

## The Painful Journey of Women from Subjugation to Emancipation in The Inheritance of Loss

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### Abstract

*The Inheritance of Loss* is a valuable tool for analyzing the multifaceted emergence of female agency in a postcolonial and patriarchal environment. The research looks at the three generations of women, a journey from absolute traditional subjugation to modern emancipation, Nimi, Lola Noni and Sai. The study outlines the roles of the “Judge”, Jemubhai Patel who is seen as the chief enforcer of the patriarchy, and whose internalised colonial self-hatred is externalised onto the women in his life as “cleansing” violence. As a muted subaltern, the first generation, Nimi is analysed as a subject whose identity is being erased through name changing, physical separation and a tragic loss of selfhood. The middle generation, embodied by Lola and Noni, whose “Westernized safety” and somewhat emancipated position is shown to be precarious in the face of ethnic and political unrest, is also studied. Sai is the “New Woman” of the third generation, in contrast. Her agency is rooted in a westernized convent education and an independent spirit which enables her to negotiate her own romantic and intellectual agency. However, Sai has the “semantic structure” to resist or use proactive choices, even though she's an heir of the “vortex of loss” of cultural rootlessness, unlike Nimi.

This research compares these characters with the lenses of naming, voice and the use of domestic space, suggesting that the education and globalisation are tools of feminine liberation, but the structural pressure of male dominance still influences the feminine psyche. The study ends by arguing that becoming “subjects to subjugation” to “resilient independent figures” represents an evolution toward more humanistic images of women, but also an aporia and a continuous struggle in being “more human” in a globalized, postcolonial world.

**Keywords:** The female agency, subjugation, emancipation, patriarchy, The Inheritance of Loss, the subaltern and the colonial legacy.

### 1. Introduction

The *Inheritance of Loss*, written by Kiran Desai, a Man Booker Prize winner, is a powerful novel that examines the nature of post-colonial identity, cultural displacement and changing role of women in a globalised world. Till date, women have been treated as objects and not as subjects in the patriarchal set up in India. Feminism, here, is a demand for equality of power, rights and opportunities. It's about freedom of choice, and not having to live up to someone else's expectations. The first three generations of women have been represented in this research paper as a representation of the hardships that women have faced and overcome in the transition from the traditional to the modern world.

Nimi, the judge's wife, is the first generation and a typical subaltern woman caught up in the vortex of male chauvinism and rigid social codes. From a lack of agency to physical abuse and the complete denial of an identity, her life is marred by that of the absence of her agency and her loss of sanity and identity, all of which culminates in an eventual tragic loss of both sanity and identity. The second generation are the characters who live in some degree of emancipation, but are still trapped by colonial "fears" and the growing tide of local insurgency, such as Lola and Noni. Lastly, the judge's granddaughter, Sai, is the embodiment of the third generation, the 'New Woman'. Not like her grandmother, Sai gets her power from a modern education and her own independence in making decisions about her love life.

The difference between these females is not just a difference in temperament, but a difference in the socio-political changes in India. This is because Nimi has been subjugated as a result of a colonial and patriarchal history which considered women as property to be protected. The emergent agency of Sai, however, is enhanced by globalization and cultural hybridity which enable her to exceed the boundaries that were once imposed on the family women. All of these characters, however, have inherited a common sense of loss, a theme that has also appeared throughout Desai's writing, connecting individual pain and hurt to the historical fissures. This paper will look at the agency of Nimi and Sai to see how these two prompt us to think of education and globalization as tools for liberation, but the presence of patriarchal dominance as a shadowy presence in the feminine psyche of modern India.

## **2. The Judge as the Agent of Subjugation – the Patriarchal Framework**

Any examination of the novel's female characters needs to be preceded by an examination of the male domination, in this case, that of Jemubhai Patel, the retired judge. The judge is the main enforcer of patriarchy, a man whose own colonial neurosis and internalized racism are reflected on the women in his care. The judge has been alienated in his schooling in England and becomes very disgusted with India. His psychological split has a definite effect on his interactions with Nimi and Sai, though in totally opposite ways.

