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The "New Woman" vs. The Traditional Subaltern: Comparing the agencies of Sai and Nimi in The Inheritance of Loss

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Abstract

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai provides a powerful examination of the agency of women in the intersections of postcolonialism, patriarchy and globalization. This paper presents a comparative study of two central female characters – Nimi, the wife of the judge and his granddaughter Sai. Nimi, the "traditional subaltern," is a character who has been silenced and erased by the unfettered crossings of colonial neurosis and indigenous patriarchy. She is caged by her family, especially by her husband Jemubhai Patel, and also by her body, from her father up until she suffers from a terrible loss of sanity and selfhood. Resistance is all but a late, desperate silence, that can't earn her dignity in the strict codes of society in her time. Sai, on the other hand, is the "New Woman" whose agency is supported by being raised in a Westernized convent and by the changes in social structure in a globalized India. Sai actively negotiates her identity, challenges traditional norms and shows a capacity for choice in her relationships, unlike her grandmother. Nimi is a character who is imprisoned at home and whose birth name has been erased, but Sai uses her education as a "semantic structure" to express her anger, to challenge the ethnic conflicts related to the Gorkhaland movement.

It is suggested in this essay that education and cultural hybridity enable both Sai to accomplish a relative emancipation; however, they are both subject to the same "inheritance of loss". This loss is felt as disunified identities and a lack of authentic place in a world marred by colonialism and present political unrest. This study will show how the Indian woman's role is changing and how it is still being challenged by analyzing the naming process, the use of voice and the use of domestic space. Finally, the paper is a call for greater progress in transitioning from subaltern to "New Woman", but the overarching presence of the shadow of patriarchal control can not be overlooked.

Keywords: Subalternity, Female Agency, Subaltern representation, Postcolonialism Postcolonial theory, Globalization, *The Inheritance of Loss*, Identity Crisis are the keywords.

Introduction

The *Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai's novel winner of the Man Booker Prize, is a multi-layered, postcolonial exploration of cultural displacement, the changing status of women in a globalized world, and postcolonial identity. The story follows the events in the decaying colonial mansion of Cho Oyu in Kalimpong and the rough, immigrant-infused, basements of New York, set mostly in the mid-1980s during the Gorkhaland movement. At the heart of the exploration are the three generations of women, each one with a different amount of agency, offering a poignant commentary on the painful journey from the old world of subjugation to the new world of emancipation. This research paper is about Nimi, the judge's wife, a quintessential "traditional subaltern" and Sai, the judge's granddaughter, the emerging "New Woman".

In Indian patriarchy system women have been treated as objects not subjects throughout the history even in the post independent era. Nimi is the first generation—a naive, illiterate, subaltern woman who is stuck in the vortex of Male Chauvinism and rigid rules of society. Her life is one of quiet, solitude, and a complete lack of control, that culminates in a sad, loss of reason and personality. Contrastively, Sai is of the third generation who is educated to the Western system and independent in her thinking and is thus very "New Woman". Whereas her grandmother is a passive participant, Sai deconstructs her identity, questions the norms and has the ability to choose her relations and social life.

The difference between these two women is not just one of temperament but it is a genuine reflection of India's socio-political changes. Nimi's subalternity stems from the colonial and patriarchal history of seeing women as property to be safeguarded or abandoned. Globalization and cultural hybridity give Sai a sense of agency, however, as it enables her to cross the boundaries that used to limit the activities of the women of her family. Both, however, share a sense of loss, a theme that is present in Desai's writing as a reminder of the personal loss of the character and the historical breaks of the nation state. This paper suggests that education and globalization offer lenses through which to view the liberation of women, but the spectre of the patriarchal influence is still all too strong and is continuing to influence the feminine psyche in contemporary India through agencies such as Sai and Nimi.

The Judge as the Agent of Subjugation, the Patriarchal Framework.

Without examining the dominant male presence in their lives – that of the retired judge Jemubhai Patel – it is impossible to understand the agencies of Nimi and Sai. The judge acts

as the main enforcer of patriarchal control, and is himself a colonial neurosis that has been himself colonized by his self-hatred. The judge grew up in England, where he had been victim to racism and alienation and hence internalises a sense of western superiority and a deep sense of contempt for Indianness. It affects the way he treats Nimi and Sai, in very different ways.

Nimi is directly and brutishly subdued. The judge can see in her all that which he has detested in India: its traditions, its lack of "refinement" its supposed backwardness. His physical and mental abuse of her is a misguided attempt to purge himself of his own "Indian-ness". The house, for Nimi, is not a safe haven, but instead a cage, in which every move she makes is watched by a man who sees her as a tool for the sex industry. The judge is more involved in Sai's interaction. Sai is a convent girl who speaks flawless English, and fits more neatly into the judge's stereotype of western refinement. That's her level of protection and respect, which Nimi never had. But, what has the judge done to it; it is a "colonial grasp" that Sai will need to work out to live a life far from. This patriarchal system is a limiting factor for women, it's a difficult terrain for the agency of Sai.

The Mute of the Subaltern Nimi: The Loss of Identity

Nimi is the most tragic and moving female character in the novel, who represents the notion of the subaltern – the one who is denied access to the powers of society, the one who remains silent to discourse of the dominant. From her childhood, Nimi is a victim of the patriarchal system. Her father locks her and her two other girls "carefully" away from the outside world to keep their honor safe. This initial caging deprives her of any early development of agency; she is conditioned to be timid, submissive and obedient, waiting for a marriage that will only transfer her from father to husband.

