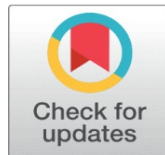


# AMBIVALENT AND NOSTALGIC ATMOSPHERE IN KIRAN DESAI'S THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

Susheel Kumar <sup>1</sup>✉

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D Research Scholar of English, Sant Baba Bhag Singh University Khiala, District Jalandhar, Punjab, India



## Corresponding Author

Susheel Kumar,  
[kumarsusheel147@gmail.com](mailto:kumarsusheel147@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is considered to be the best postcolonial novel, having multiple geographic settings as a backdrop, cross-cultural diasporic identities, multi-layered narration and representations, cultural conflicts, and deviations from moral values and ethics of the East and the West inextricably interlinked under the impact of ambivalence and nostalgia in her fictional Kalimpong town located in the western part of Darjeeling Hills in the Eastern Himalayas of India, where the local, colonial, postcolonial and global live, long and belong.

**Keywords:** Ambivalence, Nostalgia, Mimicry, Hybridity, Root, Desire, In-Betweenness, Diaspora, Isolation, Marginalization, Segregation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ambivalence and nostalgia are the two key terms that have attracted the attention, inspired, and influenced the postcolonial discourse, narration, and perspectives of many. Homi K. Bhabha (1949), an Indian-born British theorist and a man of letters, is a Professor at Harvard University who has been awarded Padam Bhushan by the Indian Government in 2012 and has theorised key concepts and terms in postcolonial theory such as “hybridity, ambivalence, mimicry, and unhomeliness” (Akceme, 2021, p. 18). His literary studies and discourses are much inspired and influenced by the world's renowned personalities like Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lecan, Michel Foucault, and Edward Said. Homi K. Bhabha agrees with V.S. Naipaul's words in *The Mimic Men* (1967) about the ambivalent and nostalgic situation when “we pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the New” (Naipaul, 1967, p. 146). Thus, ambivalence develops when we refuse our origin, narration, and representation and desire to emerge something new. Bhabha puts it in *Of Mimicry and Man* as: “The menace of mimicry is its double vision, which in disclosing the

ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (Bhabha, 1994, p.126). Ambivalence originates when one is being pulled and pushed by two equally strong things. It can be a binary opposite thing or meaning that goes side by side. Sigmund Freud in *The Unconscious* (1915) states that when we are caught inappropriately between the consciousness and pre-consciousness, ambivalence takes place. He writes that "their mixed and split origin is what decides their fate. We may compare them with individuals of mixed race who, taken all around, resemble white men but who betray their coloured descent by some striking feature of others and, on that account, are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges" (Freud, 1915, p. 190-91).

In addition to ambivalence, the term nostalgia has also been examined in the present paper. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* states that nostalgia is "a shared memory of common experiences that can be used to fill the emotional void left by the retreat, disintegration, or unavailability of real communities and networks" (Anderson, 1983, p. 13). Tamara Wagner in *Nostalgia for Home or Homelands* defines nostalgia as "construing memories of something that is familiar, though remote enough to be invested with the allure of the exotic" (Wagner, 2004, p. 45). On the other hand, nostalgia occurs when elements of uncertainty and homelessness overpower of an individual and dissolution of traditions and culture. Nostalgia is of both flexible and creative emotion, undergoing significant changes in life. Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), talks about the "dual function of nostalgia" (Said, 1979, pp.1-2). Later on, Homi K. Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* talks about "the heimlich pleasures of the hearth" that are opposite to "the unheimlich terror of the space or race of the Other" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 2) while stating the concepts of otherness and hybridity. William Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest* (1610) and Daniel Defoe's Friday in *Robinson Crusoe Rescues Friday* (1719) are the two who can be termed as ambivalent and nostalgic characters.

The present paper will highlight two terms, namely ambivalence and nostalgia, which are used and elaborated in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* with special reference to her characters and situations in connection with Homi K. Bhabha's views. Being a diasporic identity, Homi K. Bhabha knows how ambivalence and nostalgia keep working both in the hostland, an alien land, and homeland, a native place. This experience of both lands put the diasporic identity or individual into an ambivalent and in-between situation. He seems to be torn between the two worlds at the same time, especially in the hostland, where he misses his roots, cultural heritage, and practices. This creates a sense of longing for the belonging and the past in the form of memory and nostalgia. That's why he starts looking at everything and everyone with emotional eyes. At such a position, he finds himself a hybrid model, which is now far away from his past. Here, he assumes himself to have a strange personality. He feels if he lives in the past, his future will become blurring, and if he runs towards his future, his past, roots, and heritage will be missed. Thus, the origin and development of ambivalence and nostalgia are inevitable and natural. Here, Stuart Hall's observation in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* becomes relevant that "diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall, 1994, p. 402). Thus, through these productions and reproductions, the ambivalent situations and nostalgic visions have been very skilfully and dexterously delineated and portrayed by Kiran Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss* through the characters like Jemubhai Popatlal Patel in particular and other characters in general.

