

## Competing Western Hegemonies in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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**Abstract.** The paper investigates the Indian migration patterns to the UK and the US, comparing the idealized perceptions of the West with the challenges faced by the immigrant characters. The conclusions establish the relationship between the Indian trends of displacement and the competing British and American hegemonies.

**Keywords:** hegemony, indirect empire, informal empire, neo-colonialism

### Introduction

The paper discusses the construction of Britain and the United States in *The Inheritance of Loss*, analyzing the relationship between Indian patterns of migration and the shifting allegiances to the West in the era of decolonization. The novel presents two parallel migration scenarios to the UK and the US in the colonial and free India. Thus, the character of Jemubhai Patel leaves India in 1939 to pursue higher education at Cambridge. After returning home as a member of the Indian Civil Service, Jemubhai becomes a judge in the district of Uttar Pradesh and eventually in West Bengal (the city of Kalimpong). In the late 80's, Biju - the son of Jemubhai's cook-emigrates to America where he becomes an illegal restaurant worker. Unable to acquire legal status in the US, Biju comes back home and reunites himself with his father.

The discussion employs the Gramscian notion of hegemony defined as a relation of domination by means of consent through political and ideological leadership (Gramsci quoted in Hall 2001:24). Considering this concept, the paper unravels the British and the American values that appeal to Indians legitimizing different types of imperial dominance at the local level. The discussion also relies on Mann's classification of empires into direct, indirect and informal empires (2008:9-10). Direct empires imply the conquering and the political incorporation of territories into the colonial core. Indirect empires maintain their sovereignty over the periphery through cooperation with the local elites. The inclusion of the Indian citizens in the structures of the Indian Civil Service illustrates the British Empire's indirect strategy of ruling India. Informal empires have no colonies and they employ forms of capitalist coercion in order to constrain the autonomy of the otherwise sovereign peripheral rulers.

By presenting the topic of Indian migration to the US, the novel intimates the inclusion of the US in this category of empire. An equivalent term for informal empire is neo-colonialism. It designates indirect relations of domination based on economic and social control of the peripheral countries by the core states (Loomba 1998: 6). Considering these theoretical layers, the paper interprets the dynamics of Indian migration in relation to the evolution of the two Western empires.

### **Body of the paper**

The first section of the paper discusses the characters' emigration incentives, emphasizing the Western values that trigger their desire to leave India. The second part of the analysis focuses on the discrepancy between the protagonists' aspirations and their experiences abroad. The conclusions comment on the Indians' attraction to different types of Western imperial discourses.

### **Migration as status elevation**

Jemubhai and Biju's departures derive from an Indian tradition of male mobility associated with status elevation. For example, Jemubhai's role is constructed from his childhood, when the boy is sent to school on account of his being the family's single male inheritor. While attending Bishop's College on a scholarship, the boy becomes attracted to the incomprehensible greatness of the British sovereignty. His admiration for the imperial rule is shaped under the auspices of Queen Victoria's portrait (Desai 2006: 59)

“... he found her froggy 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: 58).

The boy's reflections suggest that he comes to cherish an ambivalent emblem of power. Hence, his simultaneous perceptions of royal ordinariness and authority enhance Jemubhai's esteem for the British supremacy. The character's impressions reveal his lack of interest in British cultural values as such and a focus on the idea of imperial domination. Jemubhai's father's efforts to prepare his son for departure imply his association of migration with the acquisition of a superior status. Since he earns his living by procuring false witnesses in court,

the father regards his son as the only hope for social ascension. Hence, Jemubhai's contact with the Empire, (i.e. getting higher education in Britain) is regarded as a unique opportunity for the father to become important at home:

“His son might, *might, could!* occupied the seat faced by the father, proud disrupter of the system, lowest in the hierarchy of the court. He might be a district commissioner or a high court judge [...] Father below, son above, they'd be in charge of justice, complete (Desai 2006: 59)(original emphasis).