When Nimi marries Jemubhai, she loses not only her humanity but also her mind. One of the most symbolic of her subjugation is the change of her name soon after her marriage from 'bela' to 'Nimi Patel' – indicating a complete erasure of her pre-marriage identity. Her life with the judge is a 'saga of injustice' and oppression. She is physically abused for what she is perceived to be doing: silly things like using a toilet that is different from the western toilet, and she is eventually humiliated in front of her superior officers in the judge.

For most of the novel Nimi defies by being silent. She says nothing, she refuses to rebel, she doesn't walk out. This silence is not a conscious decision made by the women, but a result of a culture of silence which affects subaltern women, and where "listeners are either silenced

themselves or affected by the same patriarchal culture". Only at the end of her relationship does she get up the nerve to speak, calling her judge "stupid," and she is thrown away and returned to her family. Her death (on a stove fire) is made to seem the only respite from a society that has oppressed her all her life. In Nimi, Desai portrays a woman that's been suppressed and battered to the point of being unable to stand up for her dignity.

Sai: The "New Woman" and the Agency of Choice

Sai is a third generation woman with her character being a "feministic voice on the sad journey from slavery towards liberation". Sai is different from Nimi; he is bold, independent and is not afraid of being frank. The authority that she has is largely a result of her western education at convents granting her an "anglicised cultural refinement" and giving her a way to interact with the world on her own terms. Education is a device that can be used to transform and help Sai discover the "real meaning of life", leading to the eventual rejection of rigid norms.

Sai's agency can be best seen in her interactions with her tutor Gyan. Sai has a more active role in her life than Nimi is, and in her choice of partner. She is not a 'timid, easily subjugated woman', but a superior woman who challenges the norms of a docile Indian woman, Gyan. However, when Gyan starts to look down upon the Gorkhaland movement and starts treating her with disrespect, Sai doesn't keep quiet. She tells him off, debates National politics with him and shows him her dismay at his betrayal. Sai is a "strong young woman" who stands up for what she wants even if it fails to work out, but she is not one who lives in false hope.

Moreover, the fact that Sai can manage the Cho Oyu household proves that she is an agency. In many cases, she is the most capable member of the house; she is able to balance her relationship with her grandfather and the cook. This is loneliness and solitude, not the same as the caged solitude Nimi suffers from, but a solitude she seeks out for herself: solitude in reading, in nature. Sai knows the "foibles of society," and intentionally tries to create a life for herself without succumbing to the "hangover of the past" that dominates the older characters.

Name, voice and space,

The difference between Nimi and Sai can be explored under three major headings – Naming Process, Use of Voice, Use of Space.

1. Naming and Identity: The loss of the name (Bela) and a complete loss of identity in the family of her husband. But even in tragedy, Sai's sense of self prevails. She is an orphan and lives with her grandfather but because of her own westernization and strength she is "Sai"—a separate entity.

2. Voice vs. Silence: Nimi's life is subsumed by a “dirty little rodent secret” of pain, and silence. Because she is in a "powerless class", she is unable to spread her fear or hopelessness. On the contrary, Sai is honest and open. She sounds out her voice to ask Gyan questions and to question the judge's apathy. With the education, she has the "semantic structure" to convey her agony and her longing for freedom.

3. Space and Caging: Nimi is physically and metaphorically caged. She is locked in her father's house and later in the judge's house in Bonda. Sai is also in a secluded place (Cho Oyu), but she utilizes for her intellectual growth. Nimi's isolation causes him to lose his sanity, while Sai's isolation results in a "quest for identity" which turns out to be self-affirming.

Today's globalization and the changing sensibilities of women.

The transformation of the subaltern to the New Woman has always been tied to globalization and multiculturalism. Nimi's world was not globalized and there was no such thing as equal opportunities in a traditional patriarchy. Her life was dominated by "superstition and lethargy" and by the strictures of an "old-fashioned type" of man. Sai, on the other hand, is the fruit of multiculturalism and has been influenced by western literature, values and world views in her educational development.

Globalization gives Sai “different windows of possibility,” and new knowledge that her grandmother never had. This "transnational experience" gives Sai agency and flexibility to negotiate her hybrid Indian and Western identities. Nimi has experienced "double colonization" (both British influence and Indian nationalism), whereas Sai is able to free herself from an exclusively traditional and an exclusively Western identity by embracing "hybridity."

But, Desai also uses Sai to condemn the shortcomings of this New Woman status. In a society characterised by displacement and political volatilities, Sai is still a victim of the "struggle of search for the home" despite of her education and boldness. Gyan's love life is complicated by colour and caste issues which globalization seems to have been unable to resolve. So, even

though the New Woman is more empowered than the subaltern, she remains a victim of the 'inheritance of loss'—a fractured sense of self and of rootedness.

Tragic End vs. Resilient Hope

Finally, the results of their resistance are compared. Nimi's resistance is weak, short and results in her being thrown away. Her death is a "last refuge," a sad conclusion to a trip that featured such predicates of despair. In Nimi, Desai depicts a woman who is too suppressed in her life to build her own.

But Sai's life, like that of her parents, is fraught with tragedy: betrayal at the hands of Gyan, the violence of the insurgency, yet it remains resilient. This novel concludes with a "glimpse of hope" the Kanchenjunga breaks through the clouds, implying that "truth was apparent". Sai still 'struggles for liberty and right' has the strength to build an independent life even in a difficult society. Desai uses Sai to urge the world to think differently as it is "dynamic and multicultural today" and women must be educated and work in society so that they become stronger and independent.

The Physical and Psychological Cages are mapped.

Cho Oyu, the judge's rotten mansion in Kalimpong, