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**Of Ambivalence, Anxiety and Acceptance**

A Postcolonial Reading of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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# Abstract

**Title:** *Of Ambivalence, Anxiety and Acceptance – A Postcolonial Reading of Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss*

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**Abstract:** One of the most frequently used concepts within postcolonial theory is also one of the most disputed ones: hybridity. *Hybridity* has been said to be apolitical and unable to account for global inequalities. This essay contributes to the on-going discussion by examining the identity formation of four characters in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), while applying the concept and relating it to hegemony and power asymmetries. The essay shows that in *The Inheritance of Loss*, hybridity can be both a source of violent self-loathing and, contradictorily enough, strength and self-acceptance. The influence of hegemony is crucial; internalised racism and social inequalities effectively turn hybridity into something the characters lament. However, it also becomes clear that for hybridity to be a place of liberation, it is precisely hegemony that needs be identified and, eventually, undermined. The possibility to do so is restricted by factors related to social, economical and historical conditions, which makes hybridity into a source of power only for a privileged few. Hence, the essay also underscores the importance of relating hybridity to hegemony.

**Keywords:** Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, postcolonial studies, globalisation, identity formation, hybridity, hegemony, South Asian diasporic fiction

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# 1. Introduction

Some people were travelling really in the name of having more space, more freedom - [that] way of travelling where you're having champagne and crab in some board room. And then there were other people who were travelling in a very different way and that was, in a way, the larger story - that travel [driven by the need for work or money] symbolised a sort of trap. (Desai qtd, in Gee 34)

Questions of identity have been a recurring literary theme through all times. In Kiran Desai's award-winning *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), self-perception and identity formation are central themes. The characters cross borders of both space and time as the story stretches across three continents and three generations, drawing parallels between the colonial past and the neo-colonial present. In the opening quotation, Kiran Desai expresses her view of the very different roles traveling has for different people, a theme which is elaborated in *The Inheritance of Loss*. The newness of the novel has even been said to reside in this theme and the literary representation of a new type of migrant (Sabo 375). The hardship related to journeying is well caught in the phrase "travel and/as travail" (Masterson); the travelling and border crossing affect the characters very differently; in each case, it is possible to argue that it has stark effects on their identity formation. Journeying might be liberating, lead to new experiences and be a chance to recreate oneself. However, it may also lead to entrapment, to the loss of oneself.

I will argue that in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, living in-between seemingly different cultures affects the characters' self-perception; their response to their own hybridity prompts different reactions ranging from calm self-acceptance to violent self-loathing. Methodologically, a postcolonial framework will inform the analysis of the close reading. To postcolonial theory, identity formation is a central concern, which makes it highly apt in relation to the focus of the essay. Naturally, the essay will foremost be concerned with *The Inheritance of Loss*, but the analysis is also informed by a range of critical material, including Frantz Fanon's and Oana Sabo's influential writing, in order to reach a more balanced interpretation of the novel and its characters. The discussion will centre on their sense of selves and what influence their different social conditions have. In other words, how do the main characters perceive themselves in relation to their hybridity? Why do the characters react so differently to their own hybridity? What is the relation between hybridity and Western hegemony? While the first question does not necessarily take the impact of structural forces into account, the two following questions aim at doing just this.

To define *hybridity* in more detail we will now turn to Homi K. Bhabha, an enthusiastic advocate of the concept. For Bhabha, borders, and what lies beyond them, are important places for identity formation:

The beyond is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past [...] we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. (Bhabha 2)

Borders are seen as places full of contradictions and ambivalence, which blur and ultimately deny binaries. In the crossing, *hybridisation* takes place and established thoughts and values can be challenged, favouring something *new* that disturbs these binary notions: the hybrid. A related concept is the *third space*, which is this in-between state, beyond the binaries. Furthermore, Bhabha writes that “[t]hese ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood [...] that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites for collaboration, and contestation” (2). For Bhabha, these places’ capacity of undermining the conventional can be consciously used by the one crossing the border.

Even though hybridity is one of the most widely employed terms within postcolonialism, it is also one of the most disputed. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin write that hybridity has been accused of being depoliticised since it sometimes fails to consider “the material status of the operation of power” (206). In *The Key Concepts* they point out several causes of this debate, the first being that hybridity, frequently, has been used synonymously with cross-cultural ‘exchange’, which both neglects and negates inequalities of power. Furthermore, the mutuality of hybridization has been argued to lessen the oppositionality between those involved. However, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin state that mutuality *per se* does not negate “the hierarchical nature of the imperial process or [involve] the idea of an *equal exchange*” (97). This essay holds that to understand the self-perceptions of the characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, hybridity is a highly pertinent theoretical concept, as long as the impact of power structures is also highlighted.

As we shall see in the analysis, *othering* is another important concept. Definitions of identity are always made in relation to something else, someone else. Here the colonised is denied the possibility of self-identification and made into an embodiment of everything that the coloniser is not: uncivilized, irrational and inferior. As this view of oneself is internalised, *shame* is often the result, with dire consequences for identity formation. One strategy to escape the shame and the belief in one’s own inferiority is to strive to adopt and *mimic* the values and manners of the coloniser (McLeod 23). Yet, the mimic can never succeed, the pure identity of the coloniser must be inaccessible to outsiders, the mimic will never be *authentic*.

