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Intersectional Identities: Class, Gender, and Race in Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss



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Abstract

This study employs Intersectionality theory through a close reading strategy to examine how the intersecting systems of race, class, gender, and colonial dominance shape the identity and psyche of the character Jemu bhai Patel. The analysis reveals how racial hierarchies, reinforced by Western colonial standards, foster internalized oppression and emotional alienation within the colonized subject. Furthermore, it uncovers the psychological violence and consequences of existing within multiple, overlapping axes of inequality, as illustrated by Jemu bhai's struggle to assimilate into Western ideals while disavowing his Indian identity. By examining Jemu bhai's interactions with his wife, servants, and community, this research draws parallels between the dynamics of privilege and oppression in both colonial and postcolonial societies. Ultimately, the paper argues that Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* critiques the enduring imprint of colonial domination on identity formation and underscores the necessity of conceptualizing identity as a product of interrelated social forces.

Keywords: Theory of Intersectionality, Oppression, Race, Class, Colonial Power, Inheritance of loss

INTRODUCTION

The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai (2006) is a very deep and powerful novel with the background of political colonial legacies. This study explores the way Desai interconnected all strong themes such as identity crisis, displacement, racism, migration, unfulfilled dreams. Each character has their own turn and trials. Like the novel is set in the mids of 1980s with the historical background of British colonial. As a researcher I have chosen this novel due to the way Desai has portrays her characters lives as she embodies the challenges of class division, ethnic tension, cultural identity, language preferences and restrictions over women. Each character is not stuck in their situation instead they keep trying to search their own for knowing their worth and to fulfil their need of love. This study strongly examines the effect of colonial power, gendered oppression, cast privilege and trauma on the main character of the novel Jemubhai Patel. His life shows the colonial subjectivity being educated in the UK and also ridiculed the people of UK on his physical appearance later on he became an Indian retired judge. Due to these intersectional identities and psychological disturbance he is stuck between his identity that's neither Indian nor British. He is uncertain of himself belonging.

Jemubhai Patel, a retired Indian judge, is at the center of this story and his life is a representation of the psychological trauma of a colonial conquest. Jemubhai, who studied in England, undermines his connection to his origin, becoming unconnected and unemotional toward the people around him as he pursues Western ideals. His fight is not just a personal problem, but a lived experience of any person that finds themselves in the cross of various types of oppression. In presenting Intersectionality Theory, Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) presents a critical approach in the study of the interaction of overlapping systems like race, class, gender, and colonial power to define the identity and experience. In this manner, the character of Jemubhai can be

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used to illustrate how colonialism results in privilege and oppression: he is allowed to become elevated and educated by the West but learns to be racially inferior and misogynist. The paper uses the Intersectionality Theory to understand how the interlinking of social hierarchy is seen through the character of Jemu bhai and the effect of the psychological hangover of colonial power on the postcolonial subject depicted by Desai.

Research Objectives

The aim of objectives is to:

To employ Intersectionality Theory in analyzing how the convergent systems of race, class, gender, and colonial power generate Jemu bhai Patel's fractured identity and his concurrent experience of social privilege and psychological oppression.

To examine the psychological manifestation of colonial trauma—specifically internalized racism, emotional alienation, and gendered repression—by tracing how Jemu bhai's internal conflicts are externalized through his relationships and authoritarian behaviors within his household and community.

Literature Review

Kiran Desai novel “ Inheritance of loss” is a postcolonial representation of the individual experience of racism, class, oppression, national identity, and inequality through a character of Jemu bhai Patel's. Desai shows how individual psychology shaped due to colonial dominance and discrimination. Through the key elements of Intersectionality Theory, Class, Race and Gender are represented in the Character of Jemu bhai Patel. This Desai's novel Inheritance of Loss is Booker prize winner in 2006, this text give the deeper and rich lens for applying intersectionality theory, as it mainly signifies the overlapping system of race, class, gender, education, and nationality that changes the character experience of marginalization, dominance and these things deeply impact the mental condition due to psychological violence.

Representation of Class, Race, and Gender

The character of Jemu bhai Patel in The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai gives a very interesting argument to look at cross points between class, race, and gender in the case of colonial and postcolonial setting. This literature review explores the ways these social categories are reflected through the character of Jemu bhai and how the Intersectionality Theory can be used as a critical framework to analyze the multi-layered forms of oppression and privilege that define his experience. As the novel The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai has received extensive critical discussion due to its subtle portrayal of postcolonial India and its inequalities in terms of class, race, and gender. In the article Race, Gender and Cultural Hegemony by Azmin (2023) published by Cognitive Discourses, the author examines the depiction by Desai of the colonial intersection of racial and gender hierarchies in the form of the internal values of the characters. The paper highlights the cultural hegemony process- the way colonized elite, symbolized by Jemu bhai Patel, unknowingly perpetuates colonial power relations yet dreams of the West ideals. This alienation shows how the process of class and race fosters social alienation and gendered inferiority in the postcolonial environment.

