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## Negotiating Nationhood: Hybridity and Belonging in Desai's The Inheritance of Loss

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### KEYWORDS

Postcolonialism, Hybridity, Nationhood, Identity, Diaspora, Belonging, Kiran Desai.

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex themes of hybridity, nationhood, and belonging in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, a novel that intricately weaves the personal and political consequences of colonial legacy and global migration. Drawing on postcolonial theoretical frameworks, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities, the paper examines how Desai portrays the fractured identities of characters caught between cultures, histories, and borders. Set against the backdrop of the Gorkhaland insurgency in 1980s India and the immigrant experience in the United States, the novel presents a nuanced critique of the dislocation and alienation faced by postcolonial subjects. Through an analysis of key characters—such as Sai, the retired judge Jemubhai Patel, and Biju—the research highlights how national identity is negotiated through cultural ambivalence, historical trauma, and the longing for rootedness. Ultimately, the study reveals how Desai's narrative underscores the contradictions inherent in global modernity and the search for belonging in a postcolonial world marked by displacement and loss.

## Introduction

The themes of nationhood, identity, and belonging have remained pivotal concerns in postcolonial literature, especially in the wake of decolonisation and global migration. Writers from formerly colonised societies often explore the fractured experiences of individuals negotiating the complex terrains of culture, memory, and political history. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), which won the Man Booker Prize, emerges as a significant literary work in this discourse. The

novel engages deeply with questions of what it means to belong to a nation, to a culture, to a family while simultaneously confronting the alienation and loss that accompany both physical and psychological dislocation.

Kiran Desai, an Indian-born author educated in India, England, and the United States, brings a distinctly transnational lens to her work. Daughter of the celebrated novelist Anita Desai, she has inherited a literary sensibility that is both introspective and expansive. Her writing reflects

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the intricacies of cross-cultural experiences, postcolonial trauma, and the paradoxes of globalisation. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai combines personal narratives with broader political themes, crafting a multi-layered exploration of displacement, marginalisation, and hybrid identity. Set against the tumultuous backdrop of the Gorkhaland movement in the Himalayan town of Kalimpong and juxtaposed with the life of an undocumented immigrant in New York City, *The Inheritance of Loss* explores the lingering impacts of colonialism and the struggles of postcolonial subjects in an increasingly globalised world. Desai presents characters who are emblematic of cultural hybridity and disorientation: Jemubhai Patel, the Anglicised retired judge who internalises colonial prejudices; Sai, his Western-educated granddaughter caught between cultural worlds; and Biju, the son of the judge's cook, who navigates a precarious life in America's underbelly as an undocumented worker. Each character inhabits a liminal space where national, cultural, and personal identities are constantly negotiated and often contested.

The novel's exploration of hybridity is informed by the colonial legacy that continues to shape postcolonial societies. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity—a space of cultural negotiation and transformation—offers a critical lens through which the characters' experiences can be understood. Bhabha argues that identity in postcolonial contexts is neither fixed nor pure but formed in the “third space” of enunciation, where different cultural narratives intersect. Additionally, Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an

“imagined community” underscores how national belonging is constructed through shared histories, symbols, and political ideologies, often excluding those who fall outside these imagined boundaries.

## **Literature Review**

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* has received considerable critical attention for its poignant portrayal of globalisation, migration, and postcolonial identity. Scholars and critics have approached the novel from various interdisciplinary perspectives, highlighting its complex treatment of nationhood, hybridity, and belonging in both the Indian and diasporic contexts.

Several critics situate the novel within the framework of postcolonial studies, focusing on the legacy of colonialism and its lingering impact on individual and collective identity. Priya Kumar (2008) interprets the novel as a narrative of “imperial entanglement,” where the characters are trapped within the contradictions of colonial mimicry and cultural dislocation. Jemubhai Patel, for instance, represents the postcolonial subject who has internalised colonial values to the extent that he becomes estranged from his own culture. This portrayal echoes Homi K. Bhabha's theory of mimicry and hybridity, where the colonised subject's imitation of the coloniser is never complete, producing a sense of ambivalence and anxiety.

