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39

FRACTURED BELONGING: DOMESTIC DIASPORA AND INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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Abstract

This paper examines Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss through the lens of domestic diaspora, arguing that the novel portrays a profound form of displacement that unfolds not across national borders but within the homeland itself. While conventional diaspora studies focus on transnational migration, Desai reveals that diaspora can be internal—crafted through colonial residues, class hierarchies, linguistic divides, and political unrest. Through the Judge's psychological exile, Sai's hybrid cultural identity, and the social instability generated by the Gorkhaland movement, the novel illustrates how home itself becomes a site of alienation. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of unhomeliness, cultural hybridity, and identity-in-process, this paper argues that The Inheritance of Loss expands the scope of diaspora literature by foregrounding internal displacement and the fractured sense of belonging within postcolonial India.

Keywords

Domestic diaspora, Internal displacement, Postcolonial India, Kiran Desai, The Inheritance of Loss, Unhomely, Hybrid identity, etc.

Full Article

Diaspora has always been referred to as a physical journey of migration, exile, and settlement across borders. Classical theory of diaspora, which emphasises on the trauma of relocation and the negotiation between homeland and host land, is dominated by geographical definition. Displacement, however, is not always linked to crossing national borders in the postcolonial world. Increasingly, scholars transform forms of internal or domestic diaspora, where individuals experience alienation and trauma within their own homeland. In these situations, displacement cannot be limited to be a physical geographic issue, but it may become a psychological, cultural, and emotional condition. This internal fracture can be produced through history, memory, class, language, and political turmoil and it shapes the very idea of belonging.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) explores the internal form of diaspora. Although the novel's depiction of displacement takes place within India itself. Critics frequently highlight the transnational migrant narrative through Biju. Judge and Sai are the characters who inhabit Kalimpong physically but remain alienated from it. Their notion of diaspora emerges not from crossing of the borders, but from fractured identities shaped by colonial legacies, linguistic hierarchies, class divisions, and regional political tensions. The unhomely emerges when "the borders between home and world become confused," (Bhabha, 13) as Bhabha observes, resulting in a feeling of alienation even in familiar places. It is a concept that recurs throughout the book.

The political turmoil of the Gorkhaland movement further deepens these tensions. Desai put forwards a landscape where belonging becomes confused, where regional identities contests, and where the idea of home is challenged by fear, suspicion, and historical grievance. The hills of

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Kalimpong which are lush, beautiful, yet trembling with unrest can mirror the characters' internal fractures.

This paper argues that *The Inheritance of Loss* broadens the boundaries of diaspora studies by exploring domestic diaspora, a form of internal displacement born from the legacies of empire, class hierarchies, and political fragmentation. Through the Judge's psychological exile, Sai's hybrid consciousness, and the collective anxieties produced by the Gorkhaland movement, Desai reestablishes diaspora as a crisis of belonging that can occur within the homeland itself. In doing so, she invites a re-examination of what it means to be displaced and suggests that the most painful feeling of alienation and trauma can be reflected sometimes in those who never leave home.

Desai highlights Kalimpong as a place which is suspended between worlds, shaped by the notions of colonial leftovers and contemporary unrest. The region is suspended by an inherent dissonance which is unrest between the idyllic natural beauty and the simmering political dissatisfaction scenario beneath the surface. Desai pointed out that the landscape was one where "the silence of the mountains was thick with contradictions" (Desai, 89). This contradiction shows the fractured sense of belonging experienced by its inhabitants. They live on familiar soil, yet their cultural and emotional bearings feel unsettled.

Alienation here becomes a shared condition. The characters inhabit a country whose internal diversity such as linguistic, cultural, and economic create barriers like those which are faced by migrants abroad. The novel thus adds to the notion of diaspora by highlighting the fact that individuals may feel foreign even in their homeland. As Desai pens of Kalimpong's residents, "they carried their own kind of exile within them, an exile that came not from leaving home but from feeling invisible within it" (Desai, 104). This line captures the feeling of internal displacement which highlights the ache of unbelonging without physical movement.

