



## RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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### Abstract

Kiran Desai is a young and vibrant Indian English novelist with innate artistic talents. Through the novel, she has highlighted the different issues of contemporary society i.e. multiculturalism, dislocation and displacement, cultural clash, immigration, poverty, subordination, hybridity, globalization, exploitation, marginalization, insurgency, political violence and economic inequality. Racial Discrimination is also one of the major issues in *The Inheritance of Loss*. Fluehr-Lobban states that, "Race is now viewed as a social construction that is primarily recognized by physical appearance or phenotype" (Fluehr-Lobban-1). Further, Fluehr-Lobban confirms that such features can be a person's skin colour, hair form, facial features such as shape of nose and lips, eye form and height (Fluehr-Lobban, 1). There are other words like ethnicity, nationality, culture, background, origin, language and identity. The concept of ethnicity is also seen in the characters between Sai and Gyan in *The Inheritance of Loss*. The term ethnicity suggests that race is a social matter (Omi and Winant, 15). In other words, ethnicity can be said to be the sociological expression of culture (Fluehr-Lobban, 17). In the research paper the term of race and ethnicity will be closely linked to the aspects of migration, integration, discrimination and power. There is difference between race and racism. Race describes, distinguishes, and classifies racial or phenotypic differences among humans while racism evaluates that difference, ranking it into superior and inferior types (Fluehr-Lobban, 20). In the novel, I made an attempt to discuss the characters like Jemubhai, Biju, Sai and Gyan who have faced and suffered with racial discrimination and ethnicity.

### Keywords

*Racism, Ethnicity, Discrimination, Superiority, Inferiority and Subordination, etc.*

### Full Article

Kiran Desai is a young and vibrant Indian English novelist with innate artistic talents. Through the novel, she has highlighted the different issues of contemporary society i.e. multiculturalism, dislocation and displacement, cultural clash, immigration, poverty, subordination, hybridity, globalization, exploitation, marginalization, insurgency, political violence and economic inequality. Racial Discrimination is also one of the major issues in *The Inheritance of Loss*. Fluehr-Lobban states that, "Race is now viewed as a social construction that is primarily recognized by physical appearance or phenotype" (Fluehr-Lobban, 1). Further, Fluehr-Lobban confirms that such features can be a person's skin colour, hair form, facial features such as shape of nose and lips, eye form and height (Fluehr-Lobban, 1). There are other words like ethnicity, nationality, culture, background, origin, language and identity.

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### **Jemubhai:**

Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a British trained Indian Civil Service Officer, is a retired judge who has done his service both in the imperial government and in the post-Independence Indian government. As he wants to lead his life of solitude and enjoy the comfort of being a stranger to others, he has chosen to settle down in Kalimpong. Through him Desai shows how discrimination due to race, which also can influence wound and in some cases, even destroy the human mind. Jemubhai is discriminated against due to his dark skin and Third World origins, the white Europeans continually prove their superiority in a universal perspective. The whites have gained power and dominance, and they demand to be treated with respect and dignity. Many critics have been interested in these crucial, typical postcolonial views, that the white, powerful and rich west feels superior to the submissive and poor Third World countries. Edward Said's 'Orientalism' from 1978 has been pioneering as such. In his introduction he claims: "My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage-and even produce-the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post Enlightenment period" (Said, 3).

Being an Anglophile the judge thinks that he is more of an Englishman than of an Indian. He hates his Indian heritage. He happens to be the first person of the Patel community to go to England to join the Cambridge University in order to become an ICS Officer. The farewell with his father before he leaves India gives the reader the bitter taste of what will come: "Never again would he know love for a human being that wasn't adulterated by another, contradictory emotion" (Desai, 37).

Jemubhai is an intelligent and clever at school, along with he has got dowry from the family of his new wife, so his father has decided to send him to study law in England where he is not accepted naturally by the Britishers due to his colour. In 1939 India was still dominated by the British Empire and in the same way Jemubhai's fellow students from England feel superior to him on the individual level. He soon withdraws from all social activities: "He retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow" (Desai, 39). After a while, he also becomes a stranger to himself: he finds his own skin colour odd, his accent unpleasant and he is terrified by the thought of being different: "Eventually he felt barely human at all" (Desai, 40). He is often ignored by his own class mates. The narrator describes the painful experience of Jemubhai: "For entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered, his heart and mind turned into blunt aching things, and elderly ladies, even the hapless –blue haired, spotted, faces like collapsing pumpkins-.The young and beautiful were no kinder: girls held their noses and giggled, 'Phew, he stinks of curry!' (Desai, 39).

Later he loses his self-esteem and starts to hate his own body and personality. The fear of being different and humiliated becomes so strong that he starts to powder his skin in a white/pinkish colour to hide his own. It symbolizes that he puts on a masque, the masque of whiteness. This indicates that he starts to adopt the features of the white man, who he admires. But Whites don't consider him. Thus his marginalization and oppression starts from the beginning of



his journey from his native place to Cambridge and does not end till his return to India from England.

Jemubhai has developed a feeling of hate to his wife after he has returned to India from England. He is feeling like a stranger: “He was a foreigner-*a foreigner*-every bit of him screamed” (Desai, 166-167). In addition, he is ridiculed because of his westernized way of life and in particular for the obsession with powdering his face. His frustrations, his temperament and his hate destroy Nimi’s life. In spite of the fact that Jemubhai always disguised his terrible behaviour, “the grotesqueness of it all shocked him” (Desai, 169-170). “Yet he repeated the gutter act again and again...cruelty to her became irresistible” (Desai, 170). Finally, the experiences of Jemubhai illustrate the destructive consequences of racism, seen as a continuous process where the oppressed suffer so badly that his only knowledge of dealing with life is to discriminate others in the same way. Thus, Desai stresses the terrible consequences of racial discrimination.

### **Biju:**

The issue of race is vividly described in the case of Biju. Biju is the son of the cook at Cho Oyu, as a young man he leaves for New York in order to secure the future for himself and his father. New York is a city known for attracting immigrants, Biju quickly learns that the “innocence” of the American dream “never prevails” there (Desai, 89). The idea of the American dream, wherein anyone can raise his or her status and become successful, plays an important role in the novel, which emphasizes the craze for the Western values, manners, language and glamorous life style. The dream, however, falls short for Biju when he finds difficulty maintaining a job without legal residency and his race. His efforts to get a tourist visa for the United States have been both challenging and humiliating for him and he is well aware that his only possibility is to stay and work illegally. The reader’s first meeting with Biju illustrates how he and his fellow have to change their jobs often because of the exploitative nature of the employers. The workers are allotted space to sleep in the restaurants according to their racial origins. They always fear being caught and sent back home by the authorities. The humiliation of continually losing a job is always present: “‘Nothing I can do’, the manager said, pink from having to dole out humiliation to these men...’Just disappear quietly is my advice....’ So they disappeared” (Desai, 16).

This quote illustrates how the system of illegal immigrants works and how they are being treated. The pink skin colour of the manager suggests the dominance of white people in positions like this, while the workers in the kitchens are mostly dark skinned and of Third World origin. In practical terms, this means that they have no rights in the American society, and that they have to accept the jobs, the pay and the poor lodgings and facilities which are offered. In order to keep their jobs, they must never complain or disagree. Financially, the undocumented workers mean a lot to the owners and managers, as especially workers from the Third World are low-cost labour. However, as for example at Pinocchio’s Restaurant, where Biju works for a period, the owner’s wife prefers illegal workers from the poorer parts of Europe rather than workers from other continents. With European workers she feels she has something in common, like religion and skin-colour which shows how the whites have superiority to the others. The only problem is that “they weren’t coming in numbers great enough or they weren’t coming desperate enough” (Desai, 48). Biju undergoes a true colonial experience at Le Colonial Restaurant. “On the top rich colonial, and down below, poor native, Colombian, Tunisian, Equadorian, Gambian” (Desai, 21). Thus, the issue of racial discrimination is present among illegal workers in New York.

Biju is naturally aspiring to get a Green Card with his fellow workers and in many cases it becomes an obsession: “Oh, the green card, the green card, the- Biju was so restless sometimes, he could barely stand to stay in his skin” (Desai, 81). However, at the same time, Biju knows that he cannot apply, because of his race: “...Indians were not able to apply” and further “The line would





be stopped up for years, the quota was full, overfull, spilling over” (Desai, 81). This situation illustrates that people from India wanting permanent resident status in America are being discriminated against due to their race and nationality.

Thus, the concept of race is very much present among the illegal immigrants, and Biju suffers in a system like this. He is aware of the fact that he, as an Indian, is not allowed to apply for the immigration lottery every year, as “Indians were not allowed to apply...on and on the list went, but no, no Indians” (Desai, 81). From other kitchens he also learns that Indians are not a well-liked group (Desai, 77). Biju feels both depressed and angry by his situation. He feels there is no future for him in America in spite of his hard work, his poor living conditions and the humiliation to which he is exposed. However, in spite of the injustice he feels himself, it is interesting to see that Biju also has prejudice for people of other races and nationalities. For a while Biju works at Brigitte’s restaurant in New York’s financial district. His fellow dishwasher Achootan, who has also lived in Canterbury for some years, describes the difference like this: “But at least this county is better than England”, he said. ‘At least they have some hypocrisy here. They believe they are good people and you get some relief. There they shout at you openly on the street, ‘Go back to where you came from’” (Desai, 134-135). This example suggests a more open and direct discrimination against foreigners in England than in America, but the intolerance against people from the Third World still seems to be the same in practical terms. He is living in the urine stinging shanty temporary sheds playing hide and seek with the US immigration authorities. He is baffled at every turn. His dreams about America are shattered. Finally he chooses to return to India as he has been desperate by the plight of America. Thus, the characters of Jemubhai, and Biju are all met with skepticism by their new countrymen, independent of the country they approach.

### **The problem of ethnicity between Sai and Gyan:**

Sai is the granddaughter of Jemubhai while Gyan is her Maths tutor; both of them have fallen in love. Later Gyan has joined GNLF and betrayed her. She thinks, betrayal is happened due to their ethnicity. Through Gyan’s betrayal he risks the life of his lover, her grandfather and the cook. Thus, in the same way Gyan feels that the Indian people with Nepalese background have been discriminated against due to ethnicity, he now uses discrimination as a weapon himself. In this respect he is like the judge. Thus, Gyan has discriminated Sai due her ethnicity. Finally both have separated themselves and lead their life separately.

Being an expatriate Kiran Desai can very well understand the kind of mental agony and physical sufferings one has to undergo when one settles down in alien land. She is of the firm opinion that racial discrimination is only man made and racism is born out of the social and political ideology of parochial minded and selfish people. But the trend has been little changed in the present days in the world scenario. She is quite certain that people should not be discriminated against the one another based on their race, skin-colour and culture. Thus, Desai has reflected the sufferings of important characters of the novel due their race and ethnicity.

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