Chapter 7:
Conflict of Interests:
Personal and Political -
Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*
The previous chapter highlighted the bureaucratic culture through the revelations and experiences of Agastya in Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *English, August*. This chapter unfolds the Naxalite movement in the North Eastern states and how it has ruined the life of the people there.

*The Inheritance of Loss* is the second novel by Kiran Desai published in 2006. It won a number of awards, including the Man Booker Prize for that year and the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award in 2007. It is a literary masterpiece in its description, characterization and depiction of human emotions. It is a story of the four individuals being turned into pawns due to political turmoil, Sai, Gyan, Biju and the Cook, Pannalal. It speaks of a military insurgency arising and hatred in the North Eastern region specifically Kalimpong. It also speaks of their sufferings, neighbours and how they accept defeat and their desire to search for the truth.

Kiran Desai presents in her novel, the social and political climate of the eighties of India in the North Eastern region. The novel is set in Kalimpong which is situated at the foot of the Mountain Kanchenjunga in the North Eastern part of post-Independence India. The novel focuses mainly on the Nepali insurgency. It deals with the events that take place at three locations: India, England and New York. She constantly shifts her location and time frame too. Thus the narrative technique of the novel is developed by the constant changing location and time.

The novel highlights some of the burning issues of contemporary society such as globalization, marginalization, subordination, economic inequality, exploitation, poverty, insurgency, immigration, racial discrimination and political violence. The novel shows how people who move out of India and migrate to countries like England and America feel rootless and alienated in a strange land. It also reveals how people in their own motherland feel isolated and suffer from loss of identity. The novel portrays various losses inherited by almost all the principal characters in the novel. While analysing the thematic concerns in the novel Ragini Ramachandra observes: “Made up of various strands the novel presents not merely a kaleidoscopic picture encompassing different countries, continents, climes, cultures, peoples, their struggles and their conflicts, their dreams and their frustrations but also a mature understanding of life itself at various levels.”

Kiran Desai manages the shifting of time skillfully. Episodes of the past life of the Judge, Jemubhai Patel or the brief life history of Sai’s parents and her childhood are
revealed through the technique of flashback. The novelist combines the past and the present. The narrative in the novel does not have a linear progression and the narration moves from one plot to another plot. Though the action of the novel ranges from India to England and America, it basically centers on the events taking place in the town of Kalimpong.

The novel begins with the insurgency activities in Kalimpong where the Indian Nepalese demanded a separate state for themselves during the 1980s. The Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) has been formed mainly by the Indian Nepalese youth who are 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. Their main grievance is that though they and their forefathers have sacrificed a lot for India, they have been treated in the country only as slaves. They still remember how the British Army and later the Indian Army had used the brave Gorkha soldiers for their selfish ends. Therefore, the GNLF has vowed to get their demands fulfilled unconditionally. The situations in Kalimpong are highly tense and explosive due to the political violence by the GNLF. The people are gripped with fear. The insurgents are against all the outsiders and especially the Bengalis who, according to them, have been the main cause of their hardships. Though the Indian Nepalese youth have been indulging in political violence, they have not still succeeded in getting a separate homeland for themselves. Like the principal characters of the novel, they too are indeed the inheritors of loss.

Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a British - trained Indian Civil Service Officer, is a retired judge who has served both the imperial government and the post-independence Indian government. He is a symbol of transition from the colonial period to the postcolonial period. Though he was born in Gujarat, a western province in Indian Territory, he has chosen to settle down in Kalimpong hillside town because he wants to lead a life of solitude. He lives along with his teenage granddaughter, Sai, his Cook and his beloved dog Mutt in a crumbling mansion called ‘Cho Oyu’ which was built by a Scottish architect. The mansion has become a symbol of loss, displacement, ineffective governance, crumbling of the generation and the system itself. It signifies the crumbling of native culture too. Commenting on the metaphorical significance of the mansion, Tessa Hadley observes:

“Cho Oyu is a tragi-comic metaphor for the seedy remains of British imperial culture in India. It is suggestive too of the novel form itself, another alien habit that might at first glance seem as ill-matched to its Indian environment as the stodgy meals and ideas
One of the themes of the novel is how the characters suffer and turn into pawns in the game of politics. This theme can be traced in the analysis of the characters in the novel. To begin with, 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 story of Jemubhai Patel’s humiliation, 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.

The judge’s past memories tell the stories of his injustice to his own parents, which he had committed, for humiliating him in front of others by their simplicity and innocence. He remembers how he had shown disrespect to his parents on the first day of his journey to Cambridge. When his father asked him to throw the coconut, he refused and from that moment, his love for his parents was mingled with pity and shame. His anger against his parents was heightened, when he found his cabin-mates twitching their noses at the smell of the bundle of puris, onion, green chillies etc packed for his lunch by his mother. Instead of feeling gratitude at the effort of his mother, he felt rather furious at the thought that she had humiliated him in front of his cabin-mates. In this way, his initial stages of foreign education came with a severe shock to his earlier outlook and customs. But as soon as he planted his foot in England, he realized his expectations were ridiculous, everything happened below his expectation. “He lived his life himself hardly realizing that his own judgment, which went out with force, would one day come and hit him back. “Hadn’t realized that here, too, people could be poor and live unaesthetic lives.”

In England, his skin complexion, native accent of English culture make him strange and alien among the English. He is humiliated by his peers for his Indian race. He begins to consider himself disgraceful. His timid nature and his loneliness make him an introvert. “The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow.” In the college, nobody is friendly to him. He is ignored by his own class mates.
The narrator describes the painful experience of Jemu:

“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!”