Nimi's subjugation is direct and brutal, the judge's eyes are seeing in her all of what he has come to hate about India. He physically and mentally mistreats her in the hope of cleansing himself of his own 'Indianness'. For Nimi, the house is not a safe space, but a prison in which every move is being judged by a man who thinks of her as "a piece of meat." This is a limiting patriarchy that subdues Nimi's spirit and serves as a tough terrain for Sai's burgeoning agency.

## **3. Nimi: The Muted Subaltern and the Erasure of Identity**

The character of Nimi is the most moving and tragic one in the novel, who represents the concept of the subaltern who is excluded from power structures and silenced by the dominant discourses. Nimi is a victim of the patriarchal system from her childhood, being kept 'carefully locked up' by her father to save the honour of his family. This early caging prevents her from ever having

developed a sense of agency; she is only allowed to be timid, submissive, and obedient.

After marrying Jemubhai, Nimi loses not only her humanity but her sanity as well. The symbolic act of her subjugation is when her name was changed from Bela to Nimi Patel on the very same day of her wedding. The symbolic act of her subjugation is when her name was changed from 'bela' to 'Nimi Patel' within a few hours of her marriage. This is a step towards her complete obliteration of the person she was before marriage. Her life with the judge is a tale of injustice and oppression; she is beaten for what is seen as ridiculous behavior – not using Western customs, etc.

The first thing Nimi has to do as a response to this abuse is to keep quiet and this is a product of the culture of the subaltern woman. She doesn't resist or run away, because she wouldn't even think about leaving, because this is an oppressed situation. Only when their relationship is at its end does she ever find the courage to address the judge, calling him "stupid," and get thrown away back to her family. The only way out of a society that has oppressed her life-long is her tragic end, burning over a stove. In Nimi, Desai depicts a woman who has been reeled in by suppression, who is so weak that she cannot even stand up for herself.

#### **4. This is the story of the 'New Woman' and the Agency of Choice, Sai.**

The third generation of women is represented by Sai and her character is a feministic approach to the path of emancipation. Whereas, Sai is assertive, independent and straightforward as compared to Nimi. Her agency stems from her western education at convents which give her "anglicized cultural refinement". Education serves as a means for transformation and provides Sai with a way to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of life and eventually challenge the strictures of society.

The most glaring example of Sai's agency is her dealings with her tutor, Gyan. Sai is not like Nimi who was a passive partner in her marriage, she actively selects her life and her romantic partner. She is not a weak female who can be dominated, but rather one who thinks better of herself than Gyan who challenges the stereotype of a subservient Indian woman. But when Gyan starts to look down on the Gorkhaland movement and starts to mock her, Sai doesn't go into silence. She challenges him, debates politics with him, and vents her displeasure at his alleged treachery.

Although the relationship fails to work out, Sai is a sturdy young woman who trusts her own judgment and doesn't believe in fantasy. Moreover, the agency of Sai is manifested in how she can maneuver through the Cho Oyu household. Although she is a lonely and isolated creature, finding comfort in books and nature, this isolation is an intellectual experience that is not the same as the forced caging Nimi endured. Sai knows the "foibles of society" and tries to construct a life of her own, separate from the "hangover of the past" which haunts the older characters.

## **5. Lola and Noni is the partial emancipation of the middle generation.**

The characters of Lola and Noni are of the second generation: a transitional figure between absolute subjugation of Nimi and the emerging independence of Sai. They are greatly affected by British habits and want to conduct their lives in their own manner. Lola, a widow, lives out her days with her sister Noni, who has more freedom than was possible for Nimi. They are "anglophiles," who take shelter in Western behaviour and literature which give them their social status.

