

Colonial Modernity and the Image of the Gorkhaland Movement in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Ubaraj Katawal
Valdosta State University

Abstract

This article examines some dynamics surrounding the Indian nation-state's treatment of its minority populations, and how Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* seems to abet the postcolonial nation-state's attempt to policing its own people. The article is interested in exploring the impact of colonial modernity in postcolonial human relations. As such, the novel successfully locates postcolonial literary violence in the character called the judge, whose replication of the racist treatment of his victims highlights the destructive cycle of violence. At the same time, the novel reinforces ethnic stereotypes against Nepali-speaking Indians—at least, it leaves much to be desired in countering racist thoughts of some of the characters. Drawing concepts from psychoanalysis and contemporary political philosophy, the article sheds light on the relationship between literature and the nation-state.

Dr. Ubaraj Katawal is Associate Professor of English at Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA. He specializes in contemporary British and Anglophone literature. He is also interested in Multi-ethnic Literatures of the United States. His articles have appeared in scholarly journals such as boundary 2, Postcolonial Text, symploké, South Central Review, Interdisciplinary Literary Studies, and South Asian Review. His book chapters have appeared in Critical Plant Studies, and Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature (Routledge, 2022).

Hate is not inborn; it has to be constantly cultivated, to be brought into being, in conflict with more or less recognized guilt complexes. Hate demands existence, and he who hates has to show his hate in appropriate actions and behavior; in a sense, he has to become hate.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

"By this time, dogs from all over the *busti* [neighborhood] had arrived galloping. They were battered and balding from fights and disease, but they, like their masters, had the air of outlaws. They surrounded Biju with gangster swagger, tails curved up over them like flags, barking and snapping."

Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*

Frantz Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks* that a victim is most likely to enact similar measures on other potential victims, creating a vicious cycle of domination and subordination, and causing trauma and mental illnesses in both the victims and the victimizers. He writes, "Affect is exacerbated in the [black man], he is full of rage because he feels small, he suffers from an inadequacy in all human communication, and all these factors chain him with an unbearable insularity."¹ This paper will examine colonial modernity and its legacy in examining a cycle of mental illness in "Third World" countries and individuals, as shown in Kiran Desai's 2006 novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. I argue that the third-person narrator of the novel exudes a conflicted position toward the Indian nation-state and its minorities. On one side, the narrator is critical of the judge, who replicates the violence of the legacy of colonial modernity upon his own people and neighbors after

his return from England, where he gets the "appropriate" training for an Indian Civil Service position. On the other hand, the narrator seems to exacerbate stereotypes and dehumanization regarding minorities within the Indian nation-state, abetting the same attitude and mindset that the narrative seeks to deconstruct.

My argument follows a recent critical trend regarding the analysis of the novel in which the successes and failures of the various characters are determined based on their individual effort to have hybrid cultural experiences. Essentially, the argument is that diasporic characters like Jemubhai Patel, aka the judge, suffer from psychosis as a result of their failure to navigate cultural hybridity. For example, Dina Yerima and Damian U. Opata assert that the judge's "failed hybridity" is the cause of the type of mental illness he suffers from, namely psychosis.² Similarly, Chiou-

¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 50.

² Dina Yerima and Damian U. Opata, "Psychosis in Hybridity: Locating the Identity of the Postcolonial

Subject in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 10, no. 3 (September 2018) 453.

Rung Deng suggests that the characters' failures or successes depend on the choice they make regarding their national and cultural identity. Comparing two characters in the novel, Biju and Saeed, Deng further argues, "While Saeed strikes a balance between adaptation to the global, hybrid culture in New York and insistence on his religious roots, Biju decides to pursue authenticity which is not adulterated by differences and changes."³ Once again, the characters' successes and failures are located in their individual efforts to straddle the opposite sides of their hybrid identity. Rather than locating characters' failures and the resulting mental illnesses in a lack of individual efforts, this paper underscores the overall environment and dominant ideology that shape individual characters' mindsets and behavior.

Colonial modernity, as Nayoung Aimee Kwon explains, "is the condition of modernity experienced in the shadows of the hegemony of the West, a sense of the Self as 'be-lated' and 'lacking' *vis-à-vis* a standard set elsewhere, or the condition of the Self-perceived as Other."⁴ In other words, colonial modernity is the practice of modernity in the colony, including an imposition of the colonial educational system and other institutions of the nation-state. Central to colonial modernity, then, is a classificatory approach to human relations. As I will explore in the rest of the article, this approach becomes important to understand many characters in

The Inheritance of Loss, including the judge, Lola, and others.

Classificatory Approach and *The Inheritance of Loss*

In a radio interview, Desai once remarked, "History is merely a story. You may fight over which is correct and in the end this is what it is."⁵ The question is: What roles do stories play in shaping the social processes of othering? If history is only a story, can one trans- pose history with story, and say, "Stories sometimes affect people's perceptions of historical events more powerfully than the real historical accounts?" While analyzing the ravages of colonial modernity through the unmasking of the figure of the judge, who replicates the attitude of his victimizers, I will show how the narrator fails to mount a critique against a biased portrayal of certain ethnicities. In context, after the publication of the novel, the Nepali-Indian communities voiced their concerns because many people thought the novel tacitly subscribed to the negative stereotypes of Nepali-speaking Indians. This paper addresses similar concerns that the narrative voice might be doing a favor to the hegemonic system in perpetuating ethnic and cultural stereotypes in the way that it fails to sufficiently unmask such bigoted figures as Lola and, to a lesser degree, Sai, since their racist views about a minority people often go unchallenged.

