



Indianness and Superstition: A Critical Evaluation of Contemporary Men and Milieu

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Abstract

In her literary works, namely *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai offers a "real-life examination" of the complex intersections between "Indianness," widespread superstition and the shifting social landscape of modern India. This study discusses the idea of culture as a "fragrance," a recognisable but intangible common cultural legacy that transcends space and time, as defined by Desai. The study suggests that in Desai's fiction, the 'Indianness' is a sui generis way of life, which entails the Indian way of thinking and feeling which survives even as individuals face the challenges of globalism and colonial mimicry. A key component of this assessment is the function of superstitious dogma as a psychological support for the modern psyche. The paper is an analysis of how "irrational thought" and religious tradition often fool the individual while at the same time giving to the marginalized a sense of agency. In the rural milieu of Shahkot, the public's receptivity to a "holy man" suggests that the public prioritises spiritual mystery over logical investigation, which is satirised and sensitively treated in Desai. But in the high mountain environment of Kalimpong, the Cook's use of folk practices (like making a clay cobra) becomes a "cleansing force" for the unravelling of traumatic poverty and powerlessness.

Moreover, the study looks at the contemporary man in this context, with the characters who, when presented, operate as a "vortex of loss". Individuals such as Jemubhai Patel are discussed as being suffering from "colonial neurosis" and are characterized by an internalized sense of superiority and self-hatred, which is manifested as the suppression of indigenous "Indianness." The younger generation, Biju and Sai, on the other hand, struggle with an ambiguous sense of self between the "American Dream" and their birthplace. In the end, the study suggests that Desai's depiction of modern men and their world reflects an ongoing struggle to reclaim an identity, revealing a "glimpse of hope" in recovery in the face of ruins of a colonial and globalized legacy.



Keywords: Indianness, Superstition, Contemporary Milieu, Kiran Desai, Colonial Mimicry, Religious Dogma, Identity Crisis, Cultural Fragrance

Introduction A giant amongst Indian English writers today, Kiran Desai uses stories to examine how Indian culture, traditional instincts, and the "net-like organization" of global power all interact. Her novels, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Man Booker Prize-winning Inheritance of Loss*, are a "real-life examination" of how people try to make sense of their "Indianness" in a world that is increasingly global, mobile and traumatised by post-colonialism. Culture, for Desai, is not a strict code of rules but a "fragrance," hard to characterize but easy to tell, known to Indians in faraway villages and in the world's metropolises alike. This 'Indianness' is a separate view on life, with its own styles of thinking and feeling, which can be passed on through the generations even as the characters become 'westernised natives'.

Superstition and religious dogma is an omnipresent element in this environment, and Desai suggests that these beliefs are a strong influence in the contemporary Indian psyche. The irrational thoughts had the power to make "fools" out of people in the rural areas of Shahkot or in the rugged terrains of Kalimpong, but at the same time, they were a strong psychological support to the ones who have to deal with the chaos of the modern world. Superstition gives agency to the public who feels he needs to accept a "holy man", or the Cook who feels he must conduct his desperate folk rituals to obtain forgiveness from snakes.

One of the "milieu" Desai is assessing is one of paradoxes: pastoral and romantic, yet wounded by historical tensions and ethnic insurgencies. In this space, modern men face a "vortex of loss": the quest for wealth, power, and the "American Dream" comes at a high price of an unstable sense of self and unease about their place in the world. The characters, such as Jemubhai Patel, embody the "colonial neurosis" (ideation), which manifests in having the racism of the West become internalized and expressed as self-hatred toward one's "Indianness". On the other hand, the younger generation, represented by Sai, tries to discover an "authentic existence" through education and intellectual independence and yet retains the "inheritance of loss". In this research paper, these dynamics are critically examined, and Desai employs them to challenge the narrow understanding of modernization, as well as the lingering influence of patriarchal power in what is an "autocratic society".