Elleke Boehmer (2005) argues that the novel critiques both the failures of nationalism and the myth of a cohesive postcolonial identity. The Gorkhaland movement depicted in the novel illustrates the internal fractures within the Indian

nation-state, where ethnic and linguistic minorities are marginalised in the name of national unity. Boehmer points out that Desai's narrative reveals how the postcolonial nation, instead of resolving colonial divisions, often replicates structures of exclusion and hierarchy.

From a diasporic lens, critics like Sarah Brouillette (2007) explore the themes of economic migration and global inequality. Her analysis focuses on Biju, the undocumented Indian immigrant in New York, as a symbol of subaltern displacement in the age of neoliberal globalisation. Brouillette emphasises how Desai contrasts the fantasy of the American dream with the brutal realities of undocumented labour, precarity, and cultural alienation.

In her essay "Transnational Belonging and the Politics of Home," Bhavna Mehta (2010) examines the disjunction between physical geography and emotional belonging. She suggests that Desai's characters occupy spaces of in-betweenness—not fully belonging to either the nation they inhabit or the one they long for. This resonates with Avtar Brah's notion of "diasporic space," where identities are forged through the intersection of migration, memory, and resistance.

Some scholars also highlight Desai's narrative technique and the interplay of language, silence, and irony in representing trauma and loss. Anjali Gera Roy (2012) observes that the novel's fragmented structure mirrors the fractured consciousness of postcolonial subjects. Through the use of shifting perspectives and non-linear storytelling, Desai captures the instability of identity in a world marked by displacement.

Despite the wide body of scholarship, there

remains space to further explore how *The Inheritance of Loss* intricately connects the local insurgencies within India to broader global flows of capital, labour, and identity. While critics have noted the novel's portrayal of hybridity and alienation, few have fully analysed how Desai juxtaposes national and transnational forms of exclusion and belonging. This paper aims to contribute to that conversation by situating Desai's characters within both the local politics of nationalism and the global context of diasporic struggle, using theoretical frameworks by Bhabha and Anderson to foreground the complex negotiations of identity, space, and community.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai illustrates how the nation is both a site of aspiration and exclusion, offering both belonging and alienation. The characters' experiences reflect the contradictions and complexities of post-colonial identity formation in a world where cultural purity is a myth and displacement is an enduring reality. The narrative oscillates between spaces—India and the United States, the elite and the marginalised, the past and the present—revealing the multiplicity of experiences that define the postcolonial condition.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The analysis of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* draws upon key postcolonial theoretical frameworks to examine the complex themes of hybridity, nationhood, and belonging. Specifically, this paper utilises Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and third space, Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, and concepts related to diaspora and displacement. These frameworks provide a nuanced lens through which

the characters' struggles with cultural identity and belonging in a globalised world can be understood.

### **Homi K. Bhabha: Hybridity and the Third Space**

One of the central theoretical tools for this analysis is Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity, which he introduces in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha's concept of hybridity refers to the cultural interactions that occur when coloniser and colonised engage in a process of exchange, producing a new, blended identity that defies pure cultural categories. In this process, the colonised subject neither fully mimics the coloniser nor remains untouched by colonial influence, resulting in a "third space" of negotiation.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai's characters embody the contradictions inherent in hybridity. For example, Jemubhai Patel, the Anglicised former judge, represents the internalised effects of colonialism—he strives to distance himself from his Indian roots while desperately clinging to British ideals. His identity is shaped by a complex negotiation between the coloniser and colonised, as he inhabits a space where his identity is fractured, neither fully British nor fully Indian. Similarly, the immigrant experience of Biju in New York City can be seen as a form of cultural hybridity, where he is neither fully American nor fully Indian, existing in a liminal space between two worlds. Bhabha's concept of hybridity provides a critical framework for understanding how Desai's characters navigate their fragmented and often contradictory identities in a postcolonial world.