³ Chiou-Rung Deng, "Negotiating Cultural Identity in *The Inheritance of Loss*," *IAFOR Journal of Literature & Librarianship*, 10, no. 2 (2021) 78.

⁴ Nayoung Aimee Kwon, "Colonial modernity and the conundrum of representation: Korean literature

in the Japanese empire," *Postcolonial Studies* 13, no. 4 (2010) 422.

⁵ See Kiran Desai talks with Michael Silverblatt on Bookworm radio program. <www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/bw/bw070712kiran_desai>

As regards the relationship between a nation-state and its minorities, Ashis Nandy points out in "The Political Culture of the Indian State" two competing visions of India as a nation. The first vision is that of politicians who assume India to be a plural state, constituted by inexorably diverse cultures, languages, and traditions. This vision can be equated with the reflective attitude toward life, of which Gandhi was a staunch proponent. The majority of the Indian people still see their nation in this pluralistic light. However, as per Nandy, the ruling elites embrace a classificatory attitude or what Nandy calls the "scientific temperament."⁶ This attitude has its moorings in colonial modernity, which labels any form of practice coming from outside its normative framework of knowledge as abnormal and backward. Nandy ascribes the establishment of this attitude in India after Independence to Jawaharlal Nehru and other nationalists. He writes:

Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, and Babasaheb Ambedkar—who among themselves did so much to give an institutional basis to the presently dominant idea of the state in India—may have differed ideologically, but they all opted for the post-seventeenth-century European concept of the nation-state. All three rejected some of the major articulations of the concept of the state during the pre-Gandhian and Gandhian phases of the nationalist movement, especially the articulations based on pre-British experiences and experiments. The post-Independence elites borrowed their concepts of the state "rationally," on suprapolitical

grounds, from the concept of the state dominant in politically "developed" societies.⁷

The greatest threat to this classificatory attitude comes from the minorities, not least because they do not quite fit within the framework of the nation-state. The dominant system, consequently, devises ways to do away with democratic processes in order to completely silence the discontent coming from those that are excluded. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi demonstrated this best in 1975 when she imposed a state of emergency and took control of all three branches of the Indian government. If such a measure fails—which it often does—to further strengthen the coercive power of the nation-state, "justifications are sought in the perceived hostility to India of—alas—all her neighbors."⁸ Subsequently, any activism (legitimate or not) coming from the minorities becomes suspect and provides the state institutions a justification for criminalizing the entire population. Cultural works, such as novels, often play a crucial role in the way actions from both the state institutions and their discontents are viewed by both the national and international communities. *The Inheritance of Loss* plays a similar role.

Desai's Man Booker Prize winning novel showcases what happens when people move from one place to another and encounter differences in terms of not only religion but also gender roles, language, race, and class. The novel consists of three different storylines, all

⁶ Ashis Nandy, "The Political Culture of the Indian State," *Daedalus* 118, no. 4 (Fall, 1989) 10.

⁷ Nandy, "The Political Culture of the Indian State," 4.

⁸ Nandy, "The Political Culture of the Indian State," 10.

about immigrant and minority populations, weaving into each other. In the first storyline, Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, also known as the judge, goes to Britain to be educated with the ultimate goal of becoming an ICS (Indian Civil Service) official. The judge spends most of his time in Britain reading materials for the examination. Solitude and isolation turn him into a stranger to himself. When he returns home, he starts replicating the treatments he has received in Britain on his friends and relatives. The judge's estrangement from his family and himself culminates when he violently evicts his wife from their house, and lives with a cook and Mutt, the dog, until his granddaughter, Sai, appears at his door. His father, who worked hard to send him abroad for education, remarks: "It was a mistake to send you away. You have become like a stranger to us."⁹

In the second storyline, another migrant character, Biju, the judge's cook's son, lives along with other migrants in New York City after entering the country illegally. He had misread the images of luxurious American life disseminated in the "mediascapes:" "[...] The further away these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds [...]."¹⁰ Shuttling between the tugs of the past and the present, of modernity and tradition, he works different menial jobs in Indian restaurants. After he slips and falls on the kitchen floor of the Gandhi Café, hurting one of his knees, his employer, Harish-

Harry, offers fifty dollars, and tells him, "Here. Why not take some rest? You can help cutting the vegetables while lying down and if you are not better, go home. Doctors are very cheap and good in India. Get the best medical attention and later on you can always return."¹¹ At the end of his three years in the United States, Biju returns home with some items he bought in the city, only to be robbed on the way home in Darjeeling. He shows up in a woman's nightdress one morning to greet his father. To add insult to injury, the judge beat Biju's father to a pulp the previous night for failing to take care of his dog, Mutt, who has recently gone missing.

