

Migration and Identity: A Study of Belongingness in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Suravi Biswas*

Submitted: 28.02.2025

Revised: 22.04.2025

Accepted: 17.05.2025

Abstract: *The central themes of Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss are Migration and identity, where the complexities of identity crisis and belongingness are explored through the lives of characters navigating the emotional and cultural detachment caused by physical and psychological migration. This study examines how Desai portrays the struggles of her characters, particularly Biju, Sai, and the Judge, as they grapple with issues of alienation, homesickness, and the search for self-identity in a post-colonial, globalized world. Through their experiences, the novel reveals the profound effects of migration, not only in terms of physical movement but also in the psychological, emotional, and social challenges that accompany it. Desai highlights the tension between the desire for a better life in foreign lands and the inescapable urge of rootedness, reflecting the broader dilemmas faced by migrants and those caught between conflicting multicultural worlds. This research aims to analyse how Desai uses migration as a metaphor for the quest for belonging, illustrating the difficulties of finding home and identity in a world marked by historical legacies, societal divides, and shifting global dynamics. The novel offers a poignant critique of the impact of colonialism, globalization, and socio-economic disparity on the migrant experience, underscoring the complex intersections of migration, belonging, and identity in contemporary literature.*

Key Words: *Migration, Identity, Belongingness. Colonialism, Globalisation.*

*Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Chapra Bangalji Mahavidyalaya, Nadia.
e-mail: suravibsws828@gmail.com

Introduction

Kiran Desai, an eminent Indian author, gained widespread recognition with her debut novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. Her second book, *The Inheritance of Loss*, further solidified her literary reputation, receiving critical acclaim and winning the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2006. Desai, who inherited her creative talents from her mother, renowned author Anita Desai, offers readers a profound and nuanced perspective through her writing. Educated in India, England, and the United States, Desai's global experiences are reflected in her works, which, like the characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, often traverse multiple cultural and geographical spaces. The novel is set against the backdrop of a remote Himalayan village in Kalimpong, India, with the narrative occasionally shifting between India, London, and the United States. The novel's central themes include migration, the desire for rootedness, and the complexities of identity in a post-colonial world. This study explores how Kiran Desai portrays the struggles of her characters—particularly Biju, Sai, and the Judge—as they navigate issues of alienation, homesickness, and the search for self-identity within a post-colonial and globalized context. Through their diverse experiences, the novel underscores the profound impact of migration, not only as a physical journey but also as a source of psychological, emotional, and social upheaval. Desai deftly captures the tension between the aspiration for a better life abroad and the persistent longing for rootedness, reflecting the broader dilemmas faced by migrants caught between multiple cultural realities. This research examines how Desai employs migration as a metaphor for the quest for belonging, illustrating the inherent challenges of locating “home” and constructing identity in a world shaped by colonial legacies, socio-economic inequality, and evolving global dynamics. The paper also examines the enduring effects of colonialism and globalization portrayed in the novel, highlighting the intricate intersections of displacement, identity, and belonging in contemporary literature.

Historical Context and the Characters

The story unfolds in 1986, amid the historical context of the Gorkhaland Movement, which was driven by the Nepali population in India's Himalayan region. The interplay of these social and political tensions provides a layered exploration of displacement and belonging. The narrative primarily focuses on two central characters: Biju and Sai. Biju, a young man who migrates to the United States in search of a better life, faces the grim reality of illegal immigration, grappling with the challenges of survival and the emotional toll of displacement. His experiences in America expose the hardships that migrants endure, offering a poignant commentary on the struggles of undocumented workers and the dislocation they face in foreign lands. In contrast, Sai, an orphan, is sent to live with her maternal grandfather in Kalimpong, after the sudden death of her parents. Her transition from a life of privilege, shaped by a convent education, to a rural, more isolated existence highlights the theme of uprootedness, as she comes to terms with her new reality and the complexities of her identity.

In addition to these protagonists, Desai weaves a rich tapestry of secondary characters, including Jemubhai Patel, the cook, Gyan, and the two sisters Noni and Lola, as well as Uncle Potty and Father Booty. These characters, through their interactions and perspectives,

contribute to a multidimensional exploration of themes such as migration, belonging, identity, class consciousness, colonialism, and the lingering effects of post-colonialism in India. Desai's narrative not only examines the internal struggles of her characters but also critiques the larger socio-political landscape in which they live. The novel serves as a compelling reflection on the complexities of post-colonial identity, the disorienting forces of migration, and the deep-seated yearning for a sense of belonging. Through her nuanced storytelling, Desai invites readers to contemplate the tensions between home and abroad, past and present, and the multiple facets of human experience that shape the quest for self-understanding in an increasingly globalized world.

The Judge's Dilemma: Identity, Displacement and Colonial Legacy

The narrative of *The Inheritance of Loss* opens with a violent gang attack at the remote house Cho Oyu, situated in the Eastern Himalayan region of Kalimpong. This house is inhabited by the retired judge Jemubhai Patel, his granddaughter Sai, and an elderly servant, commonly referred to as the cook and a dog named Mutt. The setting of the story introduces a tone of seclusion, alienation, and the fragmentation of family structures, which permeate the novel's thematic concerns. Jemubhai Patel, once a respected judge in colonial India, leads a life of isolation and bitterness in the post-colonial era. His background as a member of a peasant family, which he rose above through academic excellence, now places him among the elite of society, but he remains unable to find a sense of true identity. Despite his present elevated status, his experiences abroad, particularly during his studies, only serve to reinforce his sense of alienation. While in England, Jemubhai encountered the harsh reality of racism, which shaped his complex relationship with both his Indian roots and his adopted English identity. As Desai articulates through Jemubhai's reflections, the judge's internal conflict reveals his struggle with identity and belonging. His desire to transcend his origins and adopt the behaviours and values of the British elite is captured poignantly in the following passage:

"He found he began to be mistaken for something he wasn't—a man of dignity. This accidental poise became more important than any other thing. 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."¹

This passage encapsulates Jemubhai's tragic desire to construct an identity that is disconnected from his Indian heritage, but his efforts ultimately result in a profound sense of disillusionment and self-loathing. The narrative thus explores the paradoxical nature of his quest for belonging—through his rejection of his Indian heritage, Jemubhai ultimately fails to create an authentic sense of self. Jemubhai's experience is emblematic of a larger post-colonial predicament: the attempt to forge a new identity by abandoning one's roots often leads to a sense of loss and disconnection. His rejection of his father's inheritance and his father's aspirations for his son's accomplishments reflect his desire to construct a new identity through external achievements, which are themselves hollow and unfulfilling. This rejection extends to his personal relationships, particularly with his wife, whom he tortures emotionally for her perceived failure to relinquish her "Indianness." Furthermore, Jemubhai's obsession with

emulating English manners and customs, as seen in his preference for eating South Indian food with a fork and knife, highlights the absurdity and futility of his efforts to erase his cultural identity. His rejection of his heritage, combined with his inability to fully embrace the English way of life, results in a painful and enduring sense of loss. The judge's story, both in his memories and in his present disillusionment, underscores the novel's exploration of identity formation in a post-colonial context. His character serves as a critical lens through which Desai examines the psychological toll of colonialism and the ongoing struggle for identity in the post-colonial world. His life is a testament to the alienation that can arise from the disavowal of one's origins in favour of an unattainable and ultimately unsatisfactory ideal. Through Jemubhai's narrative, Desai offers a poignant critique of the complexities of identity, belonging, and the legacy of colonialism.

From Aspiration to Alienation: The Migrant Experience Through Biju's Character

People from South Asia often leave their homeland for first-world countries in search of a better life. However, dislocated from their native cultural identity, they often struggle to adjust to their new environment and experience a deep sense of alienation. The constant memory of their homeland haunts them, making it even harder to adapt and integrate into the new culture. This ongoing emotional and cultural disconnection prevents them from forming the new identity they once aspired to achieve. In her novel, Desai explores this crisis through the character of Biju, who embodies the painful reality of this immigrant experience.

The narrative shuffles the readers between past and present frequently. In the 1940s, Jemubhai Patel's father envisioned his son's social upliftment through his academic achievements abroad, while in 1986, Biju's father, a cook in the judge's house, also dreams of a better life for his son by sending him to America. However, the circumstances surrounding their migration differ significantly. Jemubhai went abroad on a scholarship for higher studies, whereas Biju emigrates as an undocumented migrant in search of employment. What is striking, however, is that despite the temporal gap between their experiences, Biju encounters the same racial discrimination that Jemubhai faced during his time abroad. Jemubhai's alienation is depicted poignantly when he reflects that "for entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered." ² He is ignored by his peers, never able to make a friend, and even ridiculed by a young girl who comments that he "stinks of curry." In a similar vein, Biju faces discrimination in the United States when the wife of the Italian restaurant owner fires him, expressing disdain for the smell of his hair oil. This parallel narrative of racial prejudice emphasizes the enduring challenges faced by migrants, despite the passage of time. Biju's struggle to establish a new identity in America further highlights the difficulties inherent in leaving one's homeland and attempting to assimilate into a foreign society. The colonial hangover remains a significant aspect of Indian society, influencing individuals across various socio-economic classes. In this context, Biju's father epitomizes the lingering belief in colonial ideologies, specifically the association of Western, particularly English, cuisine with higher social status and improved employment opportunities. He takes pride in the notion that preparing English meals would