As Jemu bhai tries to whiten himself using accent, dress, and behaviour, which can be regarded as internalized racism, a psychological effect of colonial domination (Fanon,

1952).

Reflection of Immigration, Alienation, and Identity Crisis in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss: A Saga of "Middle of Nowhere"* (Creative Saplings), Shukla (2024) cites that these hierarchies are exacerbated by migration and displacement. Her interpretation identifies the intersection of characters in terms of their experiences of racial discrimination in a foreign country and class hierarchies in their native country with patriarchal ideologies. These studies all combine to place Desai narrative within the framework of a critique of the colonial mentality that continues to divide identity along the intersecting lines of class, race, and gender.

Colonial Experience and oppression impact on psychology

These are the psychological effects of colonial domination that are most evident in the character of Jemu bhai Patel, who carries the inferiority and alienation within. In *Learning to be British: A Psychoanalytical Study of Colonial Trauma and Identity Crisis in the Character of Jemu bhai Patel in the Novel The Inheritance of Loss* (Social Signs Review), Ilahi, Rawaha, and Karam believe that the lack of emotions in Patel is the result of the trauma caused by colonization and his failure to integrate his Indian identity with the British values that he admires. The paper, through a Freudian perspective, determines that the defense mechanisms are repression and projection, which is the expression of his psychological oppression; he hates in other people what he most hates about himself: the fact that he is inferior in race and culture. To this end, in *Analysis of Colonial, Historical and Cultural Trauma in The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai (Humanities Journals), Komal and Sharma (2025) examine the political effects of colonialism that generate trans-generational trauma and fragmented subjectivity. Their results show that the psychological violence of colonialism still governs the relations between the self and society, transforming such characters as Patel into those who were oppressed and those who oppressed. Altogether, these interpretations make us see the psychological richness of the way Desai describes the process of colonialism, not only as a political regime but also as a cause of permanent psychic trauma.

Intersectionality Theory and Postcolonial Identity

Intersectionality theory has become increasingly used in recent scholarship to analyze postcolonial literature in order to reveal shared systems of power. In *Postcolonial Feminism and Intersectionality: A Comparative Study of Gender, Race, and Identity in Contemporary Literary Criticism* (Ignited Minds), Namdeo and Sharma (2024) describe how postcolonial subjects are frequently oppressed in many and intertwined ways influenced by race, gender and geography. Their theory justifies the study of Jemu bhai Patel as a colonial subject as well as a man whose privilege (as an upper-class male) does not negate his racial outside in colonial structures.

In the same vein, Daghamin (2025) in *Intersectionality of Patriarchy and Colonialism: A Postcolonial Ecofeminist Reading of Sahar Khalifeh The End of Spring* presents the idea of how both colonialism and patriarchy support one another in the organization of identity and belonging. Despite the fact that the study focuses on a different cultural situation, its system of overlapping systems of power can be applied to the reading of the experience of both oppression and privilege that Patel has experienced in layers. The intersectional approach, therefore, broadens the psychoanalytic reading because it demonstrates that the description of the colonial identity, which Desai

provides, functions within several, overlapping modes of domination.

Generational Masculinity and Emotional Alienation

Masculinity in *The Inheritance of Loss* has a profound overlap with the identity of the colonials and the loss of emotions. According to Ilahietal. (2025), masculinity of Jemubhai is conditioned by the colonial norms of power, oppression, and emotional suppression-qualities, which make him alien to intimacy and empathy. His alienation of feelings is not only his own but that of a colonial masculinity which reduces weakness to vulnerability. The authors show how the colonial education and racial humiliation invert the male subjectivity, generating the generational tendencies of the affective repression.

This argument is supported by the article *Of Cityscapes, Affect and Migrant Subjectivities in The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai (2021), which is published in *Subjectivity* as the source places the detachment of Jemubhai in the context of global migration and postcolonial dislocation. According to the study, emotional alienation indicates the psychic price of a desire to Western modernity- one of the main themes of Desai's critique of colonial masculinity. These works combined unveil the fact that the inner struggles of Jemubhai are deep-rooted in the historical and emotional heritage that still shapes postcolonial male self-identities.