Like Homi K. Bhabha, Kiran Desai is also an immigrant. She knows how to arise the elements of ambivalence and nostalgia in her characters both in an alien land, a hostland in particular and the native land in general. While talking about the characters, Kiran Desai admits in her 2007 interview with Sophie Rochester that "the characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys (of her grandparents) as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West, and it is this I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance" (Desai, 2007, p.1). Thus, the novelist has shown her personal experiences through this novel. She again explains in her interview with Sophie Rochester how postcolonial immigrant identities dislocate to the west, where the migrant has to face and experience imbalances and differences. She says:

It tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant. It also explores what happens when a western element is introduced into a country that is not of the west, which happened during the British Colonial days in India and is happening again 'with India's new relationship with the states.' Another aim was to write about what happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one. How does the imbalance between these two worlds change a person's thinking and feeling? How do these changes manifest themselves in a personal sphere to a political sphere over time? (Desai, 2007, p.2)

The novelist raises many questions through her present novel. Along with them, even the title of the novel looks somewhat ambivalent and nostalgic. Ambivalent in the sense that words in the title 'inheritance' and 'loss' are opposite

to each other. Inheritance is remained with a person until he goes out. Through inheritance, one learns and gains in the culture but loses when one interacts with others.

When Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a major character in the novel, was reading in Bishop Cotton School, he was much impressed and influenced by the British culture, traditions, and philosophy during colonial days in India in the late 1930s. But he did not forget to seek dowry at the time of his early managed marriage with fourteen-year-old Bela, a daughter of the wealthy parents of Piphit in Gujarat. By seeking huge dowry, he went to Cambridge University to pass ICS so that he might become a judge back in India as his father had wished. So, Jemubhai Popatlal Patel was not in a 'loss' position, but he seemed to gain more than his inheritance and capacities because he was going to England with hi-fi and desired dowry. In his conscious attempt to mimic the British and anglicise himself, he became an ambivalent puppet in the hands of his colonial west. Ghosh Tapan in *The Fictin of Kiran Desai* (2009) states that, "In the process of becoming his colonisers, he disowned his family, tradition, and culture and inherited the loss of self-esteem, pride, and vitality that left him emotionally paralytic and spiritually dead. So, degraded he became that he hated the presence of humans and felt comfortable in the company of a pure bred bitch" (Tapan, 2009, p. 70). Desai had herself described that she tried to capture such ambivalent life between East and West and about the diasporic experiences of the people who caught between two poles in her fictional world. Jemubhai Patel tried his best effort to adopt, adapt, and adept the English language, accent, and culture in England and later on applied them in India too.

After spending five years in England, Jemubhai Popatlal Patel worked as a judge firstly in Uttar Pradesh, then in Bengal, and after his retirement, he decided to live in Chu Oyu in Kalimpong, lonely as well as peacefully, but only by following his anglophile manners. His brief career of English life was so strong and powerful that Jemubhai Popatlal Patel was converted into "Mr. J. P. Patel, S.S. Strathnaver" (Desai, 2006, p. 119) only to impress 'the natives' and 'others' through the British tradition of changing the names. Desai calls him "a foreigner—a foreigner—every bit of him screamed" (Desai, 2006, p. 66) in spite of being born and brought up in India. He was so inspired, influenced, and dominated by the western culture and civilisation that he applied all those codes, values, and philosophy of the West in Kalimpong, far away from England. Like Britishers, he used to take tea every afternoon and used powder puffs to hide his real skin colour. He used to eat English food and wear clean and ironed clothes. On the other hand, he followed Indian traditions and values, but in loneliness. But in public life, he was a keen observer and follower of the Western hegemonic philosophy and culture. He converted himself into a mimic fellow who had been living under the continuous influence of flux and isthmus, conflicting and dialectic hybridization. His situation brought him to the open in-betweenness and ambivalent position where he found himself unable to come out cleanly and clearly. He was leading a dual and split life in the third space. Prasanta Bhattacharyya in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss: The Story of a Diverse Diaspora Called India* (2009) wrote on his split personality as: "The continual violence he had to engage in to drive out all traces of ethnicity from his persona in an ill-conceived attempt to become 'equal' with the masters left him bereft of vitality and merit that otherwise were his own inheritance begotten through his biological, parental, and communal past" (Bhattacharyya, 2009, p. 224). That third space brought him to postcolonial alienation, isolation, and marginalization. Here, we feel that he should lead his retired life at his native place, Piphit in Gujarat, not in the already power-stricken and politically motivated place of Kalimpong. The very place of Kalimpong was also converted into an ambivalent location because the Gorkhaland National Liberation Front was strongly demanding to have their own state and separate country, just as Pakistan was created in 1947 out of India. Thus, the whole of Kalimpong was under the influence as well as threats of ambivalence and nostalgia for the Nepalese immigrants too. The geographic location of the novel was itself quite ambivalent and nostalgic, as it was set partly in the Indian cities like Piphit in Gujarat and Kalimpong in West Bengal, close to Nepal, and partly in New York, with some flashbacks from England too. No doubt, we see in Kiran Desai's typical Kalimpong God's plenty, but all were scattered in ambivalence manners and caught between the East and West experiences. At a deeper level, the novel also explores the influence of western civilisation on these characters. It not only explores what happened during the British colonial days in India but also traces India's new relationship with the United States during the postcolonial period.