### **Benedict Anderson: Imagined Communities**

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Another crucial framework for this analysis is Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as an "imagined community," which he articulates in his seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Anderson argues that nations are socially constructed and are based on the shared imaginations of their members. National identity, he asserts, is not a natural or inherent attribute but a product of collective representation, symbols, and historical narratives that bind individuals together despite their geographic, social, or cultural differences.

In the context of *The Inheritance of Loss*, Anderson's theory can be applied to the Gorkhaland movement in India, which serves as a site of contested nationalism. The Gorkhas' demand for a separate state is rooted in their struggle for recognition and belonging within the Indian nation-state. However, their desire for independence highlights the limitations and exclusions of the Indian national identity, especially for ethnic and linguistic minorities. Desai illustrates how nationalism can simultaneously offer a sense of belonging and exclude those who do not conform to its dominant ideologies. The characters' fluctuating relationships with their national identities reflect Anderson's argument that nationhood is a process of continuous negotiation and construction.

### **Diaspora and Displacement**

In addition to hybridity and imagined communities, this paper incorporates concepts of diaspora and displacement, which are central to the experiences

of Biju and other immigrant characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*. Theories of diaspora, particularly those articulated by scholars like Stuart Hall and Avtar Brah, emphasise the fluidity of identity and the multiplicity of belonging experienced by diasporic individuals. According to Brah, diasporic subjects are often caught between the nostalgia for their homeland and the reality of their new environment, negotiating a sense of belonging in both physical and emotional spaces.

Biju's journey from India to New York City represents a classic diasporic experience, where he faces the harsh realities of undocumented migration, economic exploitation, and cultural alienation. His displacement is both physical, as he moves between countries, and psychological, as he grapples with a sense of dislocation from both his home and his adopted country. Desai portrays Biju's experiences as a commentary on the broader global dynamics of migration, labour, and exclusion. The novel reflects the contradictions inherent in the diasporic condition, where individuals must navigate the tension between a sense of home and the fragmented, often painful experience of migration.

### **Intersection of Theories in Desai's Narrative**

By applying these theoretical frameworks—Bhabha's hybridity, Anderson's imagined communities, and diaspora studies—this paper examines how Desai's characters negotiate their identities in a world where cultural borders are increasingly porous but also rigidly defined. The novel's portrayal of hybridity and displacement provides insight into how national identities are

constantly reimagined and contested. Desai's characters, caught in the intersection of personal histories, cultural traditions, and globalised realities, embody the complexities of belonging in a postcolonial, transnational world.

This research paper seeks to analyse how Desai's novel interrogates the notions of nationhood, hybridity, and belonging. It will examine how her characters embody the tensions of postcolonial subjectivity and how their personal histories intersect with larger national and global forces. By situating *The Inheritance of Loss* within the theoretical frameworks of postcolonialism, particularly the works of Bhabha and Anderson, the study will illuminate how Desai critiques the constructs of identity and the precariousness of national belonging in an era marked by migration, memory, and modernity.

### **Nationhood and Belonging**

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai intricately weaves together personal stories and political struggles, using the concept of nationhood to explore the complexities of belonging in postcolonial contexts. The characters in the novel are caught in the liminal spaces between different cultural, national, and personal identities, often questioning the meaning and value of belonging to a nation. Through the juxtaposition of the local (the Gorkhaland movement) and the global (Biju's immigrant experience in the United States), Desai critiques the rigid and exclusionary nature of national identities while simultaneously exploring the human desire for connection to a larger collective.



## Nationalism and the Gorkhaland Movement

One of the most significant political and cultural struggles in the novel is the Gorkhaland movement, which calls for a separate state for the Gorkhas in the Darjeeling hills of India. This movement is a central symbol for understanding the disjunction between the ideal of nationhood and the realities of exclusion. The Gorkhas, though part of India, are marginalised due to their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences. Desai presents the Gorkhaland movement not only as a political act of resistance but as an expression of the failure of the Indian nation-state to truly accommodate the diversity of its population.