In Bhabha's words the mimic will be "almost the same but not quite", "almost the same but not white" (127-128). This can be quite threatening, since mimicry is readily related to mockery.

Hence, it is not only the Other that reacts negatively to otherness and mimicry, but also the dominant group. The basis for the process in which the Other is constructed is both arbitrary and contradictory, in the sense that Otherness is constructed in such a way that to preserve control over the Other, he/she has to be fundamentally different; however, some identification needs to be preserved in order to valorise this control. This reveals the ambiguity of the colonial discourse and makes it possible to break from within. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write:

The Other can, of course, only be constructed out of the archive of 'the self', yet the self must also articulate the Other as inescapably different [...] and this instigates an ambivalence at the very site of imperial authority and control. (*The Empire* 102)

Hybridity and mimicry both serve as reminders of the ambivalence and weakness within the hierarchical system (102). Bhabha argues that as the colonised subject takes on traits of the coloniser, the coloniser will

lose the sense of the masterful self and its social sovereignty. It is at this moment of intellectual and psychic 'uncertainty' that representation can no longer guarantee the authority of culture; and culture can no longer guarantee to author its 'human' subjects as the signs of humanness. (195)

Like hybridity, mimicry breaks down the boundaries between what is considered for example English and Indian, leaving the coloniser powerless to control it; thus, the limitations of authority are revealed (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin *Key Concepts* 115).

When it comes to critical interpretations of *The Inheritance of Loss*, they are diverse and conflicting, not the least as a result of the aforementioned debate on hybridity. One can mention Angelia Poon, who contributes with an overtly political interpretation of the novel, highlighting the inequality of postcolonial globalisation, while denouncing the explanatory value of hybridity, arguing that it cannot recognise the hardships and inequalities suffered by migrant labourers (549). David W. Spielman, on the contrary, considers the concept to be most useful and suggests the fate of the characters to be decided by their relation to hybridity and ambiguity (89). However, he does not relate this to their different, and unequal, conditions. Margaret Scanlan analyses the portrayal of nationalism in the novel and finds that the binaries of nationalism are often presented, but only to be broken down (270) and that, as the story develops, we get a perspective where hybridity is something hopeful rather than something to lament.

Somewhere in-between these perspectives we find Oana Sabo, who simply notes that Desai does not partake in the celebration of hybridity (379). In line with Poon, she reads the novel as a conscious critique of world inequality. By studying the narrative itself, she shows that its fragmentary structure reinforces the novel's theme of migration and border crossing; thus, prompting a critical reading and figuratively placing the reader in the migrant's shoes.

While Poon considers the novel as qualifiedly optimistic, Uma Jayaraman's interpretation is bleak. She examines the identity formation of one of the main characters, the judge. Examining this character's quest to mimic the English, and reaffirm his masculinity, she notes how this leads to an intense need to reclaim authority through the means of violence (63). John Masterson partly shares the view of *The Inheritance of Loss* as a pessimistic novel, but he also sees a potential to "re-ground" and re-view postcolonial theory. He sees an exotification of exile and a tendency to mythologise migration, and, to this, the novel offers a more nuanced picture as it represents the "losers" of the globalised world rather than the "winners" (411).

Critics seem to be divided on a number of issues concerning *The Inheritance of Loss*: is there any analytic potential in *hybridity*? Is there any hope in the novel? This essay will seek to answer both questions in the affirmative. Consequently, this study can be said to partake in, and contribute to, the on-going discussion on the novel, as well as the theoretical field. In a sense, the essay can be said to examine *The Inheritance of Loss* by using hybridity in a politicised manner, which none of the aforementioned critics have done. Subsequently, the analysis consists of two chapters: the first focuses on the characters' sense of self, but also argues that the search for a purity of identity is counterproductive. The second chapter contextualises the findings in chapter one by examining the influence of Western hegemony on the characters and seeks to explain why they react so differently. What seems clear is that *The Inheritance of Loss* can be read as a strong critique of the unequal, globalised and capitalist world order, making border crossing and hybridity a source of liberation only for a privileged few.

## 2. “Solid Knowledge Vanishing to the Moon”

### On the Characters’ Self-perception

Here, where India blurred into Bhutan and Sikkim [...] it had always been a messy map [...] A great amount of warring, betraying, bartering had occurred; between Nepal, England, Tibet, India, Sikkim, Bhutan; Darjeeling stolen from here, Kalimpong plucked from there – despite, ah, despite the mist charging down like a dragon, dissolving, undoing, making ridiculous the drawing of borders. (Desai 10)

*The Inheritance of Loss* follows the lives of the inhabitants of a village in mountainous Kalimpong in the very northeast of India during the year of 1986. This essay will concentrate on four of them: Jemubhai Patel, the judge; his granddaughter Sai; Biju, the son of Jemu’s cook; and Gyan, Sai’s math tutor and first love. They all react differently to hybridity, which creates interesting contrasts. This chapter explores how they perceive themselves and shows that their pursuit of purity only leads into greater difficulty.

