so much the legitimacy of the Indian nation per se, as the longtime hold of the ethnic Bengali elite in the politics, industry, and bureaucracy of the state of West Bengal in general, and in Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills, in particular.

~ B. P Giri, Dartmouth College, 2007



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