In Desai's work, the term culture is used, evoked as a fragrance; a heritage that binds the individual to a broad river that flows behind and around him. This "Indianness" has to do with "a different way of life" and with thinking and feeling differently than what is encountered elsewhere. Take, for example, the emotions of Indian families who are in the North, South, East or West when their daughter marries and leaves home, Desai says, "The feelings are the same in all parts of the country. This cultural continuity is a fundamental part of the Indian family system, one that Desai calls the medium of "passing down of ideals and worth of an honest life from generation to generation.

But this "Indianness" is also an assimilation and adaptation. The Indian culture has been able to imbibe new ideas and thoughts from travellers, looters and conquerors without losing its essence and still remaining in its true identity. But the people in India did not reject foreign life styles, rather they accepted and made them theirs, thus generating a contemporary environment that is a natural hybrid of sorts. This "fragrance" of culture is a source for the migrant of "dignified feelings," and it is a stimulator that makes the migrant sensitive to her homeland even in exile. So "Indianness" is a natural impulse and a comportment of belonging in a globalized world.

The Social Anchor of Superstition in the Milieu of Shahkot

Desai's book *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* investigates the considerable importance of "superstitious notions" and irrational thoughts in the modern context. The village of Shahkot is a place where "irrational thought" can fool people, but also a place where people can get insights for understanding the world. The community does not see a man avoiding responsibility in mentioning the scientific names of birds like a mantra: "Treron phoenicoptera phoenicoptera", but a sage with divine knowledge. Desai has dealt with these incidents with her usual witty style, but also as an "eye-opener" for readers of what the significance of religious dogma is in Indian society.

This superstition serves as a social currency, one in which the individual makes the best of the "holiness" and can thus, in the eyes of others, "evade the crushing weight of society's expectations". The clerk's rise to a "local guru" is a subversion of traditional aspirations and



objectives in a context of hierarchy and "lethargy". The villagers' faith in Sampath is not only an ignorance, but an expression of a cultural "Indianness" which is more concerned with the spiritual than the logic. Superstition becomes then an anchor, giving a sense of purpose and identity to a community that feels "uprooted or sandwiched" between tradition and modernity.

The Ascendant of Men: Patriarchal Dominance as a "Traditional Legacy"

The "ascent of men" and the dependence of the female characters on masculine authority is a major point of interest in Desai's fiction, which does its utmost to portray India. Desai does her best to portray India in her novels, one of the salient features of the Indian milieu in her fiction being the "ascent of men" and the underlying dependence of female characters upon masculine authority. Male dominance is depicted as a "traditional legacy" which explains the "untold hardship" of women in the Indian household. This is the paternalistic system that is manifested in *The Inheritance of Loss* through the retired judge, Jemubhai Patel, who is the main enforcer of control over his wife Nimi. Nimi's life is one of being subjugated; her father "carefully locks her up" in order to protect his honor, and her husband treats her like an object, a subhuman object.

Desai demonstrates the impact of this man-centric attitude and its complete denial of women's identity. Wrapping up Bela's name in a bow in the hours after her wedding, for instance, is one of the most symbolic gestures of this "ordeal situation", indicating that a woman has to follow the instructions of the men. In this modern world, women such as Sai are yet hindered by the expectations of a male dominated setup on their "quest for identity". The "ascent of men" establishes a setting in which women are seen as "objects rather than subjects"—in which they must make "strenuous effort" to achieve any "semblance of authentic existence.

The tragedy of Jemubhai Patel is an appraisal of the "colonial mimicry" and its psychological impact on the modern man. The Judge's early schooling in England has been marred by the experience of racism and alienation, a way of life that leads him to believe that he is superior to whites and to hate his own Indian heritage. He is a "foreigner in his own country" and lives in a state of "psychiatric delirium" and his "Anglophilia" is only bound to turn into "self-hatred". It is a "colonial headache" and is manifested by his preference for British ways, for



example using a western toilet in preference to Nimi's and the fact that his anger is triggered when he sees Nimi's footprint on the toilet.

The Judge's world is a "cultural rootlessness," and he detests his wife's "Indianness" and considers her "ridiculous" and "unrefined. A misfit in both the east and the west, "embittered old judge," he is unable to fit into colonial or postcolonial society. His life is a serious critique of the effects of colonial education and socialization on the emergence of "emotional detachment" and a fractured personality. While despising their own origins, through Jemubhai Desai shows that the "inheritance of loss" is the loss of sanity and selfhood for those who try to become "more English than the English".