The third storyline is about Gyan and his Nepali-speaking community in India. Gyan holds a Bachelor's degree in science but is unemployed, and he takes part in the Gorkhaland Movement. From what Gyan tells Sai, his tutee of his ancestors' service in the British and Indian army, readers gather that in the 1800s, Gyan's ancestors immigrated to Darjeeling, India, from Nepal, attracted by employment opportunities the new homeland offered with its burgeoning economy.¹² Eventually, they were drafted into the British army, fighting wars for generations. Ironically, their service to the British Empire happened outside of England:

When Gyan was quite small, the last family recruit had one day climbed off the bus in Kalimpong's bus station and arrived missing a toe. There was nobody who could remember

⁹ Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 337.

¹⁰ Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theorizing Diaspora:*

A Reader. Eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 33.

¹¹ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 207.

¹² Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 157-158.

him, but finally, their father's childhood memories were resurrected and the man was recognized as an uncle. [...] Once Gyan had asked: "Uncle, but what is England *like*?"

And he said: "I don't know...."

"How can you not know???"

"But I have never been."¹³

The uncle would not say where he had been assigned all those years, even though the Gorkhas were instrumental for the British army. What the reader does not know about is a similar predicament of Gyan's ancestors in the Indian Army after Independence. Gyan hails from the same minority community that the ruling elites deem as a threat for its linguistic affiliation with Nepal. It appalls Sai to see the poverty in the community where Gyan lives. She notes, "[I]n these homes it was cramped and wet, the smoke thick enough to choke you, the inhabitants eating meagerly in the candlelight too dim to see by, rats and snakes in the rafters fighting over insects and the birds' eggs."¹⁴ Here, Sai's observation smacks of a voyeuristic gaze that indulges in the persistence of poverty in the Nepali-speaking community in Darjeeling.

Gyan and Budhoo, another immigrant Nepali who works as a night watchman in India, continue to remain subaltern and voiceless. The novel shows that they are perceived as the "lesser people,"¹⁵ in their own country. As one of the characters, Lola, remarks, "I tell

you, these Neps can't be trusted. And they don't just rob. They think absolutely nothing of murdering, as well."¹⁶ Bigoted sentiments such as these are left without any challenge either from the narrator or other characters, leaving readers wondering if these stereotypes are true. In one episode, Lola is subjected to a sort of poetic justice when she deservedly becomes the butt of a joke, but compared to the portrayal of Pradhan, the person who humiliates her and who is one of the leaders of the Gorkhaland Movement, Lola is made to appear as the lesser of the two evils.

To reiterate, the narrative voice is critical of the attitude that people like Lola show toward the Nepali community; at the same time, it also corroborates such an attitude by depicting this community as an unruly mob. For instance, the opening of the novel has the Gorkhaland National Liberation Front (GNLF) activists looting and terrorizing the judge's house; in another instance, a group of the GNFL boys betray and rob Biju on his way back from the United States. The novel creates a subtext that makes ethnic Nepali characters, to borrow Fanon's phrase, "in one way or another either semi-criminal" or good soldiers.¹⁷

Additionally, the novel becomes a site where bigoted characters, such as Lola, seek to find confirmation of their biased characterization of the minorities. After hearing the news about the robbery of the judge's guns at Cho Oyu, Lola remarks: "Budhoo? But he's

¹³ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 159.

¹⁴ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 279.

¹⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), xxiii.

¹⁶ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 51.

¹⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 52-53.

Nepali. Who can trust him now? It's always the watchman in a case of robbery. They pass on the information and share the spoils....Remember Mrs. Thondup? She used to have that Nepali fellow, returned from Calcutta one year to find the house wiped clean."¹⁸ Interestingly, Lola's logic about the Nepali-speaking Indians stems from the typical colonial attitude that, as Homi Bhabha reminds us, all natives are duplicitous and unworthy of trust.¹⁹

Adding to the stories of people on the move but also closely tied to Gyan's story is the story of Sai Mistry, the judge's granddaughter. After the death of her parents, a Hindu mother and a Zoroastrian father, in a freakish bus accident in Moscow, she is returned by her Convent school, where she was entrusted to by her parents to the judge, who is the only relative left. Sai's parents, both orphans, marry in a lawn witnessed by nobody else but themselves. When Sai is only six years old, they leave her behind in India and go to Moscow, where Sai's father was meant to receive training as an astronaut. Two years later, with the parents being dead and having been sent home by her Convent school, she ends up with the judge and the cook, who takes care of the judge's household.

Initially, Sai is tutored by Noni, Lola's sister. When Sai is sixteen, Noni finds out that she can no longer tutor Sai in her high-school physics. At this point, the judge appoints

Gyan as Sai's tutor. Gyan is described as "a promising student who had finished his Bachelor's degree, but hadn't yet been able to find a job."²⁰ Soon after, Sai and Gyan fall in love.

Upon hearing that the new tutor is a Nepali, the cook, hailing from the same economic class as Budhoo, remarks: "Nepalis make good soldiers, coolies, but they are not so bright at their studies. Not their fault poor things" and Sai, even though she initially calls the cook's remark "stupid," later seems to agree with him.²¹ She, for example, accuses Gyan of dishonesty as he fails to show up in Cho Oyu for some days: "Ate it for free...typical of you people, demand and take and then spit on what you've been given. There is exactly one reason why you will get nowhere—*Because you don't deserve to.*"²² One would be hard-pressed to not find at least some overlaps between Sai's sentiments and the author's when they both share a similar environment while growing up, an overlap that Chinua Achebe brings up in his discussion of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Commenting on Conrad's depiction of his characters in *Heart of Darkness*, in which Marlow's sentiments are shown to be akin to those of Conrad's, Achebe once wrote that Conrad displayed a problematic attitude towards black people.²³ In a similar vein, one might ask, how much of what Desai portrays in the novel comes from her own personal

¹⁸ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 49.