While preparing himself for the ICS examination, he undergoes serious mental torture on the campus. He becomes a stranger to himself and begins to hate his own accent and appearance. The novelist states that Jemubhai Patel “would never be seen without socks and shoes and would prefer shadow to light, faded days to sunny, for he was suspicious that sunlight might reveal him, in his hideousness, all too clearly.” Though he clears the written test for ICS through “Open Competition Examination,” he is unable to impress the English examiners because “his English still had the rhythm and the form of Gujarati.” He feels that he has become a victim of racial discrimination. Only in the second list of merit, he is selected for Indian Civil Service.

After his return to India, he directs his loneliness towards his young wife. Due to his contempt for Indian heritage and culture, he treats her cruelly by using sex as a weapon. He rapes his young wife with anger. Though it produces nausea in him, he continues to repeat the disgraceful act in order to “teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself.” All his attempts to educate his wife, Nimi, western etiquettes and manners fail. The narrator observes. “He did not like his wife’s face, searched for his hatred, found beauty, dismissed it…. An Indian girl could never be as beautiful as an English one.” He treats her with contempt and harasses her both physically and mentally. The two episodes involving the toilet seat and the powder puff sufficiently reveal the degradation of his character. His beastly behaviour towards his wife is a mockery of his English education. He beats her severely and sends her to her parents after learning that she is responsible for blocking his promotion by being part of the Committee that has welcomed Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru at the local railway station. Even the birth of a child does not soften him. Finally Nimi commits suicide. The judge treats it as an accident. He expressed his anger and frustration inflicted upon him on his meek wife who is unable to react.

The judge remains “a foreigner in his own country.” He does not love even his only surviving relative, granddaughter, Sai. The only creature he loves immensely is his dog, Mutt. It has been his companion for several years. His love for his dog is symbolic of the breaking of his human ties and bonds. When it is stolen by two wandering beggars, the judge gets terribly upset. While searching for her, the judge sentimentally calls: “Please come home, my dear, my lovely girl, Naughty girl, Princess Duchess Queen, Sweetheart!
The judge never had such emotional attachment with anyone not even with his wife. The inhuman nature of the judge makes Sai comment “Grandfather more lizard than human, Dog more human than dog.”

Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry analyzes the fractured nature of the colonial condition. The colonial power requires that the natives adopt and internalize the forms and habits of the colonial master: the native should mimic the master. We find this mimicry depicted in the character of Jemubhai Patel. The judge becomes a pawn at the hands of the system in which he is working both in the pre independence as well as the post independence phase. He is not welcomed by the Britishers due to his Indian race and he is not able to identify himself with the native Indians. We find that in turn he makes a pawn of his wife since he releases his frustration upon her. He never finds a soul mate in her or anybody else including his only surviving relative, Sai.

Sai is the real epitome of rootlessness in the novel. Even at the age of six, she learnt the meaning of the term ‘loss.’ Her father, an Air Force Officer who was about to become the first Indian to fly into space, was killed along with her mother in a road accident in Moscow. Her father, who belonged to the Parsi community, was himself an orphan. He was brought up in a Zoroastrian charity house for orphans. Sai’s mother was disowned by her parents because she had eloped with a man outside her caste. Sai thus has inherited the sense of rootlessness from her own parents. After the sudden death of her parents, she had to quit the Convent at the age of six and stay with her grandfather. Due to her anglicized education, she has become “an estranged Indian living in India.” In fact, she has become absolutely a foreigner to her own culture and country of her origin. In the convent she had been taught that “English was better than Hindi.” Though she has never been outside India, she speaks only English. She knows only the English method of making tea and she cannot eat with her fingers.

Sai’s life at Cho Oyu has been very lonely. The members of the household have a weird look and they lack zeal for life. After her arrival, Sai has found that her grandfather is a self-centered man and he has been leading a life of loneliness. She has understood that he is too insensitive and inhuman to love his own kith and kin.

To her, the Cook is more humane and loving than her affectionless grandfather. Since her grandfather has lost touch with the human world, she tries to
establish her emotional ties with the Cook. But unfortunately Sai can never create a true bond with the Cook because of the class barrier. Both cannot understand each other because she speaks only English and the Cook only Hindi. Whenever she visits the outhouse of the Cook the latter was ill at ease, and so was she; something about their closeness being exposed in the end as fake, for she was an English speaker and he was a Hindi speaker. The brokenness made it easier never to go deep.”

Though the judge does not reveal his affinity for his granddaughter openly, he feels inwardly happy because she has been brought up in Western culture. The novelist observes: “Sai…… was more his kin than he had thought imaginable. There was something familiar about her; she had the same accent and manners. She was a Westernized Indian brought up by English nuns, an estranged Indian living in India.”

When Sai was longing for human love and care, Gyan, a marginalized Indian Nepalese, came to Cho Oyu to give tuition to her. Gyan is a Mathematics tutor and a frustrated ethnic Nepalese young man. Gradually Sai and Gyan realize that they love each other. Sai believes that she is intensely loved and cared for by Gyan. Their love comes to an abrupt end when Gyan gets caught up in the political activities of the Gorkha National Liberation Front Movement (GNLF). While tracing the family history of Gyan, the novelist describes how the Indian Nepalese had been recruited in a ridiculous manner by the Britishers in India to fight for England in alien and unfamiliar places. Even after Independence, the Government of India has not done much for the marginalized Indian Nepalese who had done extraordinary service to Indian Defence Service. They are adversely affected who, unable to get proper jobs, suffer miserably from poverty and deprivation. So Gyan along with other Nepalese youth in Kalimpong is politically active and tries to fight for a separate state to be ruled by GNLF. Basically a poor man, Gyan hates the bourgeois lifestyle of the judge and Sai. He is in a dilemma and “is caught between Sai and GNLF; love and ideal. With the imagination of an adolescent, he interprets Sai’s plush affluence to belong to the other world and the mantle of martyrdom suddenly appears too attractive.” Sai understands that for Gyan she certainly “was not the center of their romance…. She was the center to herself … and a small player playing her part in someone else’s story.”

Moreover, she was terribly shocked to know that information regarding the availability of guns at her grandfather’s house has been leaked to the members of GNLF by Gyan. What has distressed Sai utmost is that the insurgents have taken away not only guns but also several other things from the house. The accusation of theft enrages Gyan
who then beats up Sai ruthlessly. The angry departure of Gyan is the permanent loss for Sai. After the dreadful loss of her parental love, Sai now undergoes the agony of losing her love. The narrator observes: “Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within.” Though she has no parents, no home of her own, no memories to share with others, she is able to get rid of her fear, anxiety and looks at life with correct perspective. Sai becomes a pawn at the hands of Gyan who uses her to loot Cho Oyu. Her grandfather has also made a pawn of her as he identifies himself with her and her English accent but hardly acknowledges it but maintains a safe distance from her; leaving her with no love and affection from anyone. Sai also suffers as a common man during the strikes and protestations of GNLF thus becoming a pawn at the hands of the political system. She receives some affection only from the Cook in the family.

The Cook, Panna Lal, another occupant of Cho Oyu, is an old man, humane and loving. He has been serving the judge for several years. He has been a very good friend and responsible guardian of Sai. When he does not cook, he simply cooks up stories and entertains Sai. He is poor, illiterate, superstitious and corrupt. The narrator remarks: “There was age in his temperament, his kettle, his clothes, his kitchen, his voice, his face, in the undisturbed dirt, the undisturbed settled smell of a lifetime of cooking, smoke and kerosene.”

Like the judge and Sai, the Cook is a rootless person. An example of exploitation through feudalism and colonialism, the Cook left his native village in Uttar Pradesh after losing his property in a court case to his brother. Thus he is made a pawn by his own relatives and judicial system. Then he somehow managed to get a job at Cho Oyu under false testimonials. He is not certainly happy to serve the judge for a meager salary which has not been raised for so many years. He manages to earn a living through black marketing the supply of army liquor. It’s a chain of corruption working from top to bottom right from Major Aloo to the merchants in the town of Kalimpong. The Cook is just a small fish in this chain of corruption.

Though he is discontented at Cho Oyu, he has placed his hope on his son, Biju, who is now in New York. He is proud of his only son who, he thinks, has been making a fortune in America. He got a visa for his son with the help of false recommendations and testimonials. Through him and Biju, the corruption and indiscipline at the Embassy is
highlighted. He thinks that he has got a respectable status in society because of his son in America. He boasts to everyone whom he meets on the roadside, “My son works in New York. He is the manager of a restaurant business… New York. Very big city. The cars and buildings are nothing like here. In that country there is enough food for everybody…. One day soon my son will take me.”

His very hope of going to America and living with his son there keeps him alive and happy at Kalimpong. We find the judge makes him a pawn by giving him a meager salary and Biju too has made a pawn of his father by using him to migrate abroad in search of greener pastures. Therefore we find that all the inhabitants of Cho Oyu are staying together out of necessity rather than any emotional attachments or affection for each other. At the same time, all are adversely affected by the insurgency in the North Eastern region.

Kiran Desai has explained insurgency in an elaborate manner in this novel. Almost fifty three chapters of the novel have been devoted to present the reasons of insurgency and the miserable condition of the common man living in the insurgency affected areas. Such rebellions are taking place in different areas thundering the unity and integrity of India as we have seen in chapter One which traces the roots of the Naxalite movement. For the analysis of this novel, the Constitutional provisions of the North – Eastern states (sixth schedule, paragraph 20) are used. The provisions impart the tribals the status of autonomous districts and reserved forests, the inheritance of property, protection of marriage and social customs. We find that the tribals are robbed off their ancestral lands and culture and are forcefully converted to Christianity thereby losing their native culture. The illegal infiltration is dominating the North – Eastern states by having their own people in government jobs, contesting elections and their representatives formulating new laws in favour of their own people. The natives are robbed of their rights and culture which has driven them to become Naxalites. They are frustrated with the degrading political system and the North Eastern region is specifically dissatisfied with the injustices levied upon them by the administrators who have smartly kept them away from the main stream Indians and from the fruits of success. The political parties play politics over this issue: “Separatist movement here, separatist movement there, terrorists guerillas, insurgents, rebels, agitators, and they all learn from one another.”

Mannoni in his psychological approach towards colonialism asserts that in order to get rid of inferiority complex, the European exploits the natives and casts himself in a paternalistic role of the parent and the master and becomes the protector/ provider to the native child. We find this approach in the plight of the native tribals of North-East
where their culture is considered inferior by the foreign infiltrators which are the outcome of tribals’ exploitation. The tribals are not given their due right to government jobs and admissions in educational institutions to keep them backward. Due to this, the immigrants smartly keep the tribals ignorant and claim their own culture to be superior. It is a sort of neocolonialism which has affected the psychology of the natives and we find them rebelling in the form of Naxalite movements.

The emergence of the GNLF is not sudden or illogical. Decades of misrule, exploitation and deprivation have given birth to the GNLF. No single man can bring in change. So people attach themselves to organizations in this case, they have attached themselves to GNLF. People are in a state of confusion and dilemma over what to do. We find that despite immense contribution to the country and society, the majority of the Gorkhas are still second rate citizens; and live without any concrete base of livelihood, education and developmental facilities.

The Naxalite movement in the novel can be compared to Days of the Turban by Pratap Sharma which analyzes the possible causes of terrorism in Punjab. The novel puts up the idea that Punjab is composite of Hindus and Sikhs. The novelist also gives a glimpse of the way the pro-Khalistanis abroad reacted to the terrorist blood bath in Punjab. In terms of explication, the novel is a fine exposition of the terrorist situation in Punjab and of the politics of religion playing with the cultural harmony of the nation. This is analogous to the Naxalite movement in the North – Eastern states.

The Gorkhas feel that even after independence, they are exploited by the politicians, police, bureaucrats, top businessmen and the Bengalis. In the 1980s, Gorkhas’ agitation was at the climax- meetings, strikes, demonstrations and violence which continued to paralyze the normal life in Kalimpong, Darjeeling and in other parts of the Himalayan region and they protested against the negligence by the governments towards their demands. Sai’s neighbour, Noni sympathizes with the afflictions and sufferings of the Gorkhas - recalls how the Nepalis were removed from Assam and Meghalaya and how the King of Bhutan expressed his anger at their ‘Illegal immigration.’23 So they want “LIBERATION, or at least their own state”24 i.e. Gorkhaland.

Gyan has an impact of this Liberation movement on him. Poverty has frustrated him. He has to walk a long distance in the cold to render his services to the
Judge who pays the former a very small amount of money. He is upset to see: “People lived here (Cho Oyu) in this enormous house and property taking hot baths, sleeping alone in spacious rooms….cutlets and peas dinner.” Consequently, he is influenced by the slogans of the GNLF. The story of Gyan represents the sufferings of his fellow people as well as the inhuman treatment by the ruling classes of the country. In support of the GNLF, a man addresses:

“In 1947, brothers and sisters, the British left granting India her freedom, granting the Muslims Pakistan, granting special provisions for the Schedule Castes and Tribes, leaving everything taken care of, brothers and sisters, Except us. EXCEPT US. The Nepalese of India. At that time, in April of 1947, the Communist Party of India demanded a Gorkhaland but the request was ignored…. We are laborers on the tea plantations, coolies dragging heavy loads, soldiers. And are we allowed to become doctors and government workers, owners of the tea plantations? No! We are kept at the levels of servants.”

But, the GNLF as it generally happens to most of the popular armed agitations in India falls in some treacherous hands and drifts from its real aim. The insurgents, when they enter Cho Oyu are more interested in tea, biscuits, cigarettes, rifles and in other valuable materials as well as in defecating in and stinking out the toilets than in proving their original oaths. They do not spare even a desperate poor fellow like Biju. When he returns to India, the insurgents rob him of his boxes, money; and strip him even of his clothes and they strip him almost naked.

Kiran Desai has presented the chaos and crisis of the modern times caused by the exploitation by the West in the name of globalization, embarrassing conditions of immigrants, gender - racial discrimination, extremism and terrorism - bringing about the loss of man’s faith in man, loss of culture and identity, loss of emotional bonds, loss of social order, peace and harmony— resulting into the loss of human values.

The insurgency at Kalimpong has led to displacement of several people. She also describes how in the post - colonial situation the marginalized and oppressed have become the aggressor. The activities of the insurgents have caused immense sufferings to people in the town. Looting and rioting have led to a lot of confusion and total chaos. The town has lost its state of normalcy and peace. Thus the common man is suffering at the
hands of politics played by GNLF and the administrators.

Though the GNLF represents the oppressed Indian Nepalese, it does not hesitate to create expatriate-like situation for people who have come from different regions and have settled down at Kaliimpong for so many years. Even the innocent neighbours of the Judge who have nothing to do with the problem of the Gorkhas have to undergo nightmarish experience during this troubled times. The two Bengali sisters Lola, a widow, and Noni, a spinster, have been living at Kaliimpong since the death of Lola’s husband, Jaydeep. They own a house and some land. One day they find that their property is encroached upon by the members of GNLF. Then Lola goes and makes a complaint to the head of the Kaliimpong wing of the Gorkha National Liberation Front, Pradhan. On hearing the French name of her house he quips: “I didn’t know we live in France. Do we? Tell me, why don’t I speak in French, then?” Without even looking at the document of Lola’s property, he indifferently tells her that he needs to accommodate his men there. When Lola tries to justify her right to her property, the leader becomes angry. “In fact,” he said, “as you can see,” he gestured out, “I am the Raja of Kaliimpong. A Raja must have many queens…. I have four, but would you,” he looked Lola up and down, tipped his chair back, head at a comical angle, a coy naughty expression catching his face, “dear Aunty, would you like to be the fifth?” Lola is terribly humiliated and deeply hurt by the words of Pradhan. Santwana Haldar rightly points out: “The humiliation Lola had to face was more painful than death and insurgency was at the root of her humiliation. Lola’s social status and her assets do not save her from an insecurity that is usually attached to exiled condition.”

Another person who has become a victim of insurgency is Father Booty, the Swiss Christian, who has been living in Kaliimpong for nearly forty five years. He has been running a milk dairy for the people in Kaliimpong and in the words of Sai he “had done much more for development in the hills than any of the locals….“ Since he had no plan to go back to his native country, he did not bother about renewing his residence permit. “He knew that he was a foreigner but had lost the notion that he was anything but an Indian foreigner.” Since the Gorkhas do not want outsiders to live at Kaliimpong, the local administration takes steps to deport him to his native country. Father Booty feels as if his heart is failing when he thinks “of his cows being turned out in favour of army tanks; looked about at his craggy bit of mountainside …. Such wilderness could not incite a gentle love — he loved it fiercely, intensely.” When the news of Father Booty being asked to go back to his country spreads, a Nepalese doctor comes to his house and asks
him to sell his land for a meager sum of money. He even tells Father that the latter will not get any other offer. He threatens him by saying “I have arranged it and you have no choice. You are lucky to get what I am giving you. You are residing in this country unlawfully and you must sell or lose everything.” The doctor, in fact, wants to construct a hospital for rich people in the area. Being treated as an illegal resident, Father Booty has to lose his property and existence at Kalimpong.

The novelist presents an authentic picture of the evil consequences of insurgency. Besides being assaulted both physically and mentally by the insurgents, people at Kalimpong are brutally attacked by the police. A common rally has been arranged by GNLF to march to the police station and set the documents on fire as a protest against the government’s discriminatory attitude towards Gorkhas’ problems. When the procession turns violent in the midway, the police opens fire which results in terrible human loss. The narrator comments: “In a fast - forward blur, thirteen local boys were dead. This was how history moved, the show build, the quick burn, and in an incoherence, the leaping both backward and forward, swallowing the young into old hate. The space between life and death, in the end, too small to measure.”

The novel is a tragic and dark reminder of how insurgency is threatening to wreck this once-peaceful region of India. The characters seem to have something lacking in them, just the feeling that their lives aren’t fulfilled. Their situation is similar to the characters of The Private Life of an Indian Prince by Mulk Raj Anand. The novel is a severe indictment on the decadent princely order. Through the example of the state of Shampur, the writer has depicted how there was improper merger of princely states into the Indian territory. This has led to many problems. Naxalite movement is one of them. In The Inheritance of Loss, Lola expresses her feelings towards how Britishers didn’t draw proper boundaries in Indian territories and the improper merger of princely states.

“This state – making,” Lola continued, “biggest mistake that fool Nehru made. Under his rules any group of idiots can stand up demanding a new state and get it, too. How many new ones keep appearing? From fifteen we went to sixteen, sixteen to seventeen, seventeen to twenty – two…” …

“And here, if you ask me,” she said, “it all started with Sikkim. The Neps played such a dirty trick and began to get grand ideas – now they think they can do the
same thing again – you know, Sai?” …

“Yes,” she said absentmindedly, she had heard the story so many times before: Indira Gandhi had maneuvered a plebiscite and all the Nepalis who had flooded Sikkim voted against the king. India had swallowed the jewel – colored kingdom …

“But you have to take it from their point of view,” said Noni. “First the Neps were thrown out of Assam and then Meghalaya, then there’s the King of Bhutan growling against - “

“Illegal immigration,” said Lola. …

“Obviously the Nepalis are worried,” said Noni. “They’ve been here, most of them, several generations. Why shouldn’t Nepali be taught in schools?”

“Because on that basis they can start statehood demands. Separatist movement, here, separatist movement there, terrorists, guerillas, insurgents, rebels, agitators, instigators and they all learn from one another, of course – the Neps have been encouraged by the Sikhs and their Khalistan, by ULFA, NEFA, PLA; Jharkhand, Bodoland, Gorkhaland; Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Kashmir, Punjab, Assam …”

Even Nayantara Sahgal’s *Storm in Chandigarh* criticizes the idea of territorial reorganization of states on the unsound linguistic basis. It gathers frustration in the case of Punjab where it repeated itself in the further bifurcation of Punjab into Punjabi speaking Punjab and Hindi speaking Haryana in 1967. Even the Gorkha insurgents in the novel are having the measure of their Nepali language and injustice levied upon them for the demand of a separate Gorkhaland state.

*The Inheritance of Loss* also describes how the Gymkhana Club was captured by the GNLF and how they surrendered their arms. There they stockpiled guns, drew maps, plotted the bombing of bridges, hatched plans that grew in daring as managers fled from the tea plantations that stretched in waves over the Singalila Mountains all around the Gymkhana, from Happy Valley, Makaibari, Chonglu, Pershok. Later they signed a peace treaty while leaving the Club. The novel describes their surrendering as:
“On October 2, 1988, Gandhi Jayanti Day, seven thousand men surrendered more than five thousand gun pipes, country–made revolvers, pistols, double– and single–barrel guns, Sten guns. They gave up thousands of rounds of ammunition, thirty–five hundred bombs, gelatin sticks, detonators and land mines, kilograms of explosives, mortar shells, canons. Ghising’s men alone had more than twenty–four thousand pieces. In the pile was the judge’s BSA pump gun, the Springfield rifle, the double–barreled Holland and Holland with which he had roamed, after teatime, in the countryside surrounding Bonda.”

The novel presents a life–like picture of the strikes and curfews by the GNLF and its effect on the common masses: “Finally, the shops and offices didn’t open at all – the Snow Lion Travel Agency and the STD booth, the shawl shop, the deaf tailors, Kanshi Nath and Sons Newsagents – everyone terrorized to keep their shutters down and not even poke their noses out of the windows. Roadblocks stopped traffic, prevented timber and stone trucks from leaving, halted tea from being transported. Nails were scattered on the road, Mobil oil spilled all about. The GNLF boys charged large sums of money if they let you through at all and coerced you to buy GNLF speeches on cassette tapes and Gorkhaland calendars.”

The curfews are described as: “There were reports of comings and goings over the Nepal and Sikkim border, of retired army men controlling the movement, offering quick training on how to wire bombs, ambush the police, blow up the bridges. But anyone could see they were still mostly just boys, taking their style from Rambo, heads full up with kung fu and karate chops, roaring around of stolen motorcycles, stolen jeeps, having a fantastic time. Money and guns in their pockets.”

The common masses have developed distrust in the government and they have a firm belief that they do not hold any future in a nation like India. Lola represents this anguish as a citizen of India. She advises her daughter who is abroad: “Better leave sooner rather than later,” she had advised Pixie long ago, “India is a sinking ship. Don’t want to be pushy, darling, sweetie, thinking of your happiness only, but the doors won’t stay open forever…”

People had developed distrust for each other due to insurgency. The Metalbox watchman, being a Nepali was forced to swear an oath of loyalty to the cause of GNLF.
Kiran Desai describes the situation as: “If you weren’t Nepali it was worse.

If you were Bengali, people who had known you your whole life wouldn’t acknowledge you in the street. Even the Biharis, Tibetans, Lepchas and Sikkimese didn’t acknowledge you. They are the small powerless numbers that might be caught up in either net, wanted to put the Bengalis on the other side of the argument from themselves, delineate them as the enemy.”

Even the police, who are supposed to safeguard the interests of common man during unfortunate times, take undue advantage of the situation. A good example of it is the atrocities of the police against an innocent drunk man, who is accused of robbing guns from Cho Oyu. They beat him badly enough to reduce him to a pulp. He pleaded for his innocence: “But the police were just practicing their torture techniques, getting ready for what was coming. When the man crawled out on his knees, his eyes had been extinguished. They would heal into horizon less, flat blanks that would forever cause others to recoil in fear and disgust.”

Thus the novel truthfully describes the sufferings of the characters at the hands of GNLF, police and the administrators in general. We find that the ultimate sufferers are common man at large who become pawns in the hands of the political system and administrators.

The novel has two strands of narratives: the one dealing with the socio-political problems of the people of Kalimpong and the other depicting the painful and alienated existence of the Indian diaspora in New York. Through the character of Biju, son of the Cook, Kiran Desai illustrates one of the major themes of the novel that is how the illegal immigrants undergo painful experiences in an alien land. The novel analyses how in the post-colonial era, people from colonized countries face terrible hardships in America which is a land of liberty. While discussing Desai’s treatment of the theme of immigration in the novel, Hirsh Sawhney points out: “Desai portrays migration as a universal, multifaceted experience, rescuing it from the clutches of myth and fetishism. Almost fifty years after the judge went to England, Biju, the Cook’s son, leads a grueling existence as an illegal immigrant in New York.”

Kiran Desai depicts Biju’s struggles and pathetic survival as an illegal
immigrant in New York – “a city without horizon” and with “buildings going up like jungle creepers starved for light.” To fulfill the desire of his father, Biju, using fake documents and false recommendations, goes to America for a better livelihood. He works in various restaurants such as Gandhi Cafe, the Stars and Stripes Diner, the Baby Bistro, Le Colonial, the Queen of Tarts, and Freddy’s Wok etc. Though he works for long hours, he is given only a meager salary and has to bear with terrible insults and ill-treatment. Like the judge, who has suffered a lot at the hands of the Whites in England; Biju is humiliated and marginalized due to racial prejudice. The owner’s wife at Pinocchio’s Italian Restaurant complains to her husband that Biju is smelly. She tells him that she prefers Europeans to Indians or Asians. The narrator observes: “She had hoped for men from the poorer parts of Europe—Bulgarians perhaps, or Zechoslovakians. At least they might have something in common with them like religion or skin colour….”

Unable to endure the resentment of the owner, Biju has to quit the place and go in search of jobs in other places. In almost all the restaurants where he works as a Cook, Biju finds to his shock that workers from third-world countries and especially from the East are given only the lowest positions. As a rootless person and illegal intruder, he has to move from one restaurant to another in search of a better job and better salary. He finds that even legal immigrants who have come to America without proper documents have to suffer from alienation.

Kiran Desai also analyzes in the novel how the problems of the legal immigrants are different from those of the illegal immigrants. The illegal immigrants have to live an underground life and are constantly on the run from the police. In fact, there is a lot of corruption and indiscipline involved in the process of procuring visa. This leads to the problem of illegal immigrants. Knowing the precarious conditions of these immigrants, the owners of restaurants extract a lot of work from them and give them very low wages because they know that the workers have no legal rights to claim a better salary.

Biju and his fellow illegal immigrants have to change their jobs often because of the exploitative nature of the employers and the unhygienic conditions in the places. While remaining rooted to his father’s love and cultural traditions, Biju now realizes that his dream of America is quite different from the places where he has worked and stayed. In the restaurants after his hard work, he has to sleep in unhygienic basements during night time. The workers are allotted space to sleep in the restaurants according to their racial origins. At Baby Bistro Restaurant, the French are asked to sleep above the restaurant “but
below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian. And when a Pakistani was hired, it was Mexican, Indian, Pakistani.”