In the present novel, we encounter two major characters, namely Jemubhai Patel, who was a British migrant during the colonial period and was living in Chu Oyu in Kalimpong, and Biju, who was a second-generation migrant living in America during the 1980s. Both are the finer examples and symbols of primrose path seekers to the western world. As far as Jemubhai Patel was concerned, he was much impressed and influenced by British culture, traditions, and philosophy. Jemubhai as well as Biju found themselves torn and caught themselves between the East and West. His identity seemed to be doubled, unstable, and hybrid or divided due to the cross-cultural interactions. Moreover, he was

kept circling in-betweenness of adopt, adapt, and adept phases. Physically, he was looking Indian, but psychologically, he behaved like a mimic as well as typical British. More or less, his psychological self was looking dominating over his physical. His psychological self belonged to the western hegemonic culture, whereas his physical side belonged to his roots, heritage, and cultural values of his native original home. Thus, Jemubhai's attitude and behaviour developed under the influence of ambivalence between the East and West. Later on, these ambivalent situations lead him towards the generation of his nostalgic self. Nostalgic in the sense that he could not decide either to live in Britain forever even after the completion of his studies or to leave his alien country. But he, under the influence of his homeland, felt his nostalgic sense called him to follow his own land and roots. Thus, he decided to serve as a judge only in India throughout his life. One thing is to be noted that he did never return to England, but he could do so at any time. This meant his nostalgic sense dominated over his British lifestyle and his ambivalent affair. He remained in the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas, where he was living after his retirement with his granddaughter, Sai, his cook, Panna Lal, and his dog Mutt. It was only because of the memories of the home and nostalgic sense of his roots that he did never think of his hostland as his homeland. It was after his return to India that he behaved like an anglophile to the natives, only to show and impress them that he had been once in Britain like a king or Maharaja. Otherwise, he was an eccentric and a misguided half-Gujrati, half-Kalimpongian, but largely a mimic British. In this way, Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, now known as Mr. J. P. Patel or James, was either an ambivalent figure between his two names or nostalgic because of his latter name, a typical hybrid model of Kiran Desai. Here, Homi K. Bhabha's arguments in *The Location of Culture* are worth mentioning where he states that "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognisable other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). Thus, Jemubhai was suitably fitted in this modal.

As far as Jemubhai's relationship with his wife Bela, later on converted into Nimi, was not idealistic but rather ambivalent because he did not marry her because he loved her, but he married only because he wanted to go to study in England, and for that he needed money, and money came through dowry from Bela's parents. Jemubhai was such a fellow who did not even touch his wife after his marriage but assaulted her over a trifle after returning from English culture. So, he violated a woman's sanctity and emotions too. He started hating her for the simple reason that she did not know how to speak English. "Nimi learnt no English, and it was out of her stubbornness, he thought" (Desai, 2009, p. 170). He wanted that she should look like Queen Victoria, "a woman so plain...so powerful" (Desai, 2006, p. 58) and beautiful. The British culture had made him barbarous and selfish. He left her, who had died mysteriously in her maternal home. He considered that "she is unsuitable to be my wife" (Desai, 2006, p. 306). But he accepted his and her granddaughter, Sai, at Kalimpong.