Their emancipation is restricted and precarious, however. They are caught up in British thinking and long for their own; they are hampered by their histories. Noni remembers her father being an 'old-fashioned type' and that this meant she could never follow her dream of becoming an archaeologist. They are exposed and their dignity is humiliated when they are publicly humiliated by the GNLFF leader Pradhan and made to feel helpless. In these sisters, Desai demonstrates that the second generation had become socially and economically independent but that they still suffered from the effects of patriarchy and the turmoil of the post-colonial political landscape.

## **6. Voice, and Space**

Nimi gives up her name (Bela) and her identity is completely absorbed by her husband's family. In contrast Sai keeps her sense of self even in the face of tragedy. She is an orphan living under her grandfather's roof, but she is still "Sai," a unique individual with his own western influences and resiliency. Nimi lives with a silence and cannot let the world know what she fears. But Sai is candid and forthright. She asks Gyan questions and defies the judge's unfeelingness with her voice. With her education she has acquired the "semantic structure" to convey her agony, her desire for freedom. Nimi is physically, and metaphorically, caged, in her father's house and later in the judge's house, in Bonda. Sai also has a secret place (Cho Oyu) where she grows intellectually and recovers from her ailments. Both Nimi and Sai are isolated, and while it's a loss of sanity for Nimi, it's a quest for identity for Sai, a search that is ultimately self-affirming.

## **7. Women's education in the emancipation programme**

In Desai's fiction, education is the main instrument of the tortuous process of emancipation from subjugation. Nimi's lack of schooling meant that she was dependent and unable to see anything beyond her husband's reach. On the other hand, Sai is taught the "real meaning of life" and eventually rebels against the rigid norms in her convent. Sai's convent education, on the other hand, helps her to understand the "real meaning of life" and eventually to rebel against the rigid norms. It gives her the brainpower to see through the "foibles of society" and work out the conditions for a real life.

According to Desai, the important elements that make a woman stronger and independent is education and her work. The "New Woman" is the essence of Sai, who has been "anglicized in culture" and thus can carry on in a challenging society. This education, however, makes her a "foreigner in her own country"

since she has come to the antipathy of the local Gorkha culture embodied in Gyan. Education as a means of emancipation adds to the complexity and another form of alienation.

The globalisation and change in female sensibility. The change in female sensibility due to globalisation.

The traditional subaltern and the New Woman are always associated with globalization and multiculturalism. Nimi set in a localised pre globalized India where there was a traditional patriarchy where it was the rule of the day. But, Sai is an outcome of multiculturalism, having been influenced by western literature and global outlook. Sai's grandmother did not have the same "windows of possibility" or new knowledge as a result of globalization.

Through this transnational experience, Sai gets to negotiate her dual identities to a certain degree of agency. Nimi's experience is one of double colonization but Sai's is a middle space, a space that is not entirely traditional nor entirely western. However, Desai also uses Sai to attack the restrictions of this position. In a displaced and volatile landscape, Sai still has a "struggle of search for the home" in front of her, even though she is bold.

The last comparison is the results of their resistance. Nimi's resistance is slow, short and must be thrown away. Her death is a sad conclusion to a journey with a series of predicates of despair. In Nimi's story, Desai stands for a woman who has been completely suppressed that she cannot build up an independent life. Sai's life is also one of loss, like her parents, Gyan betraying her, and violence erupting in the insurgency, but her life is also strong. She "still strives to be free and fair, / She is still strong to build an independent life in a difficult society. Exhorting the world's situation today of multiculturalism, Desai calls for a new mindset, in which women are active participants in the society and become stronger. The novel concludes with a "glimpse of hope" with the emergence of the Kanchenjunga, indicating that "truth was apparent" and that "Sai will keep searching for an authentic life".

It is only now, that this Second Generation: Partial Emancipation and the Fragility of Westernized Safety begins. Now, this is the beginning of the Second Generation: Partial Emancipation and the Fragility of Westernized Safety.