From the quotation above, we see how they live in a contested place: borders are blurred and then fixed only to be challenged and relocated again. In the opening scene of the novel there is an opaque and ever-moving mist covering the land, not only further denying the borders but also mocking them. We see how it is constantly attacking the borders drawn by people, but also how people struggle to enforce the borders. In a sense, the mist can be seen as a symbol of the demise of the absolute, the pure, as the process of moving beyond binaries. Furthermore, it is inescapable as the mist gets “thicker and thicker, obscuring things in parts – half a hill, then the other half [...] Gradually the vapour replaced everything with itself, solid objects with shadow, and nothing remained that did not seem molded from or inspired by it” (Desai 2). As solid objects are turned fluid and changeable and boundaries are dissolved, the effect of the mist, in fact, seems to be hybridisation.

A hybrid identity is, at once, both more and less than a pure one. The first example in the novel is the judge, Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, Jemu in short, or, if his dreams were true, James Peter Peterson (187), whose story often is related in flashbacks. Returning to the misty opening scene, Jemu’s “face seemed distanced by what looked like white powder over dark skin – or was it just the vapour?” (Desai 37). The vapour, here easily confused with white powder, has created a distance between the judge and others. If mist is a symbol of hybridity, hybridity creates a distance between the judge and others. Certainly, the judge is lonely: as he cannot make sense of himself nor the world, he distances himself from it and every one he knows.



Growing up in colonised India, Jemu is the only son in an ambitious family of low social status. Eventually, to attain legitimate influence and rise socially, Jemu is sent to England to study law at Cambridge. It is 1939 and Jemu is 15 years old. During his five-year stay, he is constantly subjected to racial discrimination and a landlady refusing to call him by any other name than “James”, in a sense completely denying his identity. In defence, Jemu retreats into solitude, which “became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow” (Desai 45). Ashamed to be Indian, Jemu desperately tries to overcome this, occupying the liminal position between the coloniser and the colonised by performing English identity: “He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both” (Desai 131). This quotation indicates how mimicry can be perceived a threat towards the racist discourse, where the upholding of difference is a prerequisite of the system’s survival. Jemu, mockingly, being “almost the same but not quite”, “almost the same but not white” (Bhabha 127-128), exposes the ambivalence at the heart of imperial control. His behaviour uncovers the limits to the colonisers’ authority; thus, Jemu’s semblance to the English serves as an unpleasant reminder of the arbitrary divide between the coloniser and the colonised.

Furthermore, the quotation underscores how Jemu’s struggle to construct a pure English identity is, ultimately, what leaves him utterly lonely. Clearly, his shame of being Indian has spread to include a hatred of all things Indian, including his own family. He has completely internalised the superiority of the English and upon his return to India, he treats the people who surround him with the same violent contempt as he has experienced in England. As he returns to India, and to his wife and family, his alienation is complete: he has “a fake English accent and [a] face powdered pink and white over brown” (Desai 93). Jemu has worked hard to anglicise himself and believes he has succeeded when his body yet again betrays him: “he was a foreigner – a *foreigner* – every bit of him screamed. Only his digestion dissented and told him otherwise [...] his gentleman’s knees creaking [...] he felt his digestion work as super efficient as – as *Western transportation*” (Desai 183). No matter how hard Jemu fights to cut all connections with India, and even with his own body, his body remains a reminder, and each time these reminders increase his self-loathing. To escape this he constructs strong walls between his past and the present: “One true thing Jemubhai learned: a human heart can be transformed into anything. It was possible to forget if not essential to do so (Desai 338)”.

What eventually brings these walls down is the arrival of Sai, the judge’s granddaughter, who, in a sense, also originates from his body. We will return to this point after examining Sai’s

sense of self. Moving back to the misty opening scene there is a description of the mist's effect on Sai:

The gray had permeated inside as well... [in the mirror, Sai] caught a glimpse of herself being smothered and reached forward to imprint her lips upon the surface, a perfectly formed film star kiss. "Hello," she said, half to herself and half to someone else. (Desai 2-3)

The mist has the house in its hold, and even though Sai is hesitant to what she sees, looking at herself, she likes it. She greets herself with a kiss – both the part she knows and understands but also what still is unfamiliar in her. Kissing her blurred image could be seen as an almost absolute acceptance of, and affection for, this indefinite quality. The contrast to the judge is striking: for Jemu, hybridity is a source of self-loathing, but Sai seems to feel a great tenderness towards it. Sabo reads this as an indication that the novel favours the type of diasporic consciousness embodied by Sai and goes as far as to call her "Desai's narrative consciousness" (385).

However, Sai's self-acceptance has not remained unchallenged. She grew up very lonely in a convent, raised by English nuns, and only at the age of nine is she brought to the judge's house. The convent was obsessed, not only with purity and instilling shame, but also with the imparting of the superiority of all things English. However, they failed: "Any sense that Sai was taught had fallen between the contradictions, and the contradictions themselves had been absorbed" (Desai 33). Despite the attempted indoctrination, Sai never becomes an anglophile; she appreciates what is Indian just as much as she appreciates what is English, and, furthermore, she does not let her preferences be part of what defines her identity. Spielman notes how this unconcern for purity and principles enables Sai to reinterpret defining categories in ways that suit her (87).