Synthesis

Through all these threads of scholarship one can see the same trend, the character of Jemubhai Patel represents the interaction of class, race, gender and colonialism which produce the postcolonial subject. Whereas the psychoanalytic studies focus on his internalized inferiority and repression, the inter sectional readings reveal the structural aspects of his oppression and privilege. The synthesis of these viewpoints is the aim of this research, because it is through the dramatization of *The Inheritance of Loss*, that the issues of identity, hierarchies, and emotional alienation are bound in colonial modernity.

Research Gap

Even though there are several literature on Kiran Desai *The Inheritance of Loss* using postcolonial, feminist and psychoanalytic approaches, there can be seen to be a gap in integrative analysis that intersects Intersectionality Theory with the psychological aspects of colonial trauma. The majority of the current literature, including Azmin (2023) and Shukla (2024) discusses the issues of class, race, and gender in the novel but does not address these aspects as systems of power that cannot exist independently of each other. Equally, the psychoanalytic interpretations of Ilahi, Rawaha, and Karam (2025) and Komal and Sharma (2025) focus on the identity crisis and colonial trauma of Jemubhai Patel, but do not focus on how his identity as a colonized, upper-class, and male person intersect. Moreover, intersectional and postcolonial framework are implemented in more general literary contexts (Namdeo, Sharma, 2024; Daghamin, 2025), but little literature is done on intersectionality applied to the colonial male psyche in South Asian fiction. The emotional estrangement and male generationality presented in the character of Jemubhai are not studied in the context of intersectional perspective that links the psychological repression and the power structure. This study thus fills this gap by providing an in-depth intersectional interpretation of *The Inheritance of Loss*, in regard to the manner

in which Desai presents the theme of class, race, and gender using the colonization of Jemubhai Patel. It also helps to expand the intersectional postcolonial criticism by mediating between the psychological and the sociological perspective. Their integration gives more insight into the ways in which the colonial escalations are still active in shaping identity and emotion in postcolonial stories.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Intersectionality Theory, firstly developed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) he states that social identities, including race, class, and gender, do not exist on their own but instead intersect to create a multifaceted experience of oppression and privilege. Intersectionality criticizes one-dimensional approaches by emphasizing the fact that people hold multiple, overlapping, social positions that help define their access to power and their vulnerability (Collins and Bilge, 2016). Crenshaw's framework allows a subtle interpretation of that how Jemubhai's multiple identities, as upper-class, male, and colonized, intersect leading to a fractured identity. As he internalizes superiority of the colonizer and continues to perpetuate hierarchies in his own culture. Crenshaw's framework highlights Jemubhai's colonial experiences, as a male Patel enjoys patriarchal privilege and emotional detachment.

Research Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative research approach which employs the use of textual analysis as its methodology. Because the study aims to understand how class, race, and gender are represented in *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai, it is based on interpretation and analysis, as opposed to first-level data. It is analyzed within the framework of Intersectionality Theory with the help of Psychoanalytic concepts that enables one to view social and psychological oppression in the novel as a multidimensional construct. The study is a descriptive-analytical study that seeks to establish, explain and assess the intertwined systems of oppression and privilege manifested in the character of Jemubhai Patel.

Data Collection

The main source of the current research is the book *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) by Kiran Desai. The work is the main object of analysis. Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, theses, and online databases will form part of secondary data and will elaborate on postcolonial identity, intersectionality, class, race, and gender. These are the academic materials that offer theoretical foundation and critical perspectives required in triangulating textual interpretation.

Data Analysis

The thematic textual analysis is applied to analyze the data in terms of patterns of colonial trauma, hierarchy of classes, racial marginalization, gender roles, and psychological sub-aggression. Both themes are analyzed using the intersectional model to track the interaction of social categories in the colonial life of Jemubhai.

Textual Analysis

Racial and Colonial Legacy

In *Inheritance of loss* by Kiran Desai's there is dialogue stated by some western girls who sat in a bus with Jemu bhai Patel.

“The young and beautiful were no kinder; girls held their noses and giggled,” phew, he stinks of curry!” (Desai,2006,p.39)

This dialogue shows how white people see themselves as superior and looked down on the browns and mocked them. This stereotype comment shapes his personality and makes him suffer from inferior complexity from his own culture and values. Despite having studied in England and attempting to imitate the culture of its people, Jemu bhai still sensed he was an outsider among the ordinary crowd. Each glance felt filled with judgment, leading him to reconsider his own identity and heritage. The oppressive attitudes of those around him altered his entire view of himself and the world he lives in.

“He grew stranger to himself than to those around him, found his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely manage to lift his lips in a smile, could not face his reflection in the mirror” (Desai,2006)

Colonial Power and Gender Oppression

Even after colonists left the oppressed people’s lands, the stains they left are still clearly visible in the minds of the victims. Despite their lack of admiration for the Eastern people, colonists played dirty tricks and pledged to turn their modest lives into opulent ones. And it was all a ruse to satisfy their covert self-interests. It didn’t take long for the darkness of colonialism to reach Jemu bhai, and that’s when he realized that his own roots were the source of his feelings of inferiority and neglect. Because of the severe effects of colonialism, Jemu bhai started to despise every facet of his own culture, customs, people, and so forth.