Modern Indian context considers the 'holy' man as a phenomenon of the public's eagerness to accept divinity without hesitation. In Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard, Sampath's decision to stay in a guava tree leads the people of Shahkot to "falsely assume that he is a holy man". There is a whole series of acceptance moments in Desai's fiction, moments in which "irrational thoughts" make fools of individuals, while other individuals are able to capitalize on a business opportunity. Mr. Chawla, Sampath's father, is an otherwise goal-oriented, ambitious man who begins to think of ways he can "make money off of him" by recruiting his son to his "guru" position.

This "holy man syndrome" stems from a society seeking solace in times of "crushing weight of society's expectations". The context in which life is lived is one in which the individual and the collective are not clearly distinguished and where the need to be alone is appropriated by the needs of the community. The inner speech (murmurings) of Sampath becomes divine revelations by the milieu, which demonstrates how "Indianness" is an ongoing reinterpretation of the mundane into the miraculous. Such a display of holiness is a "way of living in the village" and a "holy hullabaloo" that is a "distraction" from the "lethargy" of daily life.

The Cook's Clay Cobra: Folk Rituals as a reaction to Powerlessness.

The cook of The Inheritance of Loss is the "downtrodden" who makes use of folk rituals and superstition to survive in a world in which they are otherwise "powerless". The Cook, when questioned by the police, says how his body "mysteriously... swelled up to ten times my size"



which he assumes was brought on by the "rage of the snakes. After listening to the advice of the temple elders, he makes a "clay cobra," cleans the area with cow dung and does a puja to seek forgiveness. This is not just "illogical conduct" but "real cleansing force" that "created a multifarious state of mind" that brings him back his dignity in a world that treats him as a "slaving minion".

When it comes to describing his "miserable life" and a cycle of poverty he finds himself in, superstition is a "discourse of truth" for the Cook. He is a "powerless man" who has "worked like a donkey all his life" and his need for old rituals is a psychological defence mechanism. Through these "substantial images" Desai seeks to evoke a "multifarious state of mind" in the reader, a state that will make him aware of the "dirty little rodent secret" of shared Indian suffering. The importance of the Cook's faith in the clay cobra demonstrates a society where the "powerless class" has power by other means, namely through spiritual traditions of their culture, which are often discriminatory and cruel in the eyes of the law.

Class Divide at Cho Oyu: The Milieu of the "Shadow Class"

The 'class divide' which forms the backdrop of the present atmosphere in India, is reflected in the setting - the judge's mansion at Cho Oyu in Kalimpong. The front veranda is the "privileged and enjoyable activities" of the Judge and Sai, reading in National Geographic and playing chess, while the back of the house is a "storeroom" for the "slaving minions". This is a spatial hierarchy which mirrors the "economic gap" between the masters and the servants, the Cook residing in a mud and bamboo hut on the property, with "one extra shirt" and a "silver" of low-quality, brown soap.

Here, the conversation often takes place in "Hinglish," a means of the Judge's "maintaining class distinctness" which makes his instructions comprehensible to his "illiterate and disintegrated" workers. The "shadow class" is made up of underprivileged and "abused and even sometimes beaten" individuals who serve with "sincerity, devotion and commitment" and are represented by the Cook. Desai depicts the difficulty for someone from this social class of "improving his or her situation", describing them as "condemned to movement" and "invisible". In this context, "economic sufficiency determines the social status" and the "powerless class" remains "voiceless and unseen" in their own country.



Indianness through the Lens of Cuisine: Thick Gravies and Identity

In Desai's novels, the foods are a powerful signifier of "Indianness" and a locus of "multicultural conflict". The atmosphere of the North Indian cuisines is defined by its "thick, flavorful gravies", and the overabundance of nuts, milk, ghee and peppers. The characters of Kulfi, the Cook, and Biju, among others, illustrate these "unique combinations" of identity and interaction with others as Desai discusses them through the lens of cuisine. For instance, Biju will not eat beef or "shun pork" in New York restaurants, and he will find his dignity in the "principles of one's parents" in this foreign world.