Another challenge to her self-acceptance comes as she falls in love for the first time. She wonders how Gyan sees her; he makes her acutely aware of herself. She tries to form an understanding of herself, but fails:

Round and fat she was in the spoons, long and thin in the knives, pocked by insects and tiddlers in the pond; golden in one light, ashen in another; back then to the mirror; but the mirror, fickle as ever, showed one thing, then another and left her, as usual, without an answer. (Desai 83)

Here, Sai's identity comes across as highly unstable, and more of a process in the 'beyond' than a fixed entity. Bhabha describes how the 'beyond' is marked by disorientation and "an exploratory, restless movement" (2), which seems a fitting description of Sai's emotions.

As Sai and Gyan's romance develops and ultimately ends, she starts feeling even more fluid while she also loses her ability to stand loneliness. In this sense her development is the

reverse of the judge's and other characters' who, largely because of their conflicted relations to their own identities, shield themselves from intimacy. Sai's increased acceptance of her hybrid identity makes her feel more connected to the world, even though she realises that she is not its centre. The narrator tells us: "Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself" (Desai 355). This realisation, where she understands her place *vis-à-vis* the world, empowers her; it brings with it "a glimmer of strength. Of resolve" (Desai 356). Poon considers this realisation to be what "the novel mobilizes as its telos" (547).

Sai herself functions as a mirror to both the judge and Gyan, with quite opposite effects. As the orphaned Sai comes to live with her grandfather, he is afraid that she will awake the hatred within him, but instead it turns out that Sai

was more his kin than he thought imaginable. There was something familiar about her; she had the same accent and manners. She was a westernized Indian [...] an estranged Indian living in India. The journey he had started so long ago had continued in his descendants [...] This granddaughter whom he didn't hate was perhaps the only miracle fate had thrown his way. (Desai 230)

Jemu recognises himself in Sai, and he feels a connection to her that he has not felt to anyone since he first left India. However, there is an important difference between them: Sai does not hate her Indian side. Furthermore, she is something out of his past that has survived, a miracle where what he has elevated and what he has tried to kill harmonise. Spielman sees this as prompting the judge to embrace his Indian heritage and abandon his view of Englishness as superior (78).

Gyan, in turn, reacts quite differently: "Sai was not miraculous [she was] a reflection of all the contradictions around her, a mirror that showed him himself far too clearly for comfort" (Desai 287). Where the judge finds solace in finally recognising the contradictions within him, his hybridity, in someone else, this recognition is ultimately what breaks Sai and Gyan's relationship; Gyan's hybridity causes him great anxiety. For him, hybridity results in a sense of suffering from a lack, or a loss of identity, and the need to suppress this guides his life's choices. It is even the reason for him choosing accounting as a profession; he thought that

the act of ordering numbers would sooth him; however [...] the more sums he did, the more columns of statistics he transcribed – well, it seemed simply to multiply the number of places where solid knowledge took off and vanished to the moon. (Desai 79)

"Solid knowledge" has a strong pull on Gyan; he is desperately trying to make sense of himself but also of a world that is unstable and ever-changing. Spielman sees this as a result of his complicated postcolonial status where Gyan, of Nepalese descent, belongs to a group

dominated by Bengalis, who, in turn, themselves were dominated by the British. Hence, he embodies several, sometimes conflicting, identities (83). Furthermore, Gyan is from a poor family, who similarly to Jemu's, expects him to raise them up. He lives in a house that

didn't match his talk, his English, his looks, his clothes, or his schooling. [...] Every single thing his family had was going into him and it took ten of them to live like this to produce a boy, combed, educated, their best bet in the big world. (Desai 289)

However, despite his qualifications, no one is willing to employ Gyan, and the shame he feels for his family's poverty intermingles with the shame he feels for himself for failing them.

Initially, Gyan is happy with Sai. His apprehensiveness of ambiguity is almost forgotten when the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), a rebel group fighting for independence of the Indian-Nepalese minority, emerges. Through the GNLF, Gyan, temporarily, finds the authenticity he initially pursued. They provide a space where he can negate his different loyalties and the contradictions within him; they provide the "solid knowledge" he desires. However, his doubt is not gone and, as it resurfaces, he drowns it in alcohol until his "pulse [leaps] to something that felt entirely *authentic*" (176 my italics).

Choosing the stable vision offered by the GNLF, Sai becomes a symbol of all the oppression he has suffered; a coloniser and the embodiment of a higher social class, as well as India and England alike. In their confrontation, he turns against her and uses her apparent lack of national allegiance to insult her: "It's clear all you want to do is copy. Can't think for yourself. *Copycat, copycat.*" (Desai 180). This resembles Frantz Fanon's analysis of the period of decolonisation, during which, the colonised "shower [the values of the coloniser] with insults and vomit them up" to silence the arrogance of the coloniser (*The Wretched* 8-9).

However, this reaction can also be seen as an indication of the acceptance of the stratifications and categorisations of people. Hybridisation, to Gyan, appears as mere copying. Thus, his desire for authenticity results in a loathing of hybrid identities, which he fears himself to have (Spielman 85). Nevertheless, his ambiguous feelings regarding a hybrid identity are not easily suppressed. This is apparent in the last fight between Gyan and Sai. They were

ordinary humans [...] without revelation, composite of contradictions, easy principles, arguing about what they half believed in or even what they didn't believe in at all, desiring [...] authenticity as much as playacting [...] Every single contradiction history or opportunity might make available to them, every contradiction they were heir to, they desired. But only as much, of course, as they desired purity and a lack of contradiction. (Desai 283-284)

Yet again, Gyan is split between different sides of himself, which results in anxiety. As with Jemu, Gyan's attempt to construct a pure identity ends with his being lonely, after having

mistreated those close to him. Eventually, he bitterly regrets partaking in the GNLF and shunning Sai.