¹⁹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 100.

²⁰ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 79.

²¹ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 82.

²² Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 286.

²³ Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" *The Massachusetts Review* 57, no. 1 (2016), 22.

experience? Sai seems to be a character that the author would feel most sympathetic to, implied by the rhyming of their names, Sai and Desai. Additionally, the place where Sai lives with her grandfather, Cho Oyu, alliterates with Desai's seasonal family house in Chomiomi. Another biographical similarity is found in the fact that, like her character, Desai went to a convent school in Kalimpong.²⁴ It comes as no surprise then that Sai, who has just moved to Kalimpong, has an out-of-touch perspective on the lives and language of the people she tries to sympathize with: "Sai felt embarrassed. She was rarely in the cook's hut, and when she did come searching for him and 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."²⁵ Speaking of the lack of communication due to a language barrier, there are no Nepali words used in the novel even though many of the characters, including Gyan, are Nepali-speakers. The three Indian girls in New York are observed speaking in Hindi, however.²⁶ Even Biju sings a Hindi song as he pedals his bicycle: "O, *yeh ladki zara si deewani lagti hai...*"²⁷ This only goes on to show that the novel displays a problematic representation of the Nepali-speaking minority, unintentionally adding to the negative stereotypes that it tries hard to counter. In this regard, the Nepali-speaking population

exhibit subaltern positions within the configurations of human relations in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Other subaltern subjects in the novel, like the cook, find no other option but to believe in the power relations practiced upon them. The cook hides his meager possessions from Sai, who, he fears, will dislike or even disown him for being a poor man. The fear stems from the capitalist ideology that equates poverty with crime. Inscribed in the psychology of the people is the deep-seated ideology that "it is more honorable to be a master than a slave."²⁸ Sai subscribes to this ideology, as is witnessed by her uneasiness after seeing the meager possessions in the cook's room uncovered by the police. The cook feels it justified to be a suspect: "How do they to know that I am innocent? Most of the time it is the servant that steals."²⁹ Toward the end of the novel, he literally asks the judge to punish him for not being able to take care of the judge's dog, and confesses all the petty crimes he could have committed against his master:

"Sahib. I drink. I'm a bad man. Beat me. Beat me." [...]

The surge of anger was familiar to the judge.

He said, "You filth, you hypocrite. If you want punishment, I'll give it to you!"

²⁴ See "Kiran Desai." *W. H. Wilson* accessed 7/10/10 <http://www.hwwilson.com/currentbio/cover_bios/cover_bio_1_07.cfm >

²⁵ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 21.

²⁶ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 26.

²⁷ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 57.

²⁸ Ashis Nandy, *Time Treks: The Uncertain Futures of Old and New Despotisms* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007), 135.

²⁹ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 21.

"Yes," wept the cook, "that is right. It's your duty to discipline me. It's as it should be."³⁰

Desai's critique of the judge and his wounded masculinity is conspicuous here. When the focus is shifted to the Nepali-speaking community, however, the narrator uses a similar elitist discourse to characterize them.

To give one example, toward the end of the novel, when the GNLF members are shown robbing Biju, Desai writes: "By this time, dogs from all over the *busti* [neighborhood] had arrived galloping. They were battered and balding from fights and disease, but they, like their masters, had the air of outlaws. They surrounded Biju with gangster swagger, tails curved up over them like flags, barking and snapping."³¹ The omniscient narrator's perception of the whole incident appears to incriminate the entire population based on the criminal acts of a few people, which is reflective of the Indian state's criminalization of its minority populations. Incidentally, Desai's maternal grandmother herself was a German, and her maternal grandfather was a refugee from Bangladesh.³² However, it is a big mistake to forget the role that Indian interests play in the South Asian region in causing civil wars and ethnic conflicts that result in the influx of immigrants, to begin with.

The novel's focus, or lack thereof, on the Gorkhaland Movement needs some critical reading as well. The Gorkhaland Movement

is the civil rights movement in Northeast India. The ethnic Nepali-speaking Indians, as seen in the novel through Gyan and Budhoo, believe that the movement is the result of the long-standing cycle of degradation and humiliation they have suffered in Darjeeling, Sikkim, and other Indian states. They are treated as non-citizens even when they have contributed to the country's history. For example, in the Nagpur Session of the Indian National Congress in 1924, Mahatma Gandhi lamented the untimely death of one of the Nepali-Indian leaders, Dal Bahadur Giri, who followed Gandhi's non-violent and non-cooperation movement in India.³³ Ram Singh Thakuri, another Indian freedom fighter of the Nepali-speaking community, composed the popular marching song of the Indian National Army (INA).³⁴ At the same time, thousands of other Nepalis joined the INA, which was fighting against the British in Burma under the leadership of Subas Chandra Bose.³⁵ Captain Durga Malla and Major Dal Bahadur Thapa, both Nepalis, were captured, court-martialed, and hanged by the colonial government. Despite their numerous contributions to the nation-state, the Nepali-speaking people have been unable to win the trust of the Indian nation-state. This suspicion against the community was expressed by leaders like Vallabbhai Patel, who went so far as to write a letter to the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, on November 7, 1950, saying that "the people inhabiting this portion [Northeast India] have no established loyalty

³⁰ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 352.