This is a kind of cultural insulation which Biju thinks one should not renounce one's religion, "no matter what". But when food is involved it also becomes a source of humiliation and scorn; Biju is humiliated in an Italian restaurant because the owner's wife "can't stand the smell coming from his hair oil". The "perfectly third-world" atmosphere that prevails below the "perfectly first-world" dining rooms is characterised by "lentils splattered about" and "grease transparencies" in the "kitchen-basement". Thus, cuisine gets a 'twofold weapon', giving a sense of belonging and a sense of 'Otherness' to the modern-day Indian man.

A Generational Milieu Shift: The "New Woman" and Traditional Subalterns

Desai traces three generations of women that represent the "long painful journey from subjugation to emancipation" in the Indian milieu. The first generation is represented by Nimi, the "muted subaltern", who is a woman "abused by suppression" who cannot muster the strength to fight for her freedom. The middle generation, such as Lola and Noni, are in a kind of "partial emancipation," living in the west and enjoying western manners and literature, but still "trapped by British ways" and "trapped by their past. They are "anglophiles" who yearn to live their life their own way but end up being "helpless" when politics go haywire.

The third generation is present in the personality of Sai, the very essence of the "New Woman," who has a strength rooted in her "anglicized cultural refinement" and convent education. Sai is "educated, frank, bold, and independent," and has not only the "semantic structure" but also the capability to voice her desires and frustrations—unlike Nimi. She resists and challenges the stereotype of the "docile Indian woman" and makes her tutor,



Gyan, feel “inferior” due to his lack of etiquette for the west. This change in the situation reflects how women in modern India are "ready to face challenges" and "construct an independent life", even in "a society of poverty, political instability and violence".

Globalization and "Lethargy": The Coca-Cola Era in the Guava Orchard

The concept of ‘superstition and lethargy’ is discussed in the context of a globalising India in Hullabaloo in Guava Orchard. Coca-Cola's arrival in 1993 is given as a sign of 'economic emancipation' and the 'new starting' in the village of Shahkot. Coca-Cola bottling plants were set up in rural areas, symbolizing the globalization firm that began to deplete local resources. Desai takes a look at this partnership between "human beings and the weather condition," and sees it as a gift of God; Sampath being born happens to coincide with the monsoon's arrival.

But this globalization also has an “existential rootlessness” and “loss of confidence” in traditional values and norms. The “Coca-Cola” plants and foreign donations of aid are interpreted as evidence of affluence for the villagers, but they are stuck in a "irrational thoughts" and religious dogma environment. Desai calls the novel a "perspicacious rewriting" of the global-world literature, a metaphorical globalization whose impact does not just reach the local but is indicative of unequal global relations. The "lethargy" of the village is thus contrasted with the "vortex dream" of money and progress, and is set against a context within which "tradition is lost" after each freedom victory.

The Gorkhaland Insurgency: Ethnic Identity and Political Dislocations

The Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling and Kalimpong can be seen as a great symbol of "cultural and political displacement" in Desai's present context. The movement is a sort of "psychological effects of marginalization" as the Indian Nepalese are demanding for separate state to "manage their own affairs". The conflict has an impact on everybody's life, challenging them in regards to their identities and belonging. The "liberation army" of the Gorkhas who have been living under the colonial burden for 200 years consider themselves as a "liberation army" fighting to claim the rights which are considered to be "birthright" of a people and against a "neocolonial Indian administration".

Desai depicts this "environment of anarchy and chaos" as changing the status of victims into perpetrators of violence. The guerrilla boys defy the Judge and force him to say "Jay Gorkha"



and to laugh at his "sahib-hood" and "colonial inheritance". An "of power" is visible in this "web of power" as a circulation of power through the "capillary" of the social strata. The insurgency points to the fact that as political independent people continue to be "doubly colonized" first by the British and then by the "neocolonial Indian state". The Gorkhaland movement thus becomes the symbol of the "ongoing struggle" for identity and recognition in a postcolonial nation.