elevate his son's professional prospects. This belief manifests when he expresses confidence in the superiority of "Angrezi Khana" (English food) as an indicator of social advancement, suggesting that his son, by cooking English dishes, holds a higher status than if he were preparing traditional Indian food. The cook's perspective highlights a critical example of the colonial mindset that equates Western practices with prestige and success.

However, living in the remote hilly town of Kalimpong, Biju's father is unaware of the nuances of globalization. He remains disconnected from the broader economic realities and cultural shifts that have transformed the food industry. While he believes that his son's adherence to Western culinary traditions will guarantee professional success, he fails to recognize that his son's career trajectory is characterized by constant movement across different restaurant environments, each with its own specific cuisine—French, Italian, American, and others. While his father takes pride in sending his son abroad, boasting of his accomplishments, the harsh realities of Biju's migrant life tell a contrasting story. His experiences underscore the disparity between the idealized vision of success abroad and the harsh, often dehumanizing, conditions that migrants must endure. Biju's old father does not understand the complexities of post-colonial identity and the tension between traditional values and the modern realities of a globalized world, where knowledge, culture, and careers are no longer constrained by colonial boundaries but shaped by global interconnections. So, he nurtures unrealistic expectations, and worries about his son, who is doomed to low-wage jobs as an illegal immigrant in New York City, where he "joins the United Nations of the desperate— young men from around the globe who work at dirty, underpaid jobs and sleep crowded together on the floors of unventilated tenement basements"³

Another significant aspect of Biju's narrative is his cultural displacement, which does not result in the abandonment of his own beliefs and prejudices. Despite his struggles as a migrant, he harbours scepticism and mistrust towards a fellow Pakistani migrant who shares similar hardships. Additionally, Biju is reluctant to work in a restaurant that serves beef, highlighting how deeply ingrained cultural practices are tied to personal identity. His internal conflict underscores the complex relationship between culture, belief systems, and the construction of selfhood. Biju's father wished that his son will make an identity in a foreign country. But in reality, his life turned into a game like hide and seek in which he had to disappear several times in dearth of green card. The experiences of Jemubhai and Biju illustrate the enduring challenges faced by migrants, particularly the mental and physical struggles associated with cultural displacement. Their stories reveal that, despite the passage of time and geographical distance, the struggle for a new identity in a foreign land remains fraught with both external and internal conflicts. This exploration of migration highlights the profound impact that culture and identity have on an individual's sense of belonging, making the process of assimilation a complex and often painful endeavour.

One of the most striking aspects of Biju's experience is the struggle he faces in attempting to establish his identity, both in India and abroad. In India, he encounters challenges in reconciling his aspirations with the expectations of his community, but in America, this struggle intensifies.

In New York, Biju is confronted not only with the complexities of a multicultural society but also with the realities of migrant existence, where individuals from a multitude of cultural backgrounds—Mexican, African, Indian, Pakistani, and others—share similar experiences of displacement. As the text highlights, “There was a whole world in the basement kitchens of New York, but Biju was ill-equipped for it...”⁴ This quote encapsulates the sense of isolation and disorientation Biju feels in navigating the maze of foreign cultures and identities, all while trying to carve out a place for himself in an unfamiliar and often unwelcoming environment.

Biju’s astonishment is further emphasized when he realizes the breadth of his ignorance about the globalized world. Before moving to America, his understanding was limited to a handful of countries, such as England, America, Dubai, and Kuwait. He is shocked to discover the vast number of Indian migrant communities spread across the world, each attempting to adjust, integrate, or subdue their native cultural practices in order to create new identities in foreign lands. This realization forces Biju to confront the difficulties inherent in migration, as individuals are often required to abandon long-held traditions and customs to survive in a new environment. The narrative recounts, “In Canada, a group of Sikhs came long ago; they went to remote areas and the women took off their salwars and wore their kurtas like dresses”⁵. This instance reflects the broader sacrifices migrants make in their quest to assimilate into new societies, where the abandonment of traditional attire or customs is not merely a personal choice but a survival strategy. In this way the novel explores the dynamic relationship between various forms of influence and identity within the contexts of migration, diaspora, and globalization. The importance of this issue has been consistently emphasized by a range of scholars and writers, most notably by Salman Rushdie in his essay collection *Imaginary Homelands*, which underscores the literary potential of migration: “Let me suggest that Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and politics of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group [...] America, a nation of immigrants, has created great literature out of the phenomenon of cultural transplantation, out of examining the ways in which people cope with a new world; it may be that by discovering what we have in common with those who preceded us into this country, we can begin to do the same”⁶. It is in this context that Desai’s novel exemplifies global mobility across various historical periods and socio-economic structures, and highlights the unsettling impact that dominant global narratives have on both individual and collective senses of belonging and self.