Moreover, class and cultural hierarchies deepen this alienation. Those who are trained in Western traditions find themselves away from the rhythms of local life. Those who lack privilege feel marginalized within their own community. These tensions are parallel to the diasporic experience of navigating between two worlds, yet there is a rift that exists within the same geographical space. As theorist Avtar Brah accepts that diaspora is as much about "the lived experience of locality" (Brah, 192) as it is about movement. Desai's novel establishes this idea by showing how locality can be fractured, producing multiple forms of un-belonging.

Through her portrayal of Kalimpong and its people, Desai rethinks diaspora not as a matter of distance travelled but as a feeling of cultural and psychological disconnection. The landscape becomes a metaphor for the characters' inner turmoil: familiar, yet foreign; rooted, yet uprooted. Domestic diaspora thus becomes a tool through which the novel's broader themes of identity, memory, and loss are explained. Domestic diaspora thus becomes a lens through which the novel's broader themes of identity, memory, and loss can be ascertained.

The characters in Kalimpong do not migrate in the geographical sense, yet they remain emotionally, culturally, and psychologically uprooted. Their isolation from the surroundings arises from the legacies of colonialism, entrenched class hierarchies, and persistent political unrest, producing a condition of domestic diaspora which is an inward form of displacement that gradually fractures the very idea of home.

Jemubhai Patel, the retired judge, is one of the most powerful embodiments of internal diaspora in *The Inheritance of Loss*. He does not change his location geographically but psychologically he is rooted in the colonial encounter that permanently transforms his sense of self and his relationship with home. Through this character Desai shows how colonial education produces a fracture so deep that an individual becomes alienated not only from his homeland but also from his own identity.

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The Judge's transformation starts from the time when he resided in England, where he unconsciously adopted the negative beliefs, stereotypes, and devaluation promoted by colonial power about his own people and culture and then directed those negative views towards himself. Upon returning to India, he finds that he was unable to connect with the people around him: "he found he could not bear the sight of his own countrymen" (Desai, 39). His alienation is not physical distance but of emotional detachment. The sight of the culture he once belonged to now evokes in him shame and disgust. Desai intensifies feelings of self-criticism and worthlessness that it becomes an automatic and deeply ingrained pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting: "the solitude became a habit" (Desai, 41). Home does not provide comfort; instead, it becomes a mirror that reflects his fractured identity.

His obsession about cleanliness further justifies his attempt to purify himself of Indianness. Desai writes that: "he scrubbed at his flesh as if he could rub off the colour of his own skin" (Desai, 46) a striking portrayal of the shame, inferiority complex, and personality disorders engendered by the colonial system. His body which is brown becomes a site of conflict, something he cannot remain fully comfortable with. He speaks English "in a manner that made even the English falter" (Desai, 122), and this very proficiency distances him from his own linguistic roots. Gujarati, once his native language, becomes "a language he no longer knew how to inhabit" (Desai, 45). Language, identity, and belonging create a significant tension and internal conflict for the colonized which weakens or destroys the original cultural ties and sense of authentic selfhood.

The Judge's marriage further explores how internal diaspora can disrupt a person's mental and emotional state. The way he treats his young wife, Nimi erupts from the shame he inhabits within himself. When he sees that she was not familiar with Western manners, he feels "a rage that rose from the humiliation he had endured abroad" (Desai, 97). Nimi serves as the representation of the India he wishes not to accept, and thus the violence that can be witnessed in the novel towards Nimi serves as a misguided attempt of The Judge to distance himself from the cultural identity he has learned to despise. His domestic life becomes another space of exile, haunted by unresolved tensions.

Even Cho Oyu, the Judge's isolated estate, symbolizes his psychological fragmentation. The house, filled with remains of colonial influence, becomes both sanctuary and prison. Desai notes that "the walls echoed with a past he wished to forget" (Desai, 134). The home he constructs is not a place of belonging, but a fortress built to protect himself from the world, a world he no longer feels a part of. His displacement, therefore, is entirely internal: a self-imposed exile born from the impossibility of reconciling his colonized past with his present reality.

Through the Judge, Desai illustrates how colonialism creates forms of diaspora that exist without any physical movement. His story captures what Bhabha describes as the "split self," caught between imitation and rejection (Bhabha, 87). The Judge returns to India not as a reintegrated man but as one permanently suspended between world and who is unable to reclaim his past, yet unable to fully occupy the identity he sought to match. His life demonstrates that the most enduring kind of exile is not geographical but psychological.