³¹ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 348.

³² See "Kiran Desai." *W. H. Wilson* accessed 7/10/10 <http://www.hwwilson.com/currentbio/cover_bios/cover_bio_1_07.cfm >

³³ Atis Dasgupta, "Ethnic Problems and Movements for Autonomy in Darjeeling," *Social Scientist* 27, no. 318-319 (1999) 59.

³⁴ Dasgupta, 61.

³⁵ Dasgupta, 60.

or devotion to India. Even Darjeeling and Kalimpong areas are not free from pro-Mongoloid prejudices.”³⁶ Recall that most of the events in *The Inheritance of Loss* are set in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, predominantly inhabited by the ethnic Nepali-speaking community.

It is worthwhile to remember Nandy's discussion earlier about the relationship between a modern nation-state and its discontents. In order to actualize the classificatory attitude of modernity, of which Nehru and Patel were staunch proponents, the nation-state needs to “know” first who are its friends and its enemies. When the Gorkhaland Movement was launched, and the ruling elite was startled by the accompanying impact on the region's economic infrastructures, the government of West Bengal and the Indian media suspected the involvement of not only the neighboring states and countries including China, but also the United States, which vehemently denied such allegations.³⁷ Similarly, a postcolonial nation-state such as India wants to find a linguistic uniformity to ascertain its national identity which its minorities have resisted at a price.

Language, Identity, and The Gorkhaland Movement

Nepali language has worked as a mark of difference for people like Gyan. Historically, Nepalis, constituting the majority of the population in Darjeeling, Sikkim, and Bhutan,

wanted their children to learn and speak Nepali in spite of the governments' stringent regulations regarding the use of language in schools and other public places. As I was informed by one of the resettled Bhutanese refugees in the U.S., once at school in Bhutan, the headmaster had called up a few students to his office, told them to stand in line on a bench, and whipped their calves so bad that they started to open and bleed because some Nepali students were caught talking in their native tongue within the school premises. As an additional testimony to this experience, in 1979, Prime Minister Morarji Desai publicly stated that Nepali, the language of more than six million Indians, was a foreign language and therefore could not be included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.³⁸ Many people like Gyan see the Gorkhaland Movement as a way of voicing their discontent since they feel that this bias against the Nepali-speaking community has continued to this day, even though the Indian government finally agreed to include Nepali in the Eighth Schedule on August 20, 1992.

As mentioned before, in the entire 357-page novel, readers do not see the Nepali characters uttering any Nepali word, whereas Hindi words are used every once in a while. The question then is: Why do Nepali characters communicate only in English, while the other characters speak in both Hindi and English? In her ground-breaking book, *Borderlands-La Frontera*, the celebrated critic Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “Ethnic identity is twin skin

³⁶ Dasgupta, 63.

³⁷ Paulami Chattopadhyay, "Gorkhaland Movement: An Anthro-historical Perspective," *The Unrest Axl: Ethno-social Movements in Eastern India*, Ed.

Gautam Kumar Bera (New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2008), 199-200.

³⁸ Gasgupta, 62.

to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.”³⁹ Taking a cue from Anzaldúa’s assertion, one can argue that the novel seems to police the characters of Nepali ethnic minority from speaking in their language. In one narrative context, Lola and Noni discuss the issue of Nepali language as follows:

“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.”⁴⁰

These words come from not Desai, but Lola, arguably one of the most bigoted characters in the novel. Then the question is, if the writer is sympathetic to the Nepali community’s demands that their children should be allowed to speak and learn Nepali in schools, why do her characters not use any Nepali words in the novel? Is it indicative of Desai’s lack of knowledge of the language? Or could it be because she, like Lola, fears linguistic adulteration in Indian national and cultural identity? Anzaldúa recounts an experience she had at school with her Anglophone teacher. The teacher told her once: “If you want to be American, speak ‘American.’ If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you

belong.”⁴¹ A similar sentiment seems pervasive in some of the characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, a sentiment that the nationalist ideology in India would uphold, in opposition to heterogeneous temporalities of which Gandhi was fully aware. As Nandi writes:

On the Indian middle classes there has always been a fringe yearning for a nation-state with one religion, one language, and one culture, for that was what the Western societies seemingly had. But the mainstream of the freedom movement [led by Gandhi] resisted the model, partly out of a commitment to the Indian civilization, seen as dependent on this diversity for its survival, and partly out of a concern with the fate of the civil society in a country in which everybody at some plane was in a minority. That resistance is now weakening.⁴²

An argument can be made that the novel fails to vocalize the silence situated in an ethnic minority community. Desai has her bigoted characters use the colonial stereotypes and prejudices with impunity, mistaking appearance for reality about the Nepali people and their community. Even Biju is observed describing Kathmandu through a detached perspective: “Kathmandu was a carved wooden city of temples and palaces, caught in a disintegrating tangle of modern concrete that stretched into the dust and climbed into the sky.”⁴³ His outlook of the city is shallow and superficial, not least because a city is more than the buildings and how it looks from the outside.

³⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderland-La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 59.

⁴⁰ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 143.

⁴¹ Anzaldúa, 53.

⁴² Nandi, “The Political Culture of the Indian State,” 13.

⁴³ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 198.

In a similar vein, *The Inheritance of Loss* stages the Gorkhaland Movement as a play-acting, performed by anti-Indian characters. As the narrator notes in the novel:

There were reports of comings and goings over the Nepal and Sikkim border, 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 mostly boys, taking their style from Rambo, heads full up with kung fu and karate chops, roaring around on stolen motorcycles, stolen jeeps, having a fantastic time. Money and guns in their pockets. They were living the movies. By the time they were done, they would defeat their fictions and the new films would be based on them.⁴⁴

It is evident in the passage that the narrator does not give the movement any legitimacy. The repeated use of the word “stolen,” moreover, criminalizes the movement and dehumanizes the people involved in it. *The American Heritage Dictionary* 4th edition defines the word “steal” as “To take (the property of another) without right or permission.” In a different context, Edward Said has made a relevant argument regarding the Palestinian people, saying, “there is a consensus [in the West] that except as nuisances, terrorists, or anonymous refugees, the Palestinians do not exist, have no history politically.”⁴⁵ I would argue that the narrator ascribes similar characteristics to the Gorkhaland Movement and its members.

The narrative discrediting the Gorkhaland Movement is in line with the sentiments of the central and state governments at that time. As Paulami Chattopadhyay describes, the West Bengal government asked its police to cross the international border between Nepal and India to hunt the GNLFF cadres it thought to be operating from their safe haven there.⁴⁶ The state’s intelligentsia seems to have provided intellectual support to this operation. Parmanand, for example, quoting *India Today* newspaper, wrote, “Nepalis all over the Northeast are exhorting their leaders to come out in support of the Gorkhaland Movement while GNLFF emissaries are fanning out all over the country preaching about the Indian government’s policy of ‘apartheid’ toward the community.”⁴⁷ Atis Dasgupta argued in a similar line about the movement: “There were also allegations that he [Subhas Ghising, the leader of The Gorkhaland Movement in 1986] maintained indirect connections with the imperialist agencies who have been engaged in the diabolical programmes for destabilizing North-East India.”⁴⁸ *The Inheritance of Loss* lends itself to similar sentiments regarding the authenticity of the movement. What remains puzzling is the narrator’s—and by extension, the author’s—failure of a serious engagement of the disinheritance of other minorities, such as the Nepali-speaking community.

An Inheritance of Humiliation

⁴⁴ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 323-324.

⁴⁵ Edward Said, “Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims,” *Social Text* no. 1 (Winter, 1979) 13.

⁴⁶ Paulami Chattopadhyay, 200.

⁴⁷ Parmanand, “The Indian Community in Nepal and the Nepalese Community in India: The Problem of Integration,” *Asian Survey* 26, no. 9 (1986) 1019.

⁴⁸ Dasgupta, 64.

"The sense of humiliation," Nandy writes, "and feelings of inferiority in recent times are real, history serves as a projective test, and political propaganda works."⁴⁹ After Independence, Indian institutions and power-relations continue to function in the manner of colonial modernity.⁵⁰ Fanon writes, "Hate is not inborn; it has to be constantly cultivated, to be brought into being, in conflict with more or less recognized guilt complexes. Hate demands existence, and he who hates has to show his hate in appropriate actions and behavior; in a sense, he has to become hate."⁵¹ And, as Martha Nussbaum points out, "the rise of the Hindu right must be understood in conjunction with colonial humiliation and domination."⁵² All humiliations do not, however, give birth to further practices of humiliation, just like all violence does not have only negative consequences, a point Fanon makes so tellingly clear in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The humiliation that Gandhi suffered in South Africa awakened in him the subjectivity that subsequently guided him to a path of freedom. As Nandy puts it, "When a racist, white conductor threw Gandhi out of a train compartment in Pietermaritzburg in South Africa, despite Gandhi holding a first class ticket, the conductor did not know that he was gifting the world a new

political weapon for the oppressed—militant non-violence."⁵³ Nevertheless, the majority do not possess a sense of mastery over oneself and one's environment that Gandhi had, and participate in the cycle of humiliation and domination.

On one level, *The Inheritance of Loss* dramatizes and mounts a critique against this cycle of humiliation and domination through a critical portrayal of the judge, who brutally dehumanizes his wife and infantilizes Gyan in the same way that he was infantilized and dehumanized as a student in England. Here is one example of how the judge replicates humiliating techniques upon others. In England, he was interrogated as follows by a committee of administrators:

Lastly, who was his favorite writer?

A bit nervously for he had none, he replied that one was fond of Sir Walter Scott.

"What have you read?"

"All the printed works, sir."

"Can you recite one of your favorite poems for us?" asked a professor of social anthropology.

⁴⁹ Nandy, *Time Treks: The Uncertain Futures of Old and New Despotisms*, 144.