In addition to Jemubhai, many of the other characters are seen entangled in ambivalence and nostalgia. For example, Biju left India only for the sake of his father's poor condition as a servant at colonised-minded Jemubhai's home with opposing and hybrid instruments. Secondly, he wanted to be very rich, more than Popatlal Patel, as America was, in Cook's words, "the best country in the world" (Desai, 2006, p. 85). But Biju's primrose displacement to America was utterly disappointing, like a nightmare. He did not find and feel Indian culture and traditions in America. He found himself misfit and stranger in the other land, his hostland. But one day Biju, in his misidentified atmosphere, he, in one of his light moods, revived his native culture by mocking at the Anglicised Indian students as "he put two fingers to his lips and whistled into the window at the girls," then singing the Hindi film song *This girl is crazy for me* to them (Desai, 2006, p. 57). He revived Hindi film culture in his nostalgic but ambivalent situation between the East and the West.

In order to search for his new and better life, Biju worked in restaurants like Baby Bistro, Le Colonial, and the Stars and Stripes Diner relentlessly, but he did neither find job security nor a green card as he was an illegal immigrant. His immigration was under pressure and question, whereas in India neither of them was required. In America, he had to survive in the hidden and underground world: "There was a whole world in the basement kitchens of New York, but Biju was ill-equipped for it" (Desai, 2006, p. 24). His experience with his selfish and greedy boss, Harish-Harry, an Indian immigrant and owner of a restaurant was also ambivalent in the sense that "he allows [the workers] to sleep in the basement of the cafe with rats, but only pays them a quarter of the minimum wage" (Desai, 2006, p. 91). When Biju slipped down and received injuries while working in the kitchen, Harish-Harry started threatening him with immediate dismissal from his job and pointing out his undocumented immigration: "Know how easily I can replace you? Know how lucky you are!!!!... You think there aren't thousands of people in this city looking for a job? I can replace you like this," he snapped his fingers. "I'll snap my fingers, and in one second, hundreds of people will appear. Get out of my face!" (Desai, 2006, p. 206). Biju found the Americans "very violent people. All those army types..." (Desai, 2006, p. 266). There was a time when he considered America a land of opportunities and luck. But he had never imagined that he had to suffer and face miserable, isolated, alienated, nostalgic, and overwhelmed situations there. Feeling and finding himself marginalised, he became nostalgic about his world, roots, and native land. One day when he was talking to his father on



the telephone, he could not explain and express his emotions and could not speak much. "Suddenly, after this, there was nothing more to say, for while the emotion was there, the conversation was not; one had bloomed, not the other, and they fell abruptly into emptiness" (Desai, 2006, p. 231). His dialectical self emerged out of his emotions and found himself dangled between his belongingness and unhomeliness. He became aggressive with decisive changes. There and then, finding dark future in hostland, he decided to return to India, his native land. In no time,

he went to Jackson Heights Store and bought American-made goods to use in his homeland, like a TV and VCR, a camera, sunglasses, baseball caps that said 'NYC' and 'Yankees,' water-proof watches, calculators, an electric razor, a toaster oven, a winter coat, nylon sweaters, a rain jacket, a folding umbrella, suede shoes, a leather wallet, a Japanese-made heater, T-shirts with 'I LOVE NYC' and 'Born in the USA,' whisky, saffron, cashews, raisins, aftershave... (Desai, 2006, p. 270).

Here, Biju behaved like half-American and half-Indian, as he could neither be acculturated nor assimilated but was still either ambivalent or nostalgic. His purchase of certain American goods at the time of his return to his native land clearly showed that he would use them in his daily routine while living in Kalimpong, just as Popatlal was behaving in an anglicised manner after returning from England since the 1940s. But one thing is clear that, for the sake of his unfulfilled economic wellness and semi-acculturation with the West, what Biju had to inherit from his migration was the loss of his dignity and values due to ambivalent and nostalgic encounters.

As far as Panna Lal, Cook, Biju's father seemed to be semi-diasporic even while living in Kalimpong, who also seemed to be entangled between ambivalence and nostalgia after Biju's flight to America, like Jagon's position after his son's visit to America in R. K. Narayan's novel *The Vendor of Sweets*. Through the letters and telephonic conversation, Panna Lal could erect his own making America in imagination, like that of the pleasure palace of Kubla Khan in S. T. Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan*. Though Biju was staying in America on the basis of a tourist visa, after the time was over, he became an illegal immigrant, yet his father in Kalimpong, through Biju's letters, felt that he had no problem with American society. Like Jagon, he started boasting of his son's higher position in USA. Whenever he met anyone in India, he used to mention that "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... One day soon my son will take me" (Desai, 2006, p. 84). His son had "gained a higher position" (Desai, 2006, p. 17) in cooking English food excellently. He started dreaming of his richness, more rich than Popatlal, his boss, and he advised him to seek more money than ever. In a way, Panna Lal had become more or less a foreigner and behaved himself better than other fathers who could not be successful in sending their sons to America.