Through the character of Biju's father, the cook who works for Jemubhai Patel, Desai shows the conflict between regional and national identities. The cook's aspiration for a better life in a nation that promises liberty and opportunity is shattered when he faces the realities of class and racial prejudice. The cook's struggles with his sense of belonging underscore the limitations of national identity, as it fails to address the inequities faced by marginalised communities within the state.

The Gorkhaland movement highlights the complexity of national belonging, especially for those who are located on the periphery of dominant national ideologies. The Gorkhas' fight for a separate state is rooted in their desire to reclaim their identity and cultural autonomy, but this battle also reveals the contradictions within the Indian state. Nationalism, in this context, becomes an exclusionary force that marginalises ethnic minorities in the name of a unified national

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identity. This tension between inclusion and exclusion is a crucial aspect of Desai's critique of nationalism, demonstrating how the ideal of a unified nation often masks deeper divisions within its borders.

## Hybridity and the Crisis of Belonging

Benedict Anderson's notion of the nation as an "imagined community" plays a key role in understanding the complexities of national identity in the novel. Anderson argues that the nation is not a natural or organic entity but a socially constructed community that is imagined and maintained through shared symbols, rituals, and historical narratives. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai reveals how this "imagined" community is both inclusive and exclusive. Characters such as Jemubhai Patel, who has internalised British colonial values, and Sai, who is caught between the colonial legacy of her grandfather and the new globalised world, exemplify the ambivalence of belonging to a nation that is constantly evolving and shifting.

Sai, a young woman educated in Western ideals, experiences her own crisis of belonging. Raised by her grandfather in a colonial atmosphere, she is at odds with the rapidly changing social and political climate of India. Her relationship with her Western-educated teacher, who represents another facet of the colonial elite, further complicates her understanding of her own identity. Despite her intellectual engagement with Western ideas, Sai is unable to escape her Indian roots, and her sense of belonging remains fractured. Her experience represents the hybrid identity that Bhabha describes—one that is never fully assimilated into

any culture or nation but is always in a state of negotiation.

This hybridity is especially evident in the character of Biju, who experiences the painful disjunction between his status as an immigrant in the United States and his identity as an Indian. Biju's immigrant experience can be viewed as a form of cultural hybridity, where he is neither fully part of the Indian nation nor truly integrated into American society. His struggles to survive as an undocumented worker in New York City reflect the precariousness of belonging in a globalised world, where national borders are porous, but the sense of belonging to a particular nation is often rigidly defined by citizenship, race, and class.

### **Globalisation, Displacement, and the Search for Belonging**

The experiences of Biju and other characters in the novel reflect the broader dynamics of globalisation, migration, and displacement, which further complicate the idea of nationhood. As Biju navigates the underbelly of New York's immigrant economy, he encounters the harsh realities of economic migration and cultural alienation. His longing for a better life in the United States is met with exploitation, racism, and a lack of legal protection. Biju's alienation in both India and the United States exemplifies the fractured nature of belonging in a world shaped by neoliberal economics, where the promises of economic mobility and citizenship are often illusory for the marginalised.

Desai critiques the idea of a national community by showing how individuals like Biju, who are displaced by forces of globalization, are rendered

invisible by both their home and host countries. The novel highlights how the neoliberal economic order privileges certain kinds of labor while rendering the lives of migrant workers, like Biju, expendable. In this context, belonging becomes a fluid and contingent concept, shaped by economic forces and the political realities of immigration and citizenship.

### **Conclusion**

Through the lens of nationhood and belonging, Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* reveals the tensions and contradictions inherent in the nation-state and national identity. The novel critiques the exclusionary practices of nationalism, particularly as they relate to ethnic minorities and immigrant populations, while also illustrating the ambivalence and hybridity that shape postcolonial identity. Desai's characters, caught between different national ideologies and cultural influences, embody the complexities of belonging in an increasingly interconnected world. The Gorkhaland movement, Biju's immigrant experience, and the personal struggles of the characters serve as a powerful commentary on the fragile and contested nature of national identity in the postcolonial era.

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