⁵⁰ Martha Nussbaum's book discusses the atrocities of Hindu nationalists against the minority Muslim population in Gujarat. The return of Narendra Modi, under whose sufferance the atrocities were carried out, in power, however, suggests that the fanatic nationalists still hold sway. Even though I disagree with Nussbaum's generalization of Hindus in India and elsewhere, her point that violence has been meted out to minority Muslim population by the Hindu majority is, to a large extent, indisputable. It is equally true, as

I wrote in my letter to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ("The Chronicle Review" June 8, 2007), that there have been Muslim atrocities against minority Hindu population elsewhere.

⁵¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 53.

⁵² Martha Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007), 336.

⁵³ Nandy, *Time Treks: The Uncertain Futures of Old and New Despotisms*, 145.

*Oh, Young Lochinvar is come out of the west,
Through all the wide Border his steed was the
best;
[....]*

When he looked up, he saw they were all chuckling.⁵⁴

Once he returns to India, the judge practices similar methods of humiliation over Gyan, the new tutor, over dinner:

“So,” he [the judge] said, slicing the meat expertly off the bone, “so, what poets are you reading these days, young man?” He felt a sinister urge to catch the boy off guard. [....]

“Tagore?” he [Gyan] answered uncertainly, sure that was safe and respectable. [....]

“Overrated,” he said after he had chewed well and swallowed, but despite this dismissal, he gestured an order with his knife: “Recite us something, won’t you?” [....]

The judge began to laugh in a cheerless and horrible manner.⁵⁵

Gyan recites from the Nobel Laureate's *Gitanjali*, known for its celebration of an inclusive and pluralistic India.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the judge feels his self-esteem reinvigorated seeing others go through similar humiliation he once went through.

The impact of colonial modernity on the judge's personality becomes clear when one

compares his attitude toward his wife before he left for England with the one he shows her after he returns home. Before, he liked—and may have even loved—Nimi, his wife:

While the family was out selling the jewels for extra money, he offered her a ride on his father's Hercules cycle. [....]

He pedaled harder. The ground sloped, and as they flew down the incline, their hearts were left behind for an instant, levitating amid green leaves, blue sky.⁵⁷

But after returning home from England, he behaves differently toward her:

He did not like his wife's face, searched for his hatred, found beauty, dismissed it. Once it had been a terrifying beckoning thing that had made his heart turn to water, but now it seemed beside the point. And Indian girl could never be as beautiful as an English one.⁵⁸

Later, he accuses her of stealing his possessions and ends up raping her. As a result, Nimi becomes pregnant with Sai's mother, who will be disinherited from the judge's care and responsibility. In this sense, the novel is really about disinheritance, whether it is at the hands of the British, the judge, or the Indian nation-state.

The judge develops a sense of awe toward the colonial figures early in his childhood. He goes to a mission school that has a portrait of Queen Victoria at its gate: “Each morning as Jemubhai passed under, he found her froggy

⁵⁴ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 123-124.

⁵⁵ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 120.

⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion of Tagore's poetry and his philosophy of inclusive India, see

Nussbaum's *The Class Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future*.

⁵⁷ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 101-102.

⁵⁸ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 185.

expression compelling and felt deeply impressed that a woman so plain could also have been so powerful. The more he pondered this oddity, the more his respect for her and the English grew” (Desai 2006, 66). He finds power and dignity in the white people whom he meets or reads about in India. However, his admiration for white people and Western culture grows deeper only after his training for an Indian Civil Service (ICS) exam in Cambridge. Upon finishing the training, he wastes no time to practice his newly acquired power as an ICS official and the dignity that comes with it on his own people, particularly his family and friends. The following episode takes place immediately after his return from England, highlighting his frustrations when his family members do not know some of the things he has brought along:

“What is paudur poff? Paudaar paaf?”

“To protect the skin.”

“To protect the skin from what?”

[....]

“What the hell do all of you know?” said Jemubhai. Thieving, ignorant people.

He had thought they would have the good taste to be impressed and even a little awed by what he had become, but instead they were laughing.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 184.

⁶⁰ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 44.

⁶¹ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 44.

⁶² Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 45.

What happened to him to cause this transformation?

The first experience in England happens as a surprise when he notices a poor white porter carrying a brown man's bags.⁶⁰ This sight boggles his mind until the racial hierarchy he had assimilated at school gets validation when he fails to find a room for rent: “‘Just let,’ ‘All full,’ or even a curtain lifted and quickly dropped, a stillness as if all the inhabitants had, in that instant, died. He visited twenty-two homes before he arrived at the doorstep of Mrs. Rice on Thornton Road. She didn't want him either, but [...].”⁶¹ He also experiences isolation and racism:

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—moved over when he sat next to them in the bus, so he knew that whatever they had, they were secure in their conviction that it wasn't even remotely as bad as what *he* had [the color of his skin]. The young and beautiful were no kinder; girls held their noses and giggled, “Phew, he stinks of curry!”⁶²

It is an instance of “*exclusion humiliation*,”⁶³ in which a victim is segregated from the community of humans. Because he fails to make friends, he starts to see himself as different, overhears his accent as peculiar and finds his skin color to be abnormal, hence the

⁶³ Evelin Gerda Lindner, “Genocide, Humiliation, and Inferiority: An Interdisciplinary Perspective,” *Genocide by the Oppressed: Subaltern Genocide in Theory and Practice*, Eds. Nicholas A. Robbins and Adams Jones (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2009), 145.

purchase of the powder puff. He devotes almost all of his time during his five years of stay preparing for the ICS exam.