For migrants like Biju, these sacrifices are immense. They must relinquish the comfort of familiar rituals and customs, all in the name of forging new identities in foreign territories. However, the tension between preserving one’s cultural heritage and adapting to the demands of a new society is often a source of internal conflict. Biju’s failure to fully embrace this sacrifice is evident in his constant yearning for his homeland, his family, and his familiar customs. As a result, Biju struggles to survive in the harsh realities of migrant life, as his ties to his native culture persistently anchor him. This internal conflict ultimately manifests in Biju’s decision not to fully assimilate into American society. Unlike many migrants who prioritize obtaining

citizenship or permanent residency in their new country, Biju does not seek a Green Card or long-term integration into American life. Instead, he opts to return to India, seeking solace and familiarity in his homeland. His choice to make a return visa, rather than pursue permanent settlement in America, underscores the profound emotional and cultural disconnect he experiences in his migrant journey. Ultimately, Biju's return signifies his inability to completely sever his ties to his roots, illustrating the profound challenges faced by migrants who must balance the desire for a new identity with the pull of their native heritage.

Emotional Dislocation in Sai and Gyan's Divergent Journeys for Finding Identity

Sai, another central character in the novel, similarly grapples with the pain of dislocation, both geographically and emotionally. Her transition from a privileged convent life to an alienated existence with her maternal grandfather vividly illustrates the initial trauma she experiences due to this dislocation. At first glance, it appears that Sai has been uprooted from her family and thrust into a state of orphanhood due to the sudden death of both her parents. However, a deeper examination reveals that her parents' migration to Russia left Sai abandoned in the Saint Augustine convent—a place her mother had attended—where she spent two years without emotional connection to them. The absence of her parents during this period created a sense of emotional deprivation, leaving her unable to process their eventual deaths. When Sister Caroline informs her of the tragic accident that claimed their lives, Sai's reaction is detached and numb. She whispers to herself saying her parents are dead and she becomes orphan now highlighting the emotional desolation she feels, as she is unable to cry or express grief in a manner expected for someone her age. Sai's emotional dislocation extends beyond her parents' death, as she seeks warmth and connection in her relationship with the cook at her grandfather's house. Her grandfather, who is the only remaining family member, remains emotionally distant, offers no affection or comfort to her. Sai's attempts to bond with him are thwarted by his indifference, leaving her to turn to the cook as a source of emotional solace. She feels a sense of joy when she learns that the cook's son has received a visa to go abroad, as this development suggests she will become the cook's closest confidante. Yet, this seemingly close relationship is built upon a superficial foundation, shaped by the cultural and linguistic divide between them. As the text states, "She was rarely in the cook's hut, and when she did come searching for him to enter, he was ill at ease and so was she, something about their closeness being exposed in the end as fake, their friendship composed of shallow things conducted in a broken language, for she was an English-speaker and he was a Hindi-speaker."⁷ This broken communication exemplifies the emotional and cultural chasm between Sai and the cook, revealing the limitations of their relationship. Despite their apparent closeness, the lack of true emotional resonance prevents Sai from finding the familial warmth she desperately seeks.

Sai's search for emotional fulfillment extends further into her relationship with her math tutor, Gyan. Her love for Gyan represents an attempt to establish a sense of self-importance and identity, as she seeks affection from someone outside the rigid structure of her family. However, cultural distance once again proves to be a barrier. During a visit to Gyan's home,

