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Cross-cultural conflicts in Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai is an emotive exploration of cultural symbols, displacement, and colonialism. In *cross-cultural conflicts: A Study of Desai's The Inheritance of Loss*, the novel is examined as a narrative that reflects the struggles of individuals caught between conflicting worlds, ancient Indian values, and the attraction or imposition of Western modernity. The characters, mainly the superannuated judge Jemubhai Patel and his granddaughter Sai, denote the psychological toll of cultural repetition and alienation. Through stories of movement, diaspora, and desire, Desai exemplifies how the inheritance of colonialism continues to show personal and collective identities. The title "The cross-cultural conflicts" signifies the emotional and existential weight carried by those who inherit fractured cultural lineages, often leading to confusion, loss, and inner conflict. The study highlights how Desai intricately weaves issues of race, class, and nationalism into a narrative of cultural displacement, offering a deeply human account of what it means to live between worlds.

Keywords: Cross-cultural, conflicts, Indian, Immigrants

Introduction

Kiran Desai, an author, was born in 1971 in New Delhi. She lived in India before moving to England at 14 age. After spending a year in England, she and her family immigrated to the United States, where she completed her schooling in Massachusetts. She later followed higher studies at Bennington College, Hollins University, and Columbia University. Desai took a gap to write her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, which was published in 1998.

In 2006, Desai won the prestigious Man Booker Prize for her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, at the youngest woman to receive the award at the age of thirty-five. This novel shows her deep insight, sensitivity, and sharp irony in addressing themes such as politics, terrorism, immigration, globalization,

multiculturalism, colonial trauma, identity, and social divisions shaped by nationality, gender, culture, ethnicity, and class Her debut novel is humorous and light-hearted, contrary to *The Inheritance of Loss* adopts a serious tone, marked by bitterness and despair.

Kiran Desai's *novel*, winner of the Man Booker Prize in 2006, is a detailed account that depicts into the uniqueness, shift, and impact of colonialism. Set against the backdrop of the north-eastern Himalayas and spanning across India and the United States, the novel offers a profound commentary on how culture can both define and confine the individual. The phrase "burden of culture" aptly captures the emotional and psychological weight borne by Desai's characters, who are either uprooted from their native traditions or alienated by the cultural legacies they have internalized. Culture in the novel is not merely a passive inheritance but an active force that shapes aspirations, imposes expectations, and generates inner conflict.

Desai presents a postcolonial world where the remnants of the British Empire continue to haunt the Indian consciousness, manifesting in fractured identities, mimicry, and a persistent sense of inadequacy. Characters like Jemubhai Patel, who strives to emulate British ideals at the cost of his own cultural selfhood, illustrate the deep scars left by imperial domination. At the same time, Sai, his Western-educated granddaughter, grapples with the contradictions of her hybrid upbringing. Biju, an undocumented Indian immigrant in the United States, embodies the struggles of economic migration and cultural marginalization, searching for belonging in a land that refuses to recognize him.

This study, titled. *The cross-cultural conflicts* seek to explore how Desai's characters navigate the intersections of personal identity and cultural heritage. It investigates how inherited traditions, colonial residues, and the forces of globalization shape human experience and influence the perception of self and others. By analysing the cultural tensions, philosophical clashes, and internalized orders portrayed in the novel, the study extends how Desai visualizes the complex emotive terrain of postcolonial identity. In doing so, the novel becomes not just a story of individual lives, but a broader reflection on the cost of cultural dislocation in an increasingly interconnected yet divided world.

The novel exemplifies the clash of two absolute cultures and their consequences. It is a fact that the world is full with the thoughts of prejudgments, and people are treated and separated differently due to the differences in class, culture, and race. It is between two key places: Kalimpong in India and New York City, USA. Though the novel is set during repeatedly weaves in and out of a variety of time frames as far back as the 1940s.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* vividly illustrates the conflicts arising from cross-cultural encounters, especially those rooted in colonial legacy, migration, and identity.

The novel explores how individuals struggle to reconcile Western influence with native traditions, resulting in emotional, psychological, and social turmoil.

The following are cross-cultural conflicts:

1. Jemubhai Patel and Internalized Colonialism

- Jemubhai, the superannuated judge, demonstrates cross-cultural conflict through his animosity toward Indian customs and his love of British values. Educated in England, he returns to India alienated from his own roots.
- He rejects Indian culture and even avoids speaking in his mother tongue, saying:
"When he spoke it, he felt he was using a language that was inferior to his needs." (p. 45)
- His shame for being Indian becomes a lifelong burden, leading him to isolate himself socially and emotionally.

2. Sai's Anglicized Upbringing

- Sai, the judge's granddaughter, is brought up in an English school, adopted by Western ideas of beauty, manners, and living.
- She has little connection to Indian culture, cannot speak any Indian language fluently, and eats Western food like cheese toast and cakes.
- Gyan criticizes her:

"She who could speak no language but English and pidgin Hindi... she who had never been to a temple but for architectural interest..." (p. 176)

3. Sai and Gyan – Cultural Clash in Romance

- Gyan, from a lower-middle-class Nepali family, becomes politically radicalized and feels alienated from Sai's elite, anglicized world.
- Their relationship breaks down due to social and cultural differences. Sai accuses him of hypocrisy:

"If this is what you've been thinking, why didn't you boycott the cheese instead of gobbling it down?" (p. 259)

4. Biju and the Immigrant Experience

- Biju, the cook's son, migrates to America seeking opportunity but faces racial discrimination, exploitation, and alienation.
- He works illegally in restaurants with other immigrants, often living in fear and squalor.
- His disillusionment is clear:

"He had learned that survival depended on being able to hide the past... but he couldn't." (p. 139)

- The gap between the dream of the West and its reality is a core element of Biju's cultural conflict.

5. Cultural Superiority and Humiliation – Lola and Noni

- Lola and Noni, two highborn Bengali sisters, hold Western lifestyle, literature, and gardening, but face dishonour from local authorities and insurgents.
- GNLF boys loot their property, viewing their anglicized lifestyle as elitist and foreign.
- After their home is raided:

"They left with the rice and the soap, the oil, and the garden's annual output of five jars of tomato chutney..." (p. 240)

6. Diasporic Identity and Fragmentation

- The novel highlights the fragmentation of identity due to cross-cultural tensions – especially in postcolonial and diasporic contexts.
- Whether it's Jemubhai's self-loathing, Biju's exile, or Gyan's identity crisis, Desai shows how colonial history and cultural dislocation cause internal conflict.

Conclusion

The Inheritance of Loss presents cross-cultural conflict as a central theme, showing how colonialism, globalization, and migration deeply affect the personal and political lives of individuals.

Desai illustrates that such conflicts are not only external but are also internalized, often leading to emotional isolation, class tensions, and cultural confusion.

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