“one day he found footprint on the toilet seat she was squatting on it,she was squatting on it!he could barely contain his courage,took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl” (Desai,2006.p.173)

This disturbing scene of novel shows how colonial power and oppression which he faced in England shape his personality and make him hatred towards his people who has Indian identity, he’s now doing same oppression and control towards his wife and shown his superiority, basically its represent that Jemu bhai put out his anger on someone who is weaker than him and suffered from the same thing he suffered.

Psychological Trauma

The sole factor that renders the human mind truly remarkable is its adaptability and ability to adjust. The mind is incredibly powerful, capable of guiding one towards either ruin or success. A similar situation occurred when Jemu bhai came back from England. He was no longer the old Jemu bhai, but rather the one who had confronted the colonizers and embraced the mentality they desired. The mockery he experienced in that white people’s land has damaged him and negatively impacted his mental health, leading him to treat his wife in the same manner he was treated in England. His wife’s presence alone filled him with disgust. This illustrates how colonialism significantly contributes to the corruption of naive minds. His harmful mind-set essentially represents the goal of colonization.

The impact of oppression does not make him emotionally damaged but its effect on his mental health “Found his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar. He forgot how to laugh, could barely manage to lift his lips in a smile, and if he ever did, he held his hand over his mouth because he couldn’t bear anyone to see his gums,his teeth” (Desai,2006,p.40) This passage reveal how Jemu Bhai Patel personality shapes

and suffer from inferior complexity, repression and self loathing. A person who came England to groom and educate himself turn toward a depressed and complex individual

Gendered Projection and System of Power

A person's vulnerability is primarily revealed through their behaviour toward loved ones, as a strong individual would never impose its own fears and insecurities on others. Jemu's behaviour towards his wife reflects the deterioration of his mental state.

"Don't show your face outside." He said to her. "people might run from you screaming" (Desai,2006,p.173)

"He could not bear the smell of his own people, could not bear their touch, their talk, their laughter. He washed obsessively, trying to remove the brownness from his skin" .

In the mentioned lines, he was not just dominating his wife or causing her to feel unattractive or lesser; he was directly reflecting his own insecurities onto her. The manner in which white individuals made him perceive himself that his colour is unbearable and torture to their eyes, his identity is unacceptable, his roots are disgusted, his race deemed the lowest, and his culture simply barbaric. Consequently, he inflicted the same pain on his wife that he experienced, as it provided him satisfaction and pleasure to feel authoritative.

Emotional Detachment and Identity Crisis

Being a man incapable of forming any emotional bond is akin to a king without a successor to the throne. Jemu bhai faced challenges due to social, psychological, and emotional isolation, as in England, he was confined to move freely or interact with others without experiencing a sense of inferiority. His liberty was taken from him right in front of him, casting him into the shadows of solitude, abandoned, with a sense of disconnection from others. This resulted in his emotional detachment and unavailability to others.

"Find her it's your fault, mutt was in your care, I'll kill you wait and see.(Desi,2006,p.313)

In the scene when judge lost his dog (the only emotional connection), show his mental state that how he is unable to make any human connection with his granddaughter and his cook and give more value to his dog due his self inferiority and the only connection of love left within him, but when he missed judge got panic expose his emotional alienation. It symbolizes how colonial power and the patriarchal system make him incapable of finding any genuine human connection.

"He lived in a world of in-betweenness, belonging neither to the English nor to the Indians, always an outsider, always alone".

His desire to imitate or copy the western world and their people makes him distant from his own people and society. He does not even adjust in a western world nor in his own country which results in loneliness and loss of identity.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the examination of Jemu bhai characters through the lens of intersectionality theory reveals how overlapping systems of power and colonialism, race, class, gender, and patriarch produce unique experiences of privilege and

alienation. The overlapping identity of Jemu bhai shaped an individual personality, the discrimination and humiliation he faced in England not only departed him from his cultural roots but also made him alienated from his loved ones and led him towards to do the same oppression and control with them. Through this I have analyzed that identities are never singular but its formed with multiple power structured and experiences, Jemu bhai rejection and disconnection toward his wife, daughter, granddaughter, and cook show his psychological damage that the impact of western and colonial power, lastly we understand that these interconnected system not shaping only society but also the individual and the people who are connected with them like, a cook who also considered himself worthless in the surveillance of judge.

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