The parent's reasoning portrays Jemubhai holding a higher rank in the judiciary system and thus compensate for the father's marginal status within it. Indeed, as Jemubhai returns as a member of the Indian Civil Service, the son's social triumph is also shared by his father. Consequently, the neighbors express their admiration in “envy-soaked voices” (Desai 2006:118), while Mr. Patel feels like a “king holding court” (Desai 2006:118). This diffusion of power consolidates the father's status within the community, revealing a collective Indian equation of the British space with the idea of authority. Similarly, Jemubhai's future father-in-law is keen on marrying his daughter (Bella) to an Indian (Jemubhai) connected to the West. This alliance is considered a step forward on the social ladder, since the envisaged marriage will turn Bella into the “wife of one of the most powerful men in India” (Desai 2006:91). At the same time, his daughter's triumph will be transferred to the family, enabling her father to attain the highest degree of Hindu social supremacy:

“Ambition still gnawed at him, and Brahmin cook he might have, but he knew that there was *a wider world* and only very rarely did history provide a chink allowing an acrobatic feat” (Desai 2006:90) (my emphasis).

Considered from this perspective, migration to the colonial metropolis becomes a modifier of the local hierarchies. Consequently, the possibility of having a Westernized son-in-law outdoes hiring a Brahmin cook. The Brahmin category is assigned the highest social role in the Hindu social hierarchy (Embree2006: 41). The fact that this Hindu rank is considered inferior to the possibility of having Western connections suggests that local configurations are strongly conditioned by the Indians' interaction with the British imperial structures. At the same time, the association of migration to the UK with acquiring power at home illustrates the paradoxical manner of how the Gramscian notion of hegemony works: although British imperial domination implies the Indians' subordination, the colonizers perceive solely the

advantages of authority, being eager to take it over. The next section analyses the Indian characters' consent to neo-colonial values that triggers their desire to emigrate to the US.

In Biju's scenario of displacement, Biju's father considers that working in America is the ultimate Indian achievement. This episode is placed in the late eighties and it illustrates America's global ascension. Historically, the Indian immigrants' reorientation from Britain to the United States began in the mid 60's as the British Conservative legislation restricted South Asian immigration to Britain (Khadria2006:174). In 1965, America removed the ban on South Asian migration, given the country's need for highly skilled individuals. This change of legislation coincided with the empowerment of the American informal empire and its reliance on forms of economic coercion (Mann 2008:45). The layer of successful Indian immigrants in the US has been paralleled by a category of urban workers (taxi drivers, hotel, restaurant, factory workers or clerks) who has not achieved the American dream. These individuals experience lack of security and receive low incomes (Brown 2006:57). The novel presents contemporary illegal Indian emigration to America as a mass phenomenon, aided by an industry of fabricating fake identities. The procedures for obtaining an American visa entail a series of humiliations accepted by the Indian applicants (Desai 2006:184). These facts along with Biju's example illustrate the powerful appeal of the American hegemony based on the idea of affluence. Biju's father's associates the idea of welfare with Biju's access to the American world, imagined as the provider of economic advantages. For example, the cook conceives America as the land of "water and electricity" (Desai 2006:24), an inclusive space of plenty :( "In that country there is enough food for everybody" (Desai 2006:84) and "the best country in the world" (Desai 2006:85). As well as in Jemubhai's case, Biju's contact with the Western (American) space elicits the local community's respect for his father. Thus, while Biju barely survives in New York, the cook proudly informs his neighbors that his son "works for the Americans" (Desai 2006:14). The improvement of the cook's status consists in his receiving small material offers in exchange for promises to help other Indians emigrate. Thus, migration to America as well as migration to Britain modifies local hierarchies, proclaiming equality between otherwise socially different categories: "Her son was there as well. He shared this with a doctor! The most distinguished personage in town" (Desai2006:85).

Thus, the cook is proud that both he and the doctor have their sons abroad. This common element is perceived as an annulment of the social difference entailed by their different professions. The discussion has so far established that Indian migration to the UK and the US is conceived as an opportunity to elevate the family status both in the era of colonialism and after decolonization. While the colonized Indians hope to transgress the local

hierarchies by taking over the badge of imperial authority, independent Indians hope to improve their status by accumulating capital in the US. The next section discusses the rivalry between the UK and the US in the era of decolonization, stressing the Indians' antipodal Western allegiances.