Lola, Noni and the few references to Mrs. Sen and Pixie serve as a necessary connecting link between the total subjugation of Nimi and the emerging independence of Sai in the middle generation of women in *Inheritance of Loss*. The generation represents a 'partial emancipation,' quite shaped by the aftertaste of British colonialism. Lola and Noni are "anglophiles," who seek psychological solace in Western culture, manners, and the "genteel" life of the Indian upper class. They would like to live their lives as they see fit, living independently as a widow and as a single sister, but they are discovered to have an extremely fragile and exclusive form of independence.

But it is Noni's personality who embodies this middle generation's misguided aspirations. As an adolescent, she says she had a "anguish and discontentment" as she had envisioned being an archaeologist one day. However, she was unable to achieve this goal because her father was an "old-fashioned type"—a man "brought up and educated only to give orders". This is a case in point of the fact that the authority of the father was never to be overcome even for the better-off women. As a result, Lola and Noni's lives are "trapped by British ways" and they long for a past that they can never achieve, as they are always hampered by the "hangover of the past".

It is during the Gorkhaland insurgency that their vulnerability clearly comes out. The sisters' concept of "westernized safety" is broken when they are publicly humiliated by the GNLF's leader, Pradhan. Pradhan's actions "degrade the dignity of genteel women" and make them feel helpless when facing the changes in the local political landscape. It is a pivotal moment in their history, which shows them that their social position, based on colonial history, is no longer a protection in the postcolonial world of ethnic and class tensions. In Lola and Noni's case, the "loss of dignity and dreamland" is a mid generational "inheritance of loss" that keeps them apart, politically marginal.

### **8. The Ghostly Rebellion: Sai's Mother and the Act of Elopement**

Though she is a small voice heard only in the background, Sai's mother is a crucial link in the continuum of subjugation and emancipation. She was the first to suffer the "colonial headache" of her father's household, as his daughter. Her debut act of agency—and rebellion—was when she ran off with a Russian man, something that went against the will of her father and the strictures of society she was raised in.

The fact that she chooses to go away to live her own life, something her father has never allowed her to do, is in stark contrast to the passive acceptance of an arranged marriage that Nimi has come to accept. But this act of rebellion led to a complete breakdown of relationships; the judge went so far as to cut off his daughter from his life altogether, as a form of punishment for women who express their own desires, under the "brutal patriarchal system," as he put it. So her life is "cut short by an accident", but her legacy lives on in Sai; not only is she independent like her mother, but also she finds herself orphaned. Her mother's tale echoes the theme of female emancipation in this context usually means "dislocation and fragmentation".

They have sought to escape the image of the subaltern body by naming and severing it. They have tried to avoid the image of the subaltern body by a process of naming and severing it.

The "saga of injustice" that Nimi Patel endures is best conveyed symbolically, in the naming and actually physically in the abuse she suffers from Jemubhai. The process of erasing her name 'bela' and replacing it with 'Nimi Patel' shortly after her wedding day, is nothing but 'typical strategy to maintain class distinctness' in order to show that she has been completely subsumed by her husband's family.

This is her name change, the first stage in the process of her becoming a muted subaltern, one whose "human self" is methodically eliminated.

Her "indianness" and her failure to meet western standards of "refinement" is often tied to the judge's abuse of Nimi. For instance, he finds her foot on a western toilet seat and "winds up in a rage [that] knows no bound," pushing her head into the toilet bowl. Such a thing is not a whim of violence, but a "cleansing force" in the judge's own warped mind as he tries to wash away the "Indianness" that he hates by persecuting his wife.

When Nimi is kicked and thrashed blue and black for the smallest of perceived slights, when she is identified at a political meeting, her body becomes a site of "perpetual suffering. Nimi's inability to disseminate her fear and hopelessness reflects her belonging to a "powerless class" and a "powerless man" (her own father), to whom she cannot speak the fear and hopelessness. She can only retreat to silence until her last few moments of defiant strength when she utters the word "stupid" at the judge. Yet this is a late voice, and she is cast aside as for the traditional subaltern, the journey to emancipation can end in a 'tragic loss of sanity and selfhood'.