Sai, the Judge's granddaughter, represents a younger generation shaped by the lingering residue of colonial modernity. Unlike the Judge, her displacement is not rooted in direct colonial trauma but in the cultural hybridity that defines her upbringing. Educated in convent schools and raised largely outside traditional familial structures, Sai occupies a liminal space—one where she is neither fully Western nor comfortably Indian. Her identity becomes an unfinished negotiation, characterized by uncertainty and internal conflict.

From the moment she is introduced, Sai is described as living "in a world whose every detail she questioned" (Desai, 57). This questioning reflects her lack of rootedness. Unlike her peers, Sai grows up far removed from the cultural rhythms of everyday Indian life. Even her early education

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constructs a filtered reality, one shaped through the lens of colonial pedagogy. As Desai notes, "her mind had been prepared with the simplicity of Western thought" (Desai, 62), leaving her without the intuitive sense of cultural belonging shared by those around her.

Her relationship with Gyan becomes a powerful site, where her hybrid identity is both exposed and challenged. At first, their bond appears uncomplicated, a romantic connection between two young people exploring the world. Yet as political tensions intensify, Gyan begins to perceive Sai through the lens of class and cultural privilege. When he mocks her pronunciation and Westernized habits, Sai feels "a crack travel through her heart" (Desai, 214). This moment marks her recognition of the gulf between them, a gulf produced not by geography but by cultural history. The shame she feels is described as "a burning shame she could not explain" (Desai, 228), demonstrating that her alienation stems from forces she herself struggles to articulate.

Sai's hybridity also emerges in her emotional detachment from Indian traditions. When she attempts to celebrate Christmas, a holiday inherited from her convent education, she does so "without any real sense of what it meant, only that it belonged to her more than the festivals outside" (Desai, 115). The festivals of Kalimpong, rooted in Nepali tradition, feel distant to her. Yet Christmas, too, stands on uncertain ground which she adopted, but never fully made her own. This dual estrangement underlines the nature of her crisis as she belongs nowhere completely.

Even the sense of her home is fractured and is not at all fixed. Cho Oyu, the place where the Judge's reside, is described as "cold, echoing, and foreign" (Desai, 251), a place that can be called a place to live but not home. Sai roams its corridors without any connection, feeling that there is an emptiness which is felt on account of the absence of her parents. For her, Memory, is not a source of identity but a series of fragments: "scattered pieces, like photographs soaked in water" (Desai, 75). These blurred recollections deepen her emotional dislocation, preventing her from forming a coherent sense of self.

Sai's internal diaspora is intensified; she realized how the world perceives her. The criticism by Gyan's during the height of the Gorkhaland agitation expose the sociopolitical tensions embedded in her identity. When the accusation of her being insulated by privilege, Sai suddenly recognizes that "she had been wrapped in a soft shawl of ignorance" (Desai, 223). This moment of awakening forces her to confront the cultural and class-based gulf which separates her from the community she inhabits.

Through Sai, Desai demonstrates that domestic diaspora is not solely the legacy of colonialism; it can also emerge from hybridity, privilege, and the broken upbringing of a postcolonial generation. Sai's displacement is quiet, introspective, and deeply human and an identity in process rather than a fixed condition. Her struggle shows how belonging becomes difficult; the self is shaped by conflicting cultural forces. She moves through the novel as someone holding herself between worlds, never fully at home in either.

The Gorkhaland movement serves as a powerful socio-political backdrop in *The Inheritance of Loss*, shaping the atmosphere of fear, instability, and contested belonging that permeates Kalimpong. More than a historical detail, the movement functions as an active force that fractures identities and produces a profound sense of internal displacement for the people of the region. Through vivid narrative descriptions and intimate character experiences, Desai illustrates how the agitation transforms home into a landscape of uncertainty—an unstable terrain where the meaning of belonging is constantly renegotiated.

The eruption of political violence disturbs the everyday rhythms of Kalimpong. Desai's depiction of the insurgents is striking: "The insurgents arrived like shadows, unsettling the peace of the hills" (Desai, 253). The metaphor of shadows suggests a pervasive, creeping presence, one that blurs the boundaries between safety and fear. For the residents, the once-familiar pathways of the town become sites of danger. Desai writes that "the roads were no longer safe even in

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daylight" (Desai, 259). Such disruptions contribute to a collective psychological displacement, where the land itself becomes uncanny.