### **Opposite allegiances after decolonization: the UK vs. the US**

Lola and Mrs. Sen, Jemubhai's neighbors, are examples of Indian parents whose daughters live in the UK, respectively the US in the era of decolonization. The characters' rivalry illustrates a sense of social competition legitimized by their loyalties to different Western typologies. Lola conceives migration to the UK as the ultimate escape from a disintegrating country and advises her daughter Pixie to take her chance abroad: "India is a sinking ship. Don't want to be pushy, darling, sweetie, thinking of your happiness only, *but the doors won't stay open forever*" (Desai 47) (original emphasis).

Hence, the UK is implicitly conceived as a space of welfare that enhances individual development. Lola's words emphasize a sense of urgency. Her alertness may hint at the Indians' difficulty to be admitted into the UK in the second half of the twentieth century, except for the highly skilled immigrants who were allowed access towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Khadria 2006:175). Lola and her sister's (Noni) British allegiances are primarily expressed through their attachment to particular habits of consumption: watching BBC sitcoms and buying British products. For example, whenever Lola visits her daughter, she returns equipped with various supplies:

"Her suitcases were stuffed with Marmite, Oxo bouillon cubes, Knorr soup packets, After Eights, daffodil bulbs, and renewed supplies of Boots cucumber lotion and Marks and Spencer underwear-the *essence, quintessence, of Englishness as she understood it* ( Desai 46- 47) (my emphasis).

Since Lola equates British identity with an important clothing brand, her allegiance to the UK is defined primarily in consumerist terms. The entire passage is an enumeration of products manufactured by British companies (except for the German origin multi-national Knorr). Nevertheless, the sisters' consumerist loyalties to Britain are paralleled by their interest in British literature. For example, they express their preferences for the "manor house novels" and "English writers writing of England" (Desai2006:198) such as P.G. Wodehouse, Agatha Christie, Anthony Trollope.

The sisters' consumption habits as well as their cultural preferences indicate the elitist dimension of their Western practices. This difference becomes striking during the Nepali insurgence in the area of Kalimpong, when they realize that their apparent innocent Western tastes separate them from the poor majority:

*"It did matter, buying tinned ham roll in a rice and dal country; it did matter to live in a big house and sit beside a heater in the evening, even one that that sparked and shocked; it did matter to fly to London and returned with chocolates filled with kirsch; it did matter that others could not. They had pretended it didn't, or had nothing to do with them. The wealth that seemed to protect them like a blanket was the very thing that left them exposed"* (Desai 2006:242) (original emphasis).

The separatist claims of the Gurkha minority trigger the sisters' awareness of their obliviousness to local matters. The passage illustrates that simple practices of consumption eventually emphasize the existence of social inequalities that trigger political turbulences. Hence, eating different food, having comfortable lodgings and being able to travel to London are signifiers of social advantages, marking the boundaries between local hierarchies.

The rivalry between Lola and her neighbor Mrs. Sen illustrates the clash between Britain and American allegiances at the local level. Since Mrs. Sen's daughter is in America, Lola and Noni consider her socially inferior:

*"Her inferiority was clear to them long before her daughter settled in a country where the jam said Smuckers instead of 'By appointment to Her Majesty the queen', and before she got a job with the CNN placing her in direct opposition to Pixie at BBC"* (Desai2006: 131).

The passage displays antipodal constructions of Britain and the US, conceived as badges of sophistication versus ordinariness. Hence, the mark of Britishness is symbolized by the royal warrant that confers a certain refinement to the products. This is contrasted to the characters' vision of American simplicity, considered devoid of distinction. The confrontation between Lola and Mrs. Sen uncovers stereotypical Indian conceptions of the British and American identities. Thus, Lola thinks that Americans are "very simple people" although she has never been to America (Desai 2006:131), while Mrs. Sen regards this feature as a prerequisite for friendliness; "No hang-ups, na, very friendly" (Desai2006:131). Lola tries to undermine Mrs. Sen's appreciation for the Americans, considering that they cannot be involved in sincere friendships and invoking their discrimination against "the Negroes" (Desai 2006: 131). In