Diaspora's "Dirty Little Rodent Secret"

The phrase "life" for the modern Indian in the outside world comes down to a "dirty little rodent secret" which no one knows but other Indians. In New York restaurants, illegal aliens such as Biju live in a world of "grease transparencies" and "abandoned tables," and labor "fifteen-, sixteen-, seventeen-hour donkey days" for a quarter of the minimum wage. This is a world of "despicable labors" and "invisible underclasses" which drive the urban economy but are unrecognized and unenviable.

This is the cloak of secrecy that keeps the "American Dream" alive at home, as the Cook tells his son that he is a "manager" and Biju is living "like a pig". The "shared Indian suffering" in the shadows establishes a context of alienation, insecurity and existential rootlessness. Biju's example demonstrates that the "land of plenty" is really a place of "naked imperialism" where the third world subject is "expendable fragments" of the world power apparatus. The "dirty little rodent secret" is the ultimate "inheritance of loss" for the migrant, a "vacuum feeling" brought about by diasporic dislocation.

Desai considers "bride-viewing ceremony" and arranged marriages as a "stranglehold" of Indian rituals on the individual. In this modern setting, decisions are made by the elders and marriage is based on a variety of criteria, including "beauty" and "dowry". For Nimi, marriage results in an "instant loss of identity," as she is transferred from her father's house to the Judge's, where her "blows become intolerable" but she doesn't revolt. Her caging in the house symbolises 'male chauvinism' which has been the traditional inheritance in India, for which 'untold hardship' occurred.

Females who "freely choose their own life" are met with consequences in the stories, even when they escape, like when Sai's mother ran away with a Russian man, there is a "brutal



patriarchal system" in place. The Judge completely withdraws from his daughter, as he sees the milieu labeling the women as powerless and dominated. Caging is no limitation on the "urge for freedom", but Desai demonstrates that this freedom, in so many instances, is at the cost of being "orphaned" or separated from the family value system. In the environment of marriage "beauty" is a determining factor and "harmful practices such as dowry" are still destroying the virginity of the culture.

Hyphenated Identities: Cultural Hybridity and the Crisis of Belonging.

In Desai's work, contemporary men usually have a hyphenated name such as Harish-Harry, Dhansukh-Danny and Gaurish-Gray, which is "typical way of maintaining the class difference in the west". This "uncanny doubleness" and "fragmentation" of the diasporic self is the result of the simultaneous existence of a multiplicity of cultures, in the space between home country and host country. Harish-Harry is an "established" diaspora owner, who serves as a neocolonizer, taking advantage of illegal immigrants and fearing that his daughter is becoming "American."

This "identity crisis" is felt by the characters at different levels and results in a "vacuum feeling" and a lack of real identity. Sai, too, is a hybrid, a "misfit in East and West," denied her true ethnic identity by her convent education to make her a "foreigner in her own land. This hybridity will not be a "happy compromise," but rather a place of "ongoing conflict and negotiation" in which characters will be trying to find their place. The context is a place where "nationality and loyalty" have disappeared in pursuit of a "cultural identity", so the characters are caught up in "dislocated souls" in a globalized world.

The "return to the native soil" is the end point of the contemporary Indian man's journey, but it is one that is accompanied by a last loss. Biju has come back to India after his "American dream is shattered" and is "happy to be back home" despite having "lost all". On arrival, however, he is "pillaged by his own brothers"—the Gorkha insurgents—that strip him of the "TV, VCR, camera" and baseball caps he sweated to get. It's a real-life example of the "financially viable gap" which remains between the first and third world countries.

Desai claims that the "American dream" is a myth, but there is still a "glimpse of hope" in the return to roots. Finally, Biju realizes that he is part of the nation that he had questioned about,



and his "real joy" comes when he is reunited with his father. Light emanates from Kanchenjunga at the end of the novel, as if "truth was apparent" in the midst of their ruins of inheritance. In the end, Desai's analysis of the contemporary man and his milieu indicates that 'belonging and self-identity is a constant struggle' and that the contemporary Indian man can discover his 'real self' in the 'vortex of loss'.

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