The Gorkhaland movement also exposes the fragility and fragmentation of national identity. Long-settled Nepali-speaking communities, despite generations of residence, are suddenly positioned as outsiders. The accusation is clear and painful: "They said we were outsiders even though our dead were buried in this soil" (Desai, 266). This line encapsulates the essence of internal diaspora that belonging denied not based on geography but on contested definitions of identity. The homeland becomes a place where legitimacy is questioned, and citizenship becomes unstable.

Gyan's political awakening provides a personal lens into the tensions of the movement. Initially indifferent to larger political narratives, he is gradually drawn into the fervour of ethnic assertion. His participation is fuelled by resentment against class inequality and his perception of Sai as a symbol of privilege. He begins to view his own community through a new ideological framework, seeing them as "a people treated like insects, children of a lesser god" (Desai, 271). This sense of humiliation and marginalization lays the foundation for a politicized identity that is built not from migration but from exclusion within the homeland.

The movement also transforms the interpersonal relationships. Gyan's growing involvement creates a rift between him and Sai, whose Westernized upbringing marks her as culturally alien in the context of regional struggle. When he accuses her of ignorance and privilege, their personal conflict creates the broader political tensions unfolding around them. Sai becomes a symbolic figure onto whom Gyan projects the imbalances of the social system. As Desai notes, "his anger was not just for her, but for everything she represented" (Desai, 274). Thus, the political agitation infuses even intimate relationships with the sharp edges of internal diaspora.

The escalating violence intensifies the sense of vulnerability felt by the residents of Cho Oyu. The insurgents invade the Judge's home, asserting both political and symbolic power: "They entered with the arrogance of those who believed history had finally turned in their favor" (Desai, 279). Their intrusion collapses the boundary between public agitation and private space, leaving the household shaken. Home, once a refuge, becomes permeable and threatened.

Memory in *The Inheritance of Loss* functions not as a source of comfort or continuity but as a force that deepens the characters' experience of internal displacement. For Desai's characters, memory is a terrain marked by shame, fragmentation, and unresolved trauma. Rather than grounding them in a stable past, memory pulls them into states of emotional exile, intensifying their inability to belong in the present. Through the haunting recollections of the Judge, the fragile memories of Sai, and the fractured memories that shape Kalimpong itself, Desai constructs a world where the past continually disrupts the present, creating what Homi Bhabha famously terms the "unhomely" which becomes a condition where "the borders between home and world become confused" (Bhabha, 13).

No character embodies the destructive force of memory more vividly than the Judge. His recollections of England return with a painful sharpness, shaping his bitterness and self-loathing. Desai describes memory as "a curse he carried like a second skin" (Desai, 131). This metaphor captures the way his past clings to him, refusing separation. The Judge's memories do not provide nostalgia or comfort; rather, they remind him of a time when he internalized racism so deeply that he came to despise his own identity. His recollections of England are fragmented but emotionally charged: "the rain, the silence, the contempt he learned to mirror" (Desai, 138). These moments of humiliation and isolation abroad become the blueprint for the psychological exile he experiences upon returning to India.

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Sai's relationship with memory is more delicate but equally disorienting. Orphaned at a young age, she possesses only faint impressions of her parents. Desai writes that "her past arrived in scattered pieces, like photographs soaked in water" (Desai, 75). The image conveys the fragility and distortion of her memories like blurred edges, missing faces, and the impossibility of reconstructing a coherent whole. This fragmentation shapes Sai's identity, leaving her emotionally unanchored. Without the grounding influence of familial memory, she moves through life in a state of liminality, suspended between what she cannot remember and what she cannot fully comprehend.

Memory also plays a collective role in shaping the atmosphere of Kalimpong. The region carries the residue of colonial history, missionary education, military presence, and political agitation. These layers of historical memory imbue the land with a sense of instability. The characters inhabit a place where the past is "never quite past," and where old wounds continually reopen. Desai suggests that the landscape itself remembers: "the hills echoed with stories of betrayal and loss" (Desai, 164). This anthropomorphic description of the environment strengthens the novel's treatment of memory as a living force as one that shapes consciousness and complicates belonging.

While *The Inheritance of Loss* primarily foregrounds forms of internal displacement, Desai juxtaposes this with Biju's transnational journey, offering a counterpoint that deepens the novel's exploration of diaspora. Unlike the Judge and Sai, whose alienation unfolds within India, Biju's experiences explain the harsh realities of external migration. His narrative dismantles the romanticized myth of the "American dream," exposing instead a world marked by exploitation, invisibility, and systematic deprivation. Through Biju, Desai demonstrates that displacement, whether domestic or global is rooted in the same fractures of identity, belonging, and economic precarity.

From the outset, Biju's life in the United States is defined by instability. He works in a series of restaurants, each characterized by exploitative labour conditions and a rigid racial hierarchy. His existence unfolds "in dark basements that smelled of grease and loneliness" (Desai, 197), a recurring image that captures the physical and emotional suffocation of undocumented migrant life. In these cramped spaces, Biju becomes part of a shadow workforce whose presence sustains the façade of American prosperity while denying them security and recognition.

Biju's longing for home is a central aspect of his psychological struggle. He often imagines India through idealized memories of warmth and belonging, believing that "there was no place like home, no place that could forgive him for being himself" (Desai, 202). Yet these memories become both solace and torment. They offer emotional refuge but also sharpen his awareness of his current alienation. Desai shows how nostalgia can function as a double-edged sword: comforting in imagination, but painful in contrast to lived reality.

The Inheritance of Loss emerges as a powerful rethinking of diaspora by shifting attention away from geographical migration toward the subtler, yet equally devastating, experience of internal displacement. Through its layered narrative and complex characters, Kiran Desai demonstrates that alienation does not necessarily begin at the border; rather, it often originates within the home itself. The novel reveals how colonial legacies, class hierarchies, linguistic privilege, political unrest, and fractured memory collectively produce a condition of domestic diaspora, wherein individuals feel estranged despite remaining physically rooted in their homeland.

The Judge's psychological exile exemplifies the destructive afterlife of colonialism. His education abroad does not grant empowerment but instead instils shame, self-loathing, and cultural estrangement. Unable to reconcile his colonial past with his postcolonial present, he becomes a figure suspended between identities, embodying a form of diaspora that is entirely

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inward. Sai's experience, though shaped by a different historical moment, reflects a similar sense of unbelonging. Her hybrid upbringing and emotional detachment from cultural traditions render her identity unstable, leaving her caught between privilege and isolation. Through her, Desai illustrates how hybridity, often celebrated in postcolonial discourse, can also produce confusion, vulnerability, and exclusion.

The Gorkhaland movement further complicates the novel's exploration of belonging. By portraying the Nepali-speaking community's struggle for recognition, Desai exposes the fractures within the Indian nation-state itself. The movement destabilizes notions of citizenship and belonging, transforming Kalimpong into a space where home is contested, and identity becomes politicized. This collective unrest produces a shared sense of internal displacement, revealing how political marginalization can create diaspora-like conditions without physical migration.

Biju's transnational journey, while central to conventional diaspora narratives, reinforces the novel's broader argument. His return to India, marked by loss rather than fulfilment, highlights the futility of imagining home as a stable refuge untouched by global and local inequalities. His experience mirrors the emotional dislocation of those who never left, suggesting that displacement operates through shared structures of power rather than mere movement across borders.

Together, these narratives affirm that *The Inheritance of Loss* expands the conceptual boundaries of diaspora studies. Desai redefines diaspora as a condition shaped by historical memory, social fragmentation, and emotional alienation. Home, in her novel, is no longer a site of certainty or belonging but a space marked by instability and loss. By foregrounding domestic diaspora, Desai invites readers to reconsider the nature of displacement itself, suggesting that the most enduring forms of exile are often invisible, internal, and deeply ingrained in everyday life.

In illuminating these fractured forms of belonging, *The Inheritance of Loss* offers a profound commentary on postcolonial identity. The novel insists that loss is not merely inherited through migration or exile, but through history itself—embedded in the very structures that define home, nation, and self.

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