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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## “POVERTY VS PRIVILEGE IN KIRAN DESAI’S THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS”

Prabahavatai Talawar<sup>1</sup> and Deepak H, Shinde<sup>2</sup>

1. Research Scholar Karanataka Akkamahadevi Women’s University Vijayapur.
2. Assistant Professor and Research Supervisor Karanataka Akkamahadevi Women’s University Vijayapur.

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### Abstract

The research paper explores how the “the Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai discuss the ideas of class, privilege and post colonial anxiety through the lives of characters. The paper analyzes the characters thoughts, emotions and action by expanding our understanding of how they suffer from feeling of loss, confusion and powerlessness in world shaped by the past. The author Kiran Desai paints a world full of bleak, somber, uncertain, and insecure atmosphere for the immigrants like Biju who symbolically represent the whole brood of immigrants, especially, the illegal ones, always groping in dusk of despair for something they need but eludes their grasp. And the title The Inheritance of Loss is highly metaphorical and richly appropriate to the novel. Kiran Desai published her novel The Inheritance of Loss in 2006. The theme and content of Kiran Desai’s The Inheritance of Loss, the Booker Prize winning novel is entirely different. Kiran Desai takes a wider canvas of her subject which touches upon various issues that have relevance to the present day life. She has created literary history by being the youngest woman ever to win the prestigious Man Booker Prize for fiction at the age of thirty five.

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### Introduction:-

Kiran Desai is the daughter of the most famous novelist, Anita Desai, a legendary figure in the annals of Indian English literature. The Inheritance of Loss is the second novel by Kiran Desai that was published in 2006. This book bagged many awards for the author including the Man Booker Prize for that year, the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award in 2007, and the 2006 Vodafone Crossword Book Award. This novel has been written over a period of seven years after Desai’s first book Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard, which has also brought tremendous success. Major themes of the book deal with migration problems, living between two worlds, and between past and present. The novel, The Inheritance of Loss presents the lives of characters those who are entangled in class system in India. Here I refer to both the lower class and the upper class system prevalent in India. The writer has wonderfully presented hopes, aspiration and dreams of characters that are portrayed in the novel. She has also conveyed their ultimate dream and hope of immigrating to America and finally escaping the critical class and caste system of their homelands. In the novel we see that main character, Jemubhai became an itinerant civil service judge and, became typical of middle-class Anglicized Indians, somewhat alienated from his own native culture. The absence of an address protests to have fixed identity. As man possesses a limited existence, he has to keep

something behind him to remind him. The individual has to live according to the societal norms. This endeavour will be falsified in certain cases, as there is an inner self against him. It creates the loss of faith in one's own country and its values. The detailed study of *The Inheritance of Loss* gives us the feelings that there is a note of compassion in the delineation of various characters in the novel. Almost all the characters Sai, Gyan, the retired judge, the cook, the tutor, and the cook's son living in abroad- all get the compassionate feelings of the author. All these characters dwell in the context of compassion and pathos. The present paper presents a story about their hard work, effort, dedication and sacrifices that they render as to achieve their minimum needs for a normal daily living. The paper also brings out interior of the novel's characters as combined with utmost expectations and dreams to gain material growth and success.

The characters in Desai's novel have diverse economic backgrounds, from the Judge's wealth to the poverty of the cook. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, the gulf between those with extreme privilege and those living in poverty is generally shown to be a direct consequence of the legacy of colonialism. Though privilege comes in many forms, Desai illustrates the vicious and self-reinforcing cycle of class privilege by showing how those who have privilege continue to gain wealth and social standing, while those without such privilege live in poverty that only deepens their disadvantaged position. Colonialism reinforces the existing rigid class structure in India by enabling those with existing privilege and disadvantaging those without it, all while falsely claiming a meritocratic attitude towards poverty and privilege.

Gyan is ashamed of his home, which is somewhat modern but very close to ruin. Desai comments that this is not "picturesque poverty" but something even more dismal. Because of this, Gyan is ashamed of being with Sai and bringing her back to his home, which creates a rift between them. She calls him a hypocrite because he enjoys cheese and chocolate at her house but condemns these foods when he's with the Nepalis because he is unable to afford them. What she doesn't realize, however, is that he is condemning the fact that some live in luxury while others are extremely poor. The theme is reflected both in the title, *The Inheritance of Loss* and the Epigraph from Jorge Luis Borges' poem entitled *Boast of Quietness*: "My humanity is in feeling we are all voices of the same poverty, My name is someone and anyone. I walk slowly, like one who comes from so far away he doesn't expect to arrive." (Borges).

One understands from these lines of the great poet Borges that man's only inheritance in this life is one of 'poverty' of various kinds, material and spiritual, for instance; and in the end, one can only strive for, but never actually attain, fulfillment. The Epigraph encapsulates the idea of loss. All the characters in the novel appear to suffer some kind of loss which, ultimately, becomes his/her inheritance. It may be a material loss or a spiritual one, for loss is of various kinds; man's efforts in trying to realize his objective may end half-realized and half unfulfilled and to the extent that his efforts have failed to realize his objective in full, to that extent he sustains loss. Thus a man's life, on this side of the grave, is a tale of inheritance of loss.

Though the judge himself had not come from a particularly wealthy family, the opportunity to attend school in Britain creates a cycle of more and more wealth and opportunity for his future generations. After going to school in Cambridge, the judge passes the British exams needed to be admitted to the Indian Civil Service and join the government's judiciary body. Because of this, the judge's salary increases from ten pounds a month to three hundred pounds a year. He and another Indian friend together resolve to put their Indian-ness behind them, and they avoid the other Indian students. Because they start to associate Indians with poverty, they divide themselves even further from their culture. When the judge's daughter and her husband move to Moscow, her daughter Sai is then sent to a convent and grows up "Anglicised" as well. Sai describes how she only learned how to make tea in the English way; she had never learned the Indian way. When she leaves the convent, she talks about some of the lessons she had implicitly learned: cake is better than laddoos (a type of Indian confection); silverware is better than using one's hands; worshipping Jesus is better than worshipping a phallic symbol; English is better than Hindi. But she only learns these lessons because the judge is able to pay for her to attend school at the convent. When Sai is on the train to Cho Oyu the nun accompanying her criticizes the people who defecate on the train tracks. Thus, not only are they too poor to have a system of plumbing, but they are then criticized for trying to go to the bathroom—a basic human necessity.

Biju provides another, similar perspective on poverty and privilege as experienced by immigrants journeying to America, noting that those with fortune continue to gain fortune, and those who are poor continue to be luckless. At the immigration desk, Biju observes how the more desperate the people are, the more likely they are to be turned away by the embassy officials. On the other hand, those who are rich enough to travel can prove that they will not

stay in America illegally because their passports show that they have already been abroad. Stamps from places such as England, Switzerland, America, and New Zealand and corresponding return dates prove that they reliably return to India. Therefore, the more traveled a person is, the more likely it is that they will be allowed to travel again. And in New York, even with aspirations of social mobility, being an undocumented immigrant means being relegated to a “shadow class,” because people must often keep moving, finding new addresses, jobs, and names. This happens to Biju as well: after he secures a job, it often comes under threat when there are green card checks, or when people complain because he smells. Thus, the social mobility America promises is not extended to those who are the poorest. When Biju returns to India, discouraged by this “shadow” life, the bags of everyone on the airplane are lost. The airline states it will only give compensation to nonresident Indians and foreigners, not the resident Indians.

The resident Indian passengers complain about this injustice—those from rich countries and those who are wealthy enough to live outside of India are treated better than those who live within it. Biju then remarks on the nonresident Indians’ good manners as they stand in line for their compensation, thereby “proving” how much they deserved that good fortune.

“ They don’t have enough to eat, but they knew how to cry; they memorized they for script for small lives for being lesser people”. (page no 11) Desai’s portrayal of poverty not just as an economic deficit, but as an inherited emotional and social vulnerable. The cook has internalized the humiliation of social standing to the point where the grief and submission are instinctual.

In both locales—India and America alike—poverty and privilege are each treated as earned and deserved. Though this belief system is an extension of the caste system that India had prior to colonization, this system is also reinforced by colonization and meritocratic myths of capitalism. Those who are most able to afford and adopt British culture are rewarded for their assimilation, and are then assumed to be deserving of that reward. This idea also carries into America, as people immigrate in search of opportunity, but are largely denied it unless they are already wealthy. Those who are most able to afford to be there are accepted into the country most readily—a direct contradiction to the mythology of opportunity and social mobility in America which brings so many immigrants there in the first place. In Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*, poverty and privilege are not just economic states; they are a "legacy" passed down through generations, often dictating a character's capacity for hope, mobility, and dignity. Desai illustrates a vicious cycle, those with privilege use it to accumulate more wealth and social standing while those in poverty find that their lack of resources only deepens their disadvantages.

Thus, Kiran Desai’s novel, —*The Inheritance of Loss*” is a literary masterpiece with a perfect blend of Indian culture and values. The overall study of the book gives us the feelings that there is a note of compassion, fellow feeling and rivalry followed by love and hatred in the delineation of various characters in the novel. Here in the novel almost all the characters like Sai, Gyan, the retired judge, the cook, and the cook’s son living in abroad get the compassionate feelings of the author. *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with cultural conflicts of Europe, India and America simultaneously at the same time. The writer gets an opportunity to run through the concepts of globalization, multiculturalism, modernization, terrorism and insurgency. She has proved that wherever one goes, he/ she carries the value of his /her culture and tradition. *The Inheritance of Loss* has been set partly in India and partly in the US. Internal issues and conflicts in the novel are quite complicated elements that have been exemplified through the characters like Saeed, who minutely thinks that people have a choice in living their life as immigrants. He also advocated and motivates Biju to change his way of thing and his style of living by accepting the change that comes on his way. Meanwhile Sai seems to do likewise with Gyan, challenging him to recognize the contradictions in which he finds himself and not to see them as problems.

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