Sai is confronted with the harsh realities of his poverty, further isolating her and reinforcing her sense of alienation. Gyan's presence in the narrative links directly to the story's overarching theme of the quest for identity. Gyan is a restless Nepali graduate who is navigating the complexities of his own identity amid the political turmoil and questions of nationality that plague his region. His disdain for Sai's westernized lifestyle, as well as that of her grandfather, illustrates the tension between his own cultural roots and the foreign influences that shape his perceptions of the world. Gyan's internal conflict—balancing his personal affections for Sai with his struggle to maintain his identity in a politically volatile context—becomes central to his character development. Ultimately, Gyan's loyalty to his heritage and his growing commitment to the cause of Nepali nationalism drive him to abandon his relationship with Sai. Reshu Shukla in her article "Reflection of Immigration, Alienation, and Identity Crisis in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss: A Saga of "Middle of Nowhere"* writes "Between his commitment to love and his quest for identity, Gyan finds himself in complete confusion. Finally, a patriotic quest to build a Nepali nation incites him. He abandons his affections for Sai in favour of a furious zeal for movement." ⁸Gyan's decision to forsake Sai for the larger cause of national identity underscores the pervasive theme of dislocation and the struggle for belonging within the novel. His abandonment of Sai reflects his inability to reconcile personal desires with the demands of a collective, cultural identity, highlighting the complex interplay between individual relationships and broader socio-political realities. The characters of Sai and Gyan both embody the struggles of dislocation and identity formation. Sai's emotional isolation, compounded by her inability to form genuine connections, contrasts sharply with Gyan's pursuit of a nationalistic identity, as both characters search for meaning and belonging in a world marked by cultural and emotional fragmentation.

The character of Gyan, along with the insurgency in the hilly region of Kalimpong, provides a deeper exploration of detachment and the quest for identity within the novel. The Gorkha Revolution, led by the Nepali community in India, reflects a form of political and social alienation. The insurgents demand the creation of a separate state, driven by their perceived marginalization and their sense of disconnection from the central government. This detachment is rooted in the historical and socio-political neglect of the Nepali community, who have long been denied basic resources and opportunities by the Indian state. As one character reflects, "It was the Indian-Nepalese this time, fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority. They wanted their own country, or at least their own state, in which to manage their own affairs"⁹

This quote highlights the core grievance of the Gorkha Revolutionaries: the denial of their rights and recognition despite their numerical majority in certain regions. The demand for autonomy stems from a deep sense of frustration with being treated as a marginalized ethnic group, despite their significant presence in the North Eastern regions of India. The central government's neglect of their basic needs—such as adequate infrastructure, healthcare, and education—has exacerbated this sense of disconnection and disenfranchisement. The Gorkha movement, therefore, is not just a political struggle for territorial boundaries but also a fight for

cultural recognition and the right to self-determination. In this context, Gyan's personal journey becomes intertwined with the larger political struggle of his community. His participation in the movement reflects his own search for identity and his desire to align himself with a cause that seeks to address the historical grievances of his people. The insurgency in Kalimpong, thus, is not just a backdrop of the novel but also a broader commentary on the complexities of ethnic and regional identity within post-colonial India. It underscores the tensions between local populations and the central state, highlighting the ways in which political and cultural detachment can drive marginalized communities to demand recognition and autonomy.

Conclusion

Kiran Desai critiques the concept of borders and nations, asserting, "A great amount of warning, 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."¹⁰ In *The Inheritance of Loss*, migration and the search for belonging transcend mere physical movement; they represent profound internal struggles. Desai skilfully illustrates how forces such as history, colonialism, and globalization shape the characters' pursuit of identity and a sense of home and belongingness. Through the experiences of Biju, Sai, and the judge, the novel delves into the complex and often painful realities of seeking a place to belong in a world fraught with change, conflict, and historical trauma. Ultimately, the novel underscores the profound and often painful impact of migration, not only on individuals but also within the broader context of post-colonial, globalized societies. Thus, Desai's work provides a profound commentary on the disorienting and often destructive effects of migration, highlighting the complexities of the quest for identity in an ever-evolving global landscape.

References:

1. Desai, Kiran, (2006). *The Inheritance of Loss*, Penguin Books, p. 119.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
3. Halpern, Sue M., (2007). "At the Gandhi Café: Review of *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai". In: *New York Review*, p. 19.
4. Desai, Kiran, (2006). *op.cit.*, p. 22.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Rushdie, Salman, (1992). *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*, New York: Granta Books, p. 20.
7. Desai, Kiran, (2006). *op.cit.*, p. 19.
8. Shukla, Reshu, (2023). Reflection of Immigration, Alienation, and Identity Crisis in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss: A Saga of "Middle of Nowhere"*, *Creative Saplings*, vol 2, no 2, p. 8.
9. Desai, Kiran, (2006). *op.cit.*, p. 9.
10. *Ibid.*