response, Mrs. Sen claims that the Americans are honest, while the British are hypocritical since they “laugh at you behind your back” (Desai 2006:131). Along the same lines, Lola considers that the sense of American freedom is an expression of ignorance and she considers that the Americans’ display of patriotism is exaggerated. Mrs. Sen defends the Americans, highlighting their belief in happiness and their appetite for entertainment (Desai 2006: 131). These clashing perceptions illustrate different Indian allegiances to the UK and the US in the era of decolonization. Hence, loyalty to Britain is portrayed as an elite nostalgia for a sense of royal refinement and cultural prestige paralleled by a loyalty to British brands. America’s rising popularity is suggested by its being the most desirable destination for emigration in search of better living standards. By opposition to the UK, the US is considered devoid of arrogance, simple and able to provide individual happiness. Nevertheless, the positive perceptions of the two countries are paralleled by less fortunate portrayals introduced via the immigrants’ experiences. The next section analyzes Desai’s deconstruction of the myths that project the Western space as superior to India.

### **Deconstruction of the Western myths**

Jemubhai’s experience in Britain illustrates the discrepancy between his representation of the Empire and the actual perception of it. Racism is one of the features of the British society that undermines the character’s conception of colonial perfection. For example, when he arrives at Cambridge, Jemubhai faces a general British reluctance to rent rooms for Indians (Desai 2006:38). The same hostile attitude is expressed by old ladies and young girls who avoid sitting next to Jemubhai on the bus, complaining of his bad smell. The character's acceptance into the Indian Civil Service is also presented as a humiliating experience. Jemubhai fails his oral examination given his inability to speak proper English along with the examiners’ irrelevant questions. Jemubhai's degradation is emphasized by the discrepancy between his desire for acceptance and the British indifference to his enthusiasm:

“Looking neither right nor left, the newest member, *practically unwelcome* of the heaven-born, ran home with his arms folded and got immediately into bed [...] and soaked his pillow with his weeping” (Desai 2006: 117) (my emphasis).

Jemubhai's inclusion into the colonial administrative system is portrayed as a random consequence of the British policies of supplementing the numbers of Indians admitted into the Civil Service. After he obtains the lowest grade

and fails the exam, Jemubhai is accepted as a member of the ICS only because the British authorities decide to “Indianize the service” (Desai 2006: 131). Apart from his personal experience of rejection, Jemubhai witnesses acts of British verbal and physical aggression to other Indians. One striking example of this kind is the episode depicting British children disseminate racist jokes (“Why is the Indian brown? He shits upside, down, HA HA HA”) as well as the scene presenting an Indian boy being beaten and urinated on by his aggressors (Desai2006:209).

As well as Jemubhai, Biju is exposed to inimical reactions while in the US. For example, several of his employers express their discontent with respect to Biju’s bad smell. By stressing the American hostility to the Indian immigrants, the novel hints at the consequences of the late 1980’s American restrictions with respect to the entry of occupational South Asian immigrants. South Asians arriving after the 1976 Immigration and Reform Control Act were mostly accepted for family reunification purposes, being little proficient in English and unqualified for white collar jobs (Grewal1996:97). Thus, Biju experiences the challenges of acceptance given his origins and lack of qualifications. Hence, unlike his friend from Zanzibar, Biju is not eligible for the green card:

“Saeed applied for immigration lottery each year, but Indians were not allowed to apply [...].There were just too many jostling to get out, to pull everyone else down, to climb on one another’s backs and run. The line would be stopped up for years, the quota was full, overfull, spilling over” (Desai 2006: 81).

Biju’s difficulty in obtaining a green card illustrates the Indians’ limited acceptance in the American space despite their eagerness to belong to it. Biju’s working experience at the Gandhi Café reveals the downsides of the American capitalist society. The behavior of the Indian owner Harish Harry illustrates an inhuman strategy of capital accumulation. For example, the boss allows the workers to sleep in the basement of the café, sparing them the costs of the rent, but paying them only a quarter of the minimum wage. According to Triandis (1993:160), the market is the prototypical relationship in highly individualistic cultures like the American one. In a context of this kind, people consider themselves distinct individuals whose association revolves around delivering and paying for services. Another feature of an individualist society is the competition for status connoted by the individuals’ achievements rather than their belonging to a group. Along the same lines, Harrish-Harry's upward mobility is conditioned by an aggressive dissemination of market values that justifies the exploitation of his fellow-Indians:

“It was only the recollection of the money he was making that calmed him. Within this thought he found a perfectly reasonable reason for being here, a morality to agree on, a bridge over the split-and this single fact that *didn't seem a contradiction between nations* he blazoned forth” (Desai 2006:149) (my emphasis).