Sai embodies the "quintessence of the New Woman" and her "anglicized cultural refinement" and convent education allow her to build her own life that is "removed from the colonial grasp" of her grandfather. Her agency is her independence of thought; she is "frank, bold, and independent," has the "semantic structure" to tell what she wants and what she doesn't. Sai's solitary existence at Cho Oyu is a "preferred" condition as she pursues "solace in books and nature" where she is not "locked up" like Nimi is by both her father and husband.

Sai's relationship with Gyan is a test for her "New Woman" status. She is not the type of woman Gyan expects, a "not the timid, subjugated woman. On the contrary, she has the feeling that she is superior to him and does not conform to the "docile Indian woman" idea, even arguing with him about politics and the Gorkhaland movement. Gyan's "progressive thuggery" and betrayal of trust does not leave Sai silent. She faces him squarely, and doesn't see dreams.

But there is also an 'inheritance of loss' in her emancipation. Her education makes her a "foreigner in her own land" and the resulting "vacuum feeling" and "cultural rootlessness" are extremely difficult to deal with. She is a "misfit in the East and the West" living in a world where she is always subject to "continuous negotiation" for her identity. Sai's story is a story of empowerment — she has finally found her voice as a "New Woman" — but she will have to come to terms with the need to "struggle for liberty and right" in a world of poverty, violence and political turmoil.

## **9. Reflection on the environment of entrapment of women.**

The physical setting of the Himalayas and the Cho Oyu mansion itself is a "dynamic interaction between place and displacement" which echoes the inner worlds of the women. For Nimi, the "clutter of the house" and the "saga of Middle

of Nowhere" were one and the same as her psychological "placelessness". Her days were lived in "isolated houses nestled in Kalimpong," and the "crushing weight of society's expectations" and "rigid societal codes" were as heavy as the monsoon rains.

On the contrary, Sai considers the Kanchenjunga as a symbol of "truth" and "glimpse of hope". She too is "isolated", but the environment she is connected to is a "self-recovery resort to history and memory". The "green hills, coconut trees, many seasons" of the Indian scenario is now seen by Sai as "natural beauty" which is used for his intellectual growth, but for Nimi it was the backdrop of "injustice, oppression, and isolation". In this environmental contrast there is a long painful journey that is depicted from being a subject of the landscape (Nimi) to an active observer and negotiator of the landscape (Sai).

### **10. Globalization: Other windows of possibility? Other cages?**

The novel is a double-sided blade for globalisation in the context of agency for women. On the other hand, it "opens different windows of possibility" and offers the "semantic structure" for women such as Sai to know their rights. However, it hastens the process of "cultural homogenization" and "homelessness of women", resulting in "hybrid shapes in their character" lacking unity.

Globalization is a protective force for the middle generation (Lola and Noni) and in the end it proves to be "Westernized safety," which is undermined by the emergence of "ethnic assertion. Globalization provides "Westernized safety" for the middle generation (Lola and Noni), but ultimately it proves to be a failure when "ethnic assertion" shows up. For Sai it is a means of 'emancipation and meaning', but it also propels her through a vortex of loss, a constantly searching for the home. These female characters are used by Desai to "question the 'multiculturalism' that is being propelled by 'Western consumerism'.", as he puts it; he believes that emancipation is not just about 'anglicized cultural refinement', nor is it about 'consumerism'. It takes "continual resilience" and strength to build an independent life in an "globalized and postcolonial" world.

### **11. Conclusion**

The road from Nimi to Sai demonstrates that women have gone from being "subjects to subjugation" to "strong young women" but they are the biggest "inheritors of loss". Their liberation is a "struggle" to belong and to have a sense of self, an endeavor that requires a "new way of thinking" in the presence of the ongoing pressure of the patriarchal and international systems.

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