His father detects this transformation in the judge's attitude, if only too late. By the time his father interprets the judge's transformation, Jemubhai has already evicted his wife because he could not bear the look of her face anymore. Prior to her eviction, he thrashes her for taking part in a gathering to welcome Nehru.⁶⁴ He deems it uncivilized to fight against colonialism. To his father's pleading to take his wife back, he responds, "You're following the script of a village idiot. She is unsuitable to be my wife."⁶⁵ When his daughter is born, the judge does not go to see her and ignores a telegram from Nimi's brother-in-law, who has grudgingly sheltered her now after she is thrown out by her uncle. Then the judge refuses to investigate his wife's suspicious death, choosing to believe that it was just an accident.⁶⁶

Conclusion: Possibility of Something New

Colonial modernity is not the only culprit for all the ravages that have visited a postcolonial nation-state. However, the novel makes it hard to ignore the link between the classificatory human relation of colonialism and its continuation in characters such as the judge. Nandy's discussion of the colonial modernity and its aftermath in the colonies is fit to quote at length because what we are witnessing in

the judge is the result of colonial education and its application in the colony:

Modern colonialism won its great victories not so much through its military and technological prowess as through its ability to create secular hierarchies incompatible with traditional order. These hierarchies opened up vistas for many, particularly for those exploited and cornered within the traditional order. To them the new order looked like—and here lay its psychological pull—the first step toward a more just and equal world. That was why some of the finest critical minds in Europe—and in the East—were to feel that colonialism, by introducing modern structures into the barbaric world, would open up the non-West to the modern critical-analytical spirit. Like the "hideous heathen god who refused to drink nectar except from the skulls of murdered men," Karl Marx felt, history would produce out of oppression, violence and cultural dislocation not merely new technological and social forces but also a new social consciousness in Asia and Africa.⁶⁷

This "new social consciousness" is a classificatory approach to human relations.

Not surprisingly, one of the judge's interviewers happens to be a professor of social anthropology, a discipline in which knowledge through classification becomes its *raison d'être*. As Gyan Prakash contends, social and cultural anthropologists—as it were, the stewards of colonial modernity, some of whom accompanied Napoleon in his

⁶⁴ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 333.

⁶⁵ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 337.

⁶⁶ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 338.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Gyan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, no. 2 (April 1990) 404-405.

invasion of Egypt⁶⁸—assumed that a clear separation between the knower and the known was possible and an objective, universal knowledge about India could be established.⁶⁹ Several characters in the novel, including the judge, show this anthropologist's mindset, and they fear that it might give way to more supple relations, envisioned by people like Gandhi and Tagore: "Soon all the judge had worked so hard to separate would soften and envelop him in its nightmare, and the barrier between his life and eternity would in the end, no doubt, be just another failing construct."⁷⁰ Despite Desai's critique of the judge and his mindset, the configuration of the narrative seems to participate in colonial modernity's dehumanization of the others for the most part. As I pointed out earlier, the narrator not only discredits the rationale for the Gorkhaland Movement through the criminalization of its activists, but the novel also symptomatically carries out the nation-state's task of suppressing linguistic diversity. If it is true that one's cultural identity is inextricably tied with his or her linguistic identity, then *The Inheritance of Loss* fails to vocalize the voiceless Nepali-speaking community.

When the "Third World" meets the "First," essentialist notions about one's race, color, ethnicity, language, gender and sexuality that gained ascendance during colonial relations still come into play. As Joan Dayan aptly puts

⁶⁸ Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton UP, 2002), 82.

⁶⁹ Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography," 391.

⁷⁰ Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 124.

it, "It is not yet time to look back to some fossilized theme of slavery, for slavery still exists under other names."⁷¹ And since one person's imagined community is often another person's political prison,⁷² political freedom of one people has become the nightmare of others, for such freedom is generally accompanied by an urge for regional and eventually global dominance. Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* powerfully dramatizes this experience in the South Asian context, in which some characters enact elements of exclusionary colonial knowledge on others. If one reads the judge allegorically as postcolonial India, then Nimi embodies the victim of a postcolonial nation-state. Not surprisingly, to the judge, his father, a figure in the mold of Gandhi, seems to be like a "village idiot" when the latter tries to talk to the judge to take his wife back. Once a victim of colonial modernity, the judge (and India) metes out the exclusionary practices toward his own people.

By the end of the novel, Sai comes to a realization that India has multiple histories, all clamoring for attention, resisting the domination of anyone: "The simplicity of what she'd been taught wouldn't hold. Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own mean little happiness and live safely within it."⁷³ This is the beginning of something positive and underscores the porous nature of human

⁷¹ Quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2009), 148.

⁷² Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," 30.

⁷³ Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 355.

relations. One only wishes this realization would spread in her surroundings, especially in people like the judge and Lola. In the end, it is not just an individual character but the dominant ideology that determines human relationships in a group, community and a nation-state.

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