Biju undergoes a true colonial experience at Le Colonial Restaurant: “On the top rich colonial, and down below, poor native, Colombian, Tunisian, Ecuadorian, Gambian.”

At the Stars and Stripes Dinner Restaurant “All American flag on top, all Guatemalan flag below. Plus one Indian flag when Biju arrived.”

Though he finds his job disgusting and humiliating, he has the hope of getting a Green Card. He knows to live in America permanently one should possess a Green Card. Even to leave America one must have one. “He watched the legalized foreigners with envy as they shopped at discount baggage stores for the miraculous, expandable third-world suitcase …. Then, of course, there were those who lived and died illegal in America and never saw their families, not for ten years, twenty, thirty, never again.”

Not knowing the conditions in which Biju is leading his miserable life in America, his father writes to him:

“Stay there as long as you can. Stay there. Make money. Don’t come back here.”

Kiran Desai satirizes materialism which has resulted in selfish attitudes. While working at Gandhi Café, Biju skids on some rotten spinach and gets his knee injured. When he asks the owner to take him to a doctor for treatment the owner simply refuses. He tells him without any qualms: “You slipped in the kitchen. If you slip on the road, then who would you ask, hm? …. I take you in. I hire you with no papers, treat you like my own son and now this is how you repay me! Living here rent free. In India would they pay you? What right do you have? Is it my fault you don’t even clean the floor? You should have to pay me for not cleaning, living like a pig. Am I telling you to live like a pig?”

Getting enraged with the words of the employer, Biju looks at him angrily and says: “Without us living like pigs, …. What business would you have? This is how you make your money, paying us nothing because you know we can’t do anything, making us work day and night because we are illegal.”

Biju then asks his employer to sponsor him for the Green Card. The employer tells him that if the police finds out that the workers employed in the restaurant are illegal immigrants, he would be imprisoned. Therefore, he does not want to take any unnecessary risk. He then gives Biju fifty dollars and tries to cajole him. Biju understands that it is “the benevolent patriarch garnering the loyalty of staff; offering slave wages, but now and then a box of sweets, a lavish gift — ….”

Social and cultural alienation, rootlessness, frustration and his longing for his father finally force him to leave America for India. When he reaches Calcutta, he is
overwhelmed with great delight and excitement. While describing the feelings of Biju, the novelist observes: “Sweet drabness of home — he felt everything shifting and clicking into place around him, felt himself slowly shrink back to size, the enormous anxiety of being a foreigner ebbing – that unbearable arrogance and shame of the immigrant.”

Through the story of Biju, Kiran Desai provides the reader with the dark side of the globalization when she describes the customer - receiving areas of an up market restaurant flying an advertised, authentic French flag, while in the kitchen the flags are Indian and Honduran. Though Biju lives in New York, he hasn’t the time to see the country, lives in poverty where he has to sleep in shifts, or on the floor of the hotel he works and even has to serve beef which he detests. When people come to US for the first time and are desperate to make a living, like Biju they are willing to undergo any torment to make ends meet. The novel truly depicts their sad lives.

As soon as he returns to Kalimpong, he falls into the hands of the revolutionary members of the GNLF who rob him of everything he has brought from America. Abandoned in the deep jungles mercilessly by his own countrymen, he finds himself “without his baggage, without his savings, worst of all, without his pride.” Despite his shame and humiliation, he feels immensely happy to unite with his father. The love and affection that Biju and the Cook share moves Sai deeply. The true joy of this union is revealed in the final words of the novel: “The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned gold with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it.” Thus through Biju we find that how illegal immigrants become prey to exploitation and become pawns. Biju is a pawn as an illegal immigrant and also a pawn at the hands of GNLF who loot him and as a common man. He is unhappy with the job opportunities in India and escapes in search of better prospects.

*The Inheritance of Loss* can be compared to that of Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*. It is part bleakness and part happiness and it is a testament of how a single story can be created out of various sub-plots leading towards a larger theme. In *A Fine Balance* too we find the subplot of Dina, Ishvar and Om, Maneck, Shankar and so on.

Though Kiran Desai presents the problems of the socially oppressed class of Gorkhas with compassion, she does not fail to point out political violence and loss of
human lives. While portraying characters like the Cook and the wandering beggars, she reveals her profound concern for the poor and the downtrodden. She focuses on human issues like globalization, multiculturalism, immigration, Green card, mimicry, love, sex, poverty, injustice, insurgency, nationalism or antinationalism. The novel reflects her love for human values, love for reason, truth and justice, love for liberty, equality and fraternity, love for peace and harmony, love for one’s native soil, culture and identity, love for charity and mankind.

The novel is a geographically divided novel. Chapter by chapter, we move between India and America. The division of the narrative into fragments gives memories the same status as present events. Along with geographic movement between continents, there is the more frequent movement between present and past. Dividing the narrative also allows the insertion of stories and fragments of dialogue. Much of the novel’s comedy is in the conversation of Lola and Noni and whose fragments of talk move around everything under the sun right from the shortcomings of V. S. Naipaul to bigotry.

The novel is full of problems of human identities and frustrations. In the age of globalization, when the world is striving to work together hand in hand, the Gorkhas are deprived of their labor and loyalty and are suffering in the land where they had served and worked all throughout their lives. This sense of loss engulfs almost all the stratas of society, starting from a domestic helper to a retired judge, who hasn’t been spared of, inspite of his position as an ICS officer. The judge’s family and his surroundings represent a larger issue relevant in our society, to remember our past mistakes that affect the present state of affairs.