If Gyan is vacillating between the search for purity and the acceptance of contradictions, Biju, the fourth and final character in this study, resolutely seeks purity as a means of self-preservation. Biju's story is a more isolated narrative strand than the others'; he is an illegal immigrant, who is exploited in the kitchens of New York. Feeling in place, is not equally attainable for everyone: social class and unequal access to education and economic capital provide different opportunities of belonging (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin *The Empire* 219). John McLeod calls the "concrete experience of living 'out of place' [...] a perpetual tryst with pain on a number of fronts" (240), which is what Biju experiences. For Biju, the ever-escalating exploitation brings increasing pain, both mentally and physically.

Working in restaurants serving beef, Biju feels his ideals being compromised and constantly reproaches himself: "Holy cow unholy cow. Job no job. One should not give up one's religion, the principles of one's parents and their parents before them" (Desai 151). He experiences a growing anxiety of losing India and his identity, since they are increasingly dependent on fixed and distinguishing qualities. As a remedy, Biju decides to stand by his principles and finds employment at an Indian restaurant. However, just as with Gyan, Biju's search for purity only leads into greater difficulty: Biju's hope of finally belonging in the USA is ultimately crushed by his Indian employer, Harish-Harry, who uses Indian immigrants for his own gain. Clearly, inequalities of class, e.g. intellectual and financial capital, live on within the diaspora. Biju cannot cross the class barrier. When he is hurt at work, Harish-Harry furiously refuses to allow him to see a doctor:

If you are not happy, then go right now [...] Know how easily I can replace you? *Know how lucky you are!!!* You think there aren't thousands of people in this city looking for a job? [...] I'll snap my fingers and in one second hundreds of people will appear. (Desai 206)

Biju's vulnerability is evident: he neither has anywhere to go, nor is he physically able to leave. To Biju, Harish-Harry, becomes a warning example, a split version of himself with his hyphenated name, indicating the impossibility of balance as long as you constantly need to negotiate and relate your own self to what is foreign to you. Biju's fixation on purity makes him unable to develop a critical perspective and consider alternative causes for, and solutions to, the challenges he faces. In Biju's failure to succeed in the USA, Scanlan reads a challenge to the American story of the immigrant's transformation, the melting pot, and the American dream of success being available to everyone through hard work (273).

For Biju, memories of home turn into his only source of joy. This has far-reaching imaginative effects on his idea of India, which becomes idealised and romanticised. Salman Rushdie argues that emigrants, here Indian emigrants, will be haunted by a sense of loss prompting a need to return; however, “physical alienation [...] almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; we will [...] create fictions [...] imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (10). This is what Biju does, romanticising his village, he remembers nothing but the beauty, and the community; it turns into a “place where he could never be the only one in a photograph” (Desai 296).

Finally, Biju decides to return home to India, but only to be proven that it is not the refuge from exploitation he remembered, or *imagined*, it to be. Travelling to his village, he is robbed of everything, including, “worst of all [...] his pride” (Desai 349). Thus, he is “[b]lack from America with far less than he’d ever had” (Desai 349). While being so close to home, his pain returns, in effect indicating that there will be no way of escaping it: “Biju sat there in terror of what he’d done, of being alone [...] Suddenly, he felt an old throbbing of the knee that he had hurt slipping on Harish-Harry’s floor” (Desai 350). The return home exposes his illusion, which does not match the experience of being back; thus, *home* has turned imaginary and always out of reach.

As solid knowledge vanishes “to the moon” (Desai 79), the characters that attempt to construct a pure identity, only find themselves in greater difficulty and increased anxiety. Firstly, Jemu comes to hate himself, a hate that renders him completely isolated. Secondly, Gyan rejects love and joins an armed movement, which ultimately, only increases his shame. Lastly, Biju, in clinging to an imagined authentic India, loses his sense of belonging in the place he has always regarded as home. On the other hand, Sai, further accepts her hybridity and is empowered by it. The next chapter will seek to answer why their reactions are so different and relate this to hegemony in order to account for the impact of power asymmetries.

### 3. “A World that Was Still Colonial”

#### On the Relation Between Self-perception and Hegemony

The very title, *The Inheritance of Loss*, can be said to highlight the relation between the characters' self-perception and global power hierarchy. The notion of *inheritance* can be read as a critique of Euro-American values and writing of history and its continuing impact in the contemporary world, which is marked by “inequalities, suffering, and loss on psychic, social, and cultural levels” (Sabo 379). As noted by Poon, Desai's novel depicts links originating from globalisation, which is often associated with increased connection, reduced distances, and cultural plenitude, but here the common denominator of the characters is a sense of loss, which cuts across both space and time (548). Gyan and Biju both express a longing for a home country that is imaginary: neither Gyan's envisioned Indian-Nepali nation, nor Biju's romanticised India exist. Furthermore, as Sabo suggests, their stories are connected through a desire to level power imbalances between the have and have-nots, and between ethnic majority and minority groups. The judge's narrative thread reveals the continuance of this over time, from a world order with British imperialism to a world where American capitalism is on the rise (376-377).