The character's ideology illustrates the internalization of the capitalist logic of the market that promotes financial interests at the expense of maintaining human bonds. Another instance that reveals the harshness of Harish-Harry's capitalist outlook is his refusal to help Biju become legal after he hurts his knee, depriving the injured boy of access to healthcare. Similarly, the Indian owner refuses to sponsor his employees for their green card applications. This procedure would jeopardize his position, exposing the illegal nature of his business. By presenting Harish-Harry's obsession with enlarging his material possessions, the author highlights the individualist association of status with achievement to the point of eroding any kind of bonding. While the illegal immigrants cannot afford health care and proper housing, legal Indians such as Harish-Harry and Mr. Shah are preoccupied with getting larger houses that they cannot furnish. The evolution of Harish-Harry and Mr. Shah further proves that Indian migration to the US is conceived as a means of consolidating one's social position through the accumulation of goods. This ideal is dismantled by the author who highlights the degeneration of the immigrants' desire for accumulation into an utter lack of empathy.

By approaching the topic of contemporary Indian illegal immigration to the US, Kiran Desai unmasks the country's complicity with ideologies of informal imperialism. The strategy of US neo-colonial dominance is to obtain profits by exploiting the economic dependence of the peripheral countries:

“The objective of the imperialist system of today as in the past is to open up peripheral economies to investment from the core capitalist countries, thus ensuring both a continual supply of raw materials at low prices, and a net outflow of economic surplus from periphery to center of the world system [...]Economies of the periphery are structured to meet the external needs of the United States and the other core capitalist countries rather than their own internal needs. This has resulted (with a few notable exceptions) in conditions of unending dependency and debt peonage in the poorer regions of the world (Foster <http://www.questia.com/read/5014694378?title=Naked%20Imperialism>).

The economic exploitation of the Third World Countries by the core states is strongly emphasized in the novel. For example, the dialogue between Biju and another Indian immigrant Mr. Kakkar, refers to the new type of colonial domination imposed by the US. Mr. Kakkar, the owner of a travel agency, advises Biju not go back to India, since it is only America that can provide financial empowerment:

“Think of your children. If you stay here, your son will earn a hundred thousand dollars for the same company he could be working for in India but making one thousand dollars (Desai2006: 267).

Mr. Kakkar is more aware than Biju that America’s global expansion entails the dissemination of a system of economic imbalances. The example he employs illustrates the idea that the Third World countries function as suppliers of cheap labor for dominant economies. Hence, by paying less for the same position held in a company established India, the Americans minimize their production costs, generating an increase of profit. Mr. Kakkar’s position illustrates the strong Indian consent to the values proliferated by the American capitalist hegemony despite the awareness of the inequalities underlying this doctrine of plenty.

## **Conclusions**

The paper has examined the Indians’ consent to the British and the American imperial hegemonies in relation to the changing Indian patterns of migration before and after decolonization. Starting with an analysis of the idealized representations of the two Western countries, the paper has subsequently discussed their subversion as illustrated by the experiences of the immigrant Indian characters.

Thus, the British value that mostly appeals to the colonized Indians is the ideal of high status conferred by one’s association with the imperial power. In independent India, local allegiances to Britain characterize an elite group that nurtures nostalgia for the British grandeur, royal refinement, high-quality goods and cultural products. The Indian adherence to America is presented as a contemporary phenomenon that illustrates the US global supremacy and the decline of the British prestige after the collapse of its Empire. The American values that attract waves of Indian migration are prosperity, economic accumulation, freedom, all associated with the idea of status improvement. Nevertheless, the immigrants’ experiences in the two countries reveal the common gaps in their hegemonic discourses: racism, exclusion and arrogance.

Moreover, America's negative portrayal stresses an extreme version of capitalism that destroys human connections.

In all cases, migration to the West illustrates the construction of local consent triggered by the desirable values spread by the British and the American hegemonies. At the same time, the Indian changing patterns of migration illustrate the rivalry between the two Western powers, despite their overlapping discourses.

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