However, lives flourish in the lap of Kanchenjunga. As Kiran Desai says; “Kanchanjunga was a far peak whittled out of ice, gathering the last of the light, a plume of snow blown high by the storms at its summit.” Sai represents a new age and a new dawn amidst conflicting identities. Kiran Desai puts it beautifully:

“Her ears strained beyond the horizon, anticipating what didn’t fail to arrive, yet another wave of bombardment, the sound of civilization crumbling—she had never known it was so big—cities and monuments fell—and she fled again.”

“Could fulfillment ever be felt as deeply as a loss?”
Everything is not lost. Sai is hopeful about a better future. Gyan too realizes that the GNLF movement lacks sincerity and decides to quit it and begin life in search of new avenues. The Cook and Biju with their union are going to face life in new dimensions. The judge is satisfied with his own way of life.

The judge, despite his lost past glory, continues to retain his habits and good taste, and struggles to maintain his position. He wants a cake or a sconce, macaroons or cheese straws with his tea. He cannot change his habits for the sake of other people’s problems. He asks for perfection in everything, no matter what price the person on the other end pays for it. But, in spite of his show for taste and standard, he seems to lack far behind in his approach to life and concept of change. The judge lives for his own sake and will die for his own sake, unable to get rid of the farce of foreign education. He owes nothing to his ancestors, to his contemporaries and to his descendants. He cultivated in himself the Western style and way of living and whoever fails to come up to his expectation, suffers his wrath. The English countryside, too, didn’t give him the kind of satisfaction and beauty, he had anticipated before coming to England. Notwithstanding he would love to imitate them and imbibe them throughout his life.

There is the inclination of harking towards the past; the judge being nostalgic of the bicycle ride with his tender teenage wife, the Cook’s fondness for the photograph with his son. None of them had thought that they would be regretting over the decision they had made for their future, afterwards. They suffer the pain of loss, a loss of which each of them is responsible.

It is a farce that the Judge cannot judge his past, his present and even his future. He cared to pass judgment on others, and forgot to care to look into his own self and make judgment. In this way, he spoilt his past, his present and his future. The Cook’s share of follies in the making of their own history, always begging and seeking mercy from others, is seen. They had never learnt to live their life with dignity and responsibility.

The Gorkha insurgents rely on the past deeds of the Gorkhas to frame their argument of a Gorkhaland but they lack to exhibit courage and honour. The boys, behind the mask of patriotism, intruded in the house of the judge to fill their empty stomachs and material possessions. Their slogans have no meaning without their weapons. The educated judge, who got through ICS exam to win the respect from his people at one point of time,
is taunted and humiliated by the boys who robbed him and used his whole family as slaves. It symbolizes the downfall of a proud man, who has failed due to his own failure of judgment of the world in which he is to judge.

Biju’s frustration on his experience in America is almost similar to the judge’s first experience in Britain. He realizes the emptiness and meaninglessness of himself. People change their jobs, shift to new place and change their names to survive. These experiences remind him about his village where he had lived with his own people enjoying simple and trivial things of life. His family was satisfied with the small income from his father’s service as a Cook. It seems as if they realize the worth of their lives when they are separated from one another. He remembered how his father had become nostalgic about his village, they had sat outside in the evenings and his father had reminiscence: “How peaceful our village is. How good the roti tastes there! It is because the ata is ground by hand, not by machine……….and because it is made on a choolah, better than anything cooked on a gas or a kerosene stove….. Fresh roti, fresh butter, fresh milk still warm from the buffalo……”

In this way, they celebrate the loss of their inheritance and thereby of their past. They march towards the future with expectations of new and better things discarding their opportunities just to realize that their own past had better in store for them than the present situation. Biju was wrong to hand over the responsibility of his own life in the hands of others. The judge’s act of disowning his own wife and daughter is a clear example of his lack of reasoning and judgment. The question of human identities and its changing nature makes it a conflicting issue. Not only in India, even in America people are migrating illegally, staying there, hoping for a new life. Boundaries have been changed so many times and people have been transported from place to place, but the problem remains.

“How can the ordinary be changed? Did their hearts rise and fall to something true? Did they see themselves from a perspective beyond this moment, this unleashed Bruce Lee fans in their American T-shirts made in – China – coming – in – via - Kathmandu?”

This patriotism is fake, as Gyan realized it. It was —” the leaders harnessing the natural irritations and disdain of adolescence for cynical ends; for their own hope in attaining the same power as government officials held now.” His realization came with
the accusations from Sai about his own lack of sincerity and humility to his own identity and background. Thus all the characters are suffering from the inheritance of the loss as goes the title of the novel.

Salman Rushdie’s appreciation of this masterpiece of Kiran Desai is no exaggeration: “Welcome proof that India’s encounter with the English language continues to give birth to new children, endowed with lavish gifts.” On the whole, “She is the mistress of engaging details and images as well as leaping lavish gifts of phrasing. The pumping heart of the novel or the tale’s emotional centre is powered by a superb language - assured and eloquent, supple and elegant. With her deft touch the author has manipulated the interesting fragments of loss into a poignant story of our mixed-up times.”

With this chapter, the individual analysis to the selected novels of this study comes to a close. The next chapter of Conclusion will justify the rationale of the study.
References


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