Apart from Jemubhai Patel, Biju, and Panna Lal characters like Bela, Jemubhai's wife (Nimi Patel), Sai, Jemubhai Patel's teenager grand-daughter, her mathematics tutor Gyan, a Nepali, their neighbours, Father Booty, a Swiss migrant, Uncle Potty, a British upper-class migrant, Nonita (Noni), Lolita (Lola), who were also living in North-East Indian town Kalimpong, and Biju's friends Saeed and Harish-Harry, who had been migrated to America, were also leading ambivalent and nostalgic lives. Father Booty was a farmer, Swiss priest, missionary, and Oxford educated who had been living as an illegal immigrant in India for the last thirty years. When the activists of GNLf threatened him to leave the country as soon as possible, he became nostalgic about India and did not want to leave India. Sai, an orphaned daughter of a multicultural couple, Gujarati mother and Zorastrian father, had to move to her grandfather Jemubhai Patel's home in Kalimpong at Cho Oyu at the age of eight, where she was introduced as "Miss S. Mistry, St. Augustine's Convent" (Desai, 2006, p.19) after the death of her parents in Russia. There she missed them very much. She used to live in her past spaces and memories with her parents and met them only in memories and nostalgia. As far as her behaviour, attitude, and habits were concerned, she loved foreign culture and preferred cake to ladoos, ate with fork spoons rather than hands, and spoke "English better than Hindi" (Desai, 2006, p. 30). She was tutored by Nonita, a worshipper of British culture, and later on, Gyan, a twenty-year-old Nepali angry young man, her mathematics teacher and a staunch follower of GNLf who was fighting for his separate new state or new country. Elements of isolation, marginalisation, and segregation were also developed ambivalently in his personality, leading him to be nostalgic about his own homeland too.

Kiran Desai has also depicted such characters that had seen colonial British hegemony and postcolonial society in India, like Jemubhai, Nonita, Lolita, Mrs. Sen, and the Cook, Panna Lal. They used to appreciate western values, customs, and cultures even in postcolonial times. While living in India, they could be seen inspiring and motivating their next generation to establish themselves in empires to enhance their careers and status, as their future was more secure in western countries than in their own country. Their preferences for British products and British hegemony over the postcolonial countries showed either their ambivalent present or nostalgic past. Under the impact of British colonialism and western culture, Lola and Noni considered themselves a little bit modernised to others. They possessed Christian

names, used to wear British-branded clothes, applied British-made products, and even their habits of reading British literature, "P.G. Wodehouse, Agatha Christies, Anthony Trollope, etc." (Desai, 2006, p. 198), even while living in Free India, showing that they were still ambivalent about how and which way or culture or country was to be followed. Lola and Mrs. Sen were also ambivalent and nostalgic about her daughters. Mrs. Sen's daughter, Mun Mun, was selected for CNN news in America, and Lolita's daughter, Piayali Bannerji, was a news reader at the BBC and changed her Bengali name to a modern English name as Pixie.

Thus, the whole atmosphere in Kalimpong was replete with ambivalence and nostalgia. Even the very location of Kiran Desai's Kalimpong seemed to be torn and entangled among multiple identities and cross-cultural national backgrounds, various ethnicities, different values, attitudes, behaviours, approaches, and customs. Here Kiran Desai's plenty was either ambivalent or nostalgic not only with oneself but also with the other to whom they had been associated and belonged. Here, Homi K. Bhabha's words in *The Location of Culture* are worth mentioning that,

Gatherings of exiles and emigres' and refugees; gathering on the edge of 'foreign' cultures; gathering at the frontiers... gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, and disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment: of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present. Also the gathering of people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned.... (Bhabha, 1994, p. 139)

Thus, with the cross-presences of local, colonial, postcolonial, and global individuals like Christians, Buddhists, Nepalese, Lepchas, Bengalis, Assamese, Bhutanese, Sikkimies, Biharis, and Marwaris found in Kalimpong together and created an atmosphere of ambivalence and nostalgia annexing with New York restaurants, Victorian England, and rural Gujarat. In this way, we agree with Subha Mukharjee's remarks in *Kiran Desai the Novelist: An Anthology of Critical Essay* that Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* presents the picture of globalised India but in ambivalence and nostalgia. "The characters like Jemubhai Patel, Mr. And Mrs. Mistry, Sai, Biju, Lolita, and Nonita are affected by imperial impacts. As an intelligent writer and current observer of human behaviour, Kiran Desai fulfils the responsibility of writing about current sensational transnational issues" (Mukharjee, 2012, p. 15).

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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