However, Jemu's and Biju's experiences and possibilities differ in crucial ways, which might help explain their very different reactions, one seeking what he perceives to be a purely Indian identity and the other one an English. Even though both come from a low social class, Jemu's family has economic capital and he is in England legally. Poon underscores the importance of their different historical contexts and their relation to the systems they are subjected to; the judge is “fashioned into a member of an elite group [...] in order to ensure the reproduction of colonial and then national power” (553). While Jemu is selected for a type of privilege, Biju certainly is not. His historical moment is global and neoliberal in its character, and Biju is only “one of the millions who are individually dispensable but collectively crucial” (553) for the maintaining of the system. Biju's exchangeability is yet another inheritance: his father, Panna Lal, Jemu's cook, who is not a minor character, but becomes a father figure for Sai, is not named until the novel's penultimate page. Before then, he is simply referred to as “the cook”, clearly emphasising the importance of his function, not his person.

As we have seen, the judge comes to mimic the English, but he is also made into an Other:

Jemubhai's mind had begun to warp; he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely manage to lift his lips in a smile [...] he couldn't bear anyone seeing his gums, his teeth. They seemed too private. In fact, he could barely let any of himself peep out [...] for fear of giving offence. He began to wash obsessively, concerned he would be accused of smelling [...] To the end of his life, he would never be seen without socks and shoes and would prefer shadow to light, faded days to sunny, for he was suspicious that sunlight might reveal him, in his hideousness, all too clearly. (Desai 45)

Eventually, he feels barely human at all. Jemu has internalised a view of himself as something deviant and abnormal, he has become the Other, all in relation to the English, white majority. Frantz Fanon has described this process: “[i]n the white world, the man of color [becomes] an image of the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty” (*Black Skin* 90). Fanon's man of colour is no longer in authority to define himself freely, but with qualities attributed to him by his oppressor, qualities which are derogatory. There is no doubting the judge's view of himself as “the third person”: he stops using the personal pronoun “I” altogether, instead reverting to the impersonal “one” when speaking about himself. It is a conscious decision, a refuge to “keep everyone at bay, to keep himself away from himself” (Desai 122).

At once, he is isolating himself from others but also hiding, or negating, his own opinions or agenda. Again, Fanon has described the impact on one's identity when one, as he puts it, “gives oneself up as an object” and he describes this as causing tangible pain on the body itself (*Black Skin* 92). Surely, it is also an attempt to remedy the *certain uncertainty*, which can be seen as originating from what Jayaraman calls an awareness “of his liminal position in between the spaces that are unequivocally occupied by the coloniser and the colonised” (61). In this liminal space, between borders, Jemu's mimicry is a survival strategy in a colonial world. With the Indian independence, however, the demands are the contrary (62). This only paralyses him further. Thinking back on the English leaving India, he grieves them “leaving behind only those ridiculous Indians who couldn't rid themselves of what they had broken their soul to learn” (Desai 224). Contrary to what Bhabha suggests, Jemu is not able to find strength nor strategies to resist binary notions in this position; instead, he identifies himself as “broken” and withdraws from the world, which he finds is “only a different version of the same old [with a] man with the white curly wig and a dark face covered in powder, bringing down his hammer, always against the native, in a world that was still colonial” (Desai 224).

While the judge isolates himself from the world, Biju, on the other hand, is cast out in it utterly “ill-equipped” (Desai 24). In New York, he meets immigrants from the whole world, and



interaction proves a challenge. As Biju makes friends with, and comes to admire, Saeed Saeed, a black Muslim from Zanzibar, he has to confront his own prejudices:

Saeed was kind and he was not Paki. Therefore he was OK? [...] Therefore he liked Muslims and hated only Pakis? Therefore he liked Saeed, but hated the general lot of Muslims? [...] No, no, how could that be [...] Therefore he hated all black people but liked Saeed? Therefore there was nothing wrong with black people and Saeed? (Desai 85-86)

From this line of reasoning emerges a perceived hierarchy of the immigrant communities, where Indians are superior to (at least) blacks and Muslims. Nonetheless, Biju seems to discover that, even though his fellow immigrants may be different from him, they all suffer from the impact of colonisation and racialization. However, he never manages to discard his beliefs in a hierarchical system, even though, he finds that he had “a habit of hate” (86) and “possessed an awe of white people, who arguably had done India great harm, and a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India” (86). This further indicates an internalised racist discourse and, as noted by Sabo, the difficulties for Others to connect in the “context of a shared history of political violence” (378). With the arrival of a Pakistani in the kitchen comes relief: “At least he knew what to do [...] *Desis* against Pakis. Ah, old war, best war” (Desai 24-25). In his condition of great solitude and abuse, he appears to return to a familiar discourse; partly because of its familiarity, the maintenance of it seems comforting.

Biju’s place in the hierarchy is non-negotiable. The restaurants he works in offer “the authentic colonial experience. On top, rich colonial, and below, poor native” (Desai 23). The aforementioned fight with the Pakistani, leads to their being fired as “the sound [travelled] up the flight of stairs [...] they might upset the balance, perfectly first-world on top, perfectly third-world twenty-two steps below” (Desai 25). This could be read as “balance” being created through the hierarchical divide of people, within restaurants, but also, beyond. Masterson writes: “[b]eneath the glossy rhetoric of a borderless planet, supposedly liberated by liquid capitalism, lies the principle that order is ensured by the increasingly intense policing of these stratifications” (423).

Biju’s pain is tangible; however, one could argue that it is not as much a result of being oppressed, as of anxiety of ambiguity when borders are blurred. In the novel, there is only one sequence when Biju is at ease with himself and the world around him: on the return flight to India, with a stopover at Heathrow, which, significantly, “[hasn’t] been renovated for the new age of globalization but lingered back in the old age of colonization” (Desai 313). Masterson

argues that the aeroplane and airports distil the dominant power imbalances that exist beyond them, underscoring how the “new age” is not very different from the old (420).

It is in the airplane bathroom that Biju, just like Sai, confidently salutes himself in the mirror, as if he is finally back in place. However, unlike Sai who has reconciled with herself, Biju makes a promise to forget the world outside of Kalimpong. As previously noted, meeting people from different parts of the world caused Biju to question the hierarchical divide of peoples, but only to later negate those doubts. As asserted by Masterson, the maintenance of the dominant vision is conditioned by the compliance of the ones oppressed by it. It is only by questioning the foundations of the stratification that the “ideologies of exclusion” can be broken. Even though Biju cannot, Masterson argues that *The Inheritance of Loss* urges its readers to do so, since it invites us to, instead of “drawing lines that divide, [draw] lines that unite” (424). Sabo sees the novel as engendering awareness of the similarities between colonialism and globalisation, but also of the two sides of diaspora as both bringing a cost of dislocation and a possibility of self-invention, often conditioned by social class. Biju’s failure and promise to forget is in stark contrast to Sai, a member of the Indian elite, who, at the end of the novel, has gained a wider vision and is on the verge of stepping out into the world (388).

Sai differs from the other characters in several important ways, but a fundamental difference is that she is not responsible for anyone but herself; all the others are expected to raise their families up either socially, economically, or both. Barely remembering her family, she, in a sense, has the opposite experience from Biju and the judge: she never leaves a feeling of belonging, but it is something that gradually builds up as she comes to Kalimpong. She is also economically and educationally privileged, and an avid reader. While Biju, Jemu and Gyan are directly exposed to discrimination based on race and ethnicity, Sai’s encounter with this is primarily through books, e.g. travel accounts of India. Through these she sees herself through the colonisers’ eyes, and she comes to see herself as a product of the colonial past: “The repetition had willed her, anticipated her, cursed her, and certain moves made long ago had produced all of them” (Desai 218). Sabo sees this realisation as prompting an understanding of power asymmetries and of the nation always being culturally and politically embedded in the world (385). Furthermore, Sai is able to apply this to her own situation. When Gyan blames her for being upper class and westernized, she is aware of her privilege, and acknowledges her double role of being, in a sense, both coloniser and colonised. However, she is able to make a distinction between her inheritance and herself: “You hate me [...] for big reasons, that have nothing to do with me” (Desai 285), something that he cannot.

Furthermore, Sai and her friends draw connections between the past and the present, in ways that serve to mock the former colonial power: “Apartheid, genocide [...] Very unskilled at drawing borders, those bloody Brits [...] No practice, na, water all around them, ha ha” (Desai 143). This mockery can be seen as a strategy of undermining the dominant discourse of the superiority of the West as they claim the power to define the British. However, this quotation also reveals their privilege *vis-à-vis* the Indian-Nepalese minority, who, as we shall see, are not amused by the situation and the arbitrarily drawn borders.

Sai is the only one of the four characters examined in this study that does not fight to forget the past or withdraw from the world outside of Kalimpong. As noted by Poon, Sai’s self seems to shrink as her world expands, and paradoxically, it is out of this that her commitment to the world grows (554). However, to Sai, loss is a basic condition of life, and even a prerequisite of love: “she decided that love must surely reside in the gap between desire and fulfillment, in the lack, not the contentment. Love was the ache, the anticipation, the retreat” (Desai 3). To Sai, the lack is where love originates. Relating the notion of loss, or lack, to hybridity, to being less than pure, this is to Sai a source of strength. This is very similar to Bhabha’s view of “the third space” as empowering. One character that does not always share this notion is Gyan, who, like the rest of the Indian-Nepalese, was “tired of being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority” (Desai 10).

The Indian-Nepalese uprising and claim for independence serve as the backdrop of the novel, together with the resentment of the Indians towards this ethnic group. Joining the GNLFF “the shames [Gyan] had suffered, the future that wouldn’t accept him [...] joined together to form a single truth” (Desai 177). Out of this truth, pure hatred is born, which was “theirs by birthright” (Desai 177). Fanon considers this process the spark of decolonisation. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes how the colonised has an “atmospheric violence [...] rippling under the skin” (31), which ultimately progresses as “the colonized subject identifies his enemy, puts a name to all of his misfortunes, and casts all his exacerbated hatred and rage in this new direction” (31). Unmistakeably, Gyan, like Biju, has inherited a habit of hate. Past injustices and power asymmetries are, to Gyan, still very much a part of the present, leaving him with a feeling of the future being out of reach. He is effectively caught by history.

As we have seen, Gyan is torn between purity and ambiguity, but he is also torn between wanting to make an impact on the world and escaping it. He vacillates between wanting to run away with Sai, “free from history, free from family demands and the built-up debt of centuries” (Desai 173) and letting himself be engulfed by a desire to confront history, and make someone

pay the debt of it: in the words of Fanon “[t]o blow the colonial world to smithereens” (*The Wretched* 6). Being westernized is in the novel a sign of high class and education. As Gyan becomes more and more anxious about his own social class, his is more and more dedicated towards overthrowing the present by establishing a pure and authentic Nepalese state. Fanon has called violence, in this context, “the perfect meditation” (*The Wretched* 44). He sees violence both as a source of, and a means to, liberation. He too stresses the impact of history, and violence as part of an inheritance: “each individual represents a violent link in the great chain, in the almighty body of violence rearing up in reaction to the primary violence of the colonizer” (*The Wretched* 50).

Ironically, the GNLF comes to serve as another example of the futility of the pursuit of authenticity and purity. The movement is as derivative of Western imagery and ideas as the Anglicised Indians they are opposing: they are dressed in “universal guerrilla fashion” (Desai 4), dressing as Rambo, “[t]hey were living the movies” (Desai 324), imagining themselves in Hollywood films. Sabo states that in doing so, the GNLF is using Western culture when constructing their national identity. She argues that their quest for authenticity is overlooking the fact that they themselves are part of a labour diaspora living in a place that has been “colonized by the British, disputed by neighbouring states, and recently penetrated by Western culture” (382-383). This history makes Kalimpong into a place that cannot be authentic in the conventional sense of the word. Still, as noted by Scanlan, and in line with nationalist ideology, the GNLF wants to establish an independent “political structure coterminous with the boundaries of an *authentic* indigenous culture” (271 my italics), while being as westernised as Sai or the judge. The depth of the impact of the Global North is apparent in their self-definition: the movement Anglicises their very name, taking to calling themselves Gorkha instead of Gurkha.

The difficulty to handle a history and a present full of injustice seems to be at the root of their issues: “there they were, the most commonplace of them [...] caught up in the mythic battles of past vs. present, justice vs. injustice – the most ordinary swept up in extraordinary hatred, because extraordinary hatred was, after all, a commonplace event” (324). Sai is the only one who manages to distance herself from “the habit of hate”. As we have seen, only Sai is able to discern the foundation of the dominant discourse, and her questioning of it impedes its influence. This strategy clearly is more successful than the others’, who, when they deny parts of themselves and their lived experiences in attempts to reach purity, comply with the hierarchical system instead of undermining it. To them, the world is still colonial.

## 4. Conclusion

As we have seen, in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, living in-between seemingly different cultures affects the characters' self-perception; their response to their own hybridity prompts different reactions ranging from calm self-acceptance to violent self-loathing. The cause is not the difference *per se*, but clearly the hegemonic discourse and power asymmetries that oftentimes restrict them. The questions of why the characters react so differently to their own hybridity, and what the relation between hybridity and Western hegemony is like, have proven difficult to separate; the characters' reactions to their hybridity are always in dialogue with Western hegemony. They define themselves in relation to others, and since most of them do not question the hegemonic, dominant vision, they can never escape its power, nor destabilise it.

They all have several cultural identities, which sometimes have contradictory values that are not easily reconciled, and as the narrator reminds us; they desire "every single contradiction history or opportunity might make available to them, every contradiction they were heir to" (Desai 284). Their different social and historical contexts certainly give them different possibilities; however, as the novel ends, all four characters have experienced different kinds of breakthroughs. Although they all have experienced nothingness and loss, Poon sees this as a prelude to redemption; loss is "the inheritance with which to begin writing a future [...] the loss that we inherit is ours to make good" (555). Ambivalence might bring anxiety but acceptance is not impossible. The search for purity is only confirming the legitimacy of the dominant vision, but in accepting the loss of it, there might be liberation. However, Jemu, Biju and Gyan, cannot do this. They perceive their hybrid identities to be *less* than a pure one, resulting in an identity crisis they cannot escape. This is contrasted by Sai, who can be said to embody the third space, and who considers her hybrid identity to be *more* than a pure one. Hence, she is the only one who manages to use her hybridity as a source of strength, enabling her to fully accept herself.

For Bhabha, hybridity can be a political strategy of self-definition and self-location. This view that has been challenged, and is also problematized in *The Inheritance of Loss*, where three out of the four characters studied cannot adopt it. The weight of history permeates the present and brings with it hatred, directed towards themselves, and other groups subjected to the system, but not directed towards the hegemonic system itself. This further underscores their internalisation of a racist discourse, and the suffering it brings. It has been argued that discussions on hybridity cannot account for, for example, inequality and hegemony. This

essay contributes to that ongoing discussion by showing that it is not only possible to combine hybridity with hegemony, but, in the case of *The Inheritance of Loss*, that it is essential to do so. Complete withdrawal from the world is an impossibility and ones' self-perception is clearly related to our social, historical and economic conditions.

However, there are factors that postcolonial theory does not shed light upon, and that are still key to understanding identity formation, for example gender norms. The male characters are all drawn towards aggression and violence, in line with masculinity norms and an intersectional analysis, also examining gender norms, would be interesting. This essay does, however, uncover the impact of hegemony and its preservation through the stratification of peoples, and so does *The Inheritance of Loss*. Even though the characters cannot see and challenge hegemony, the novel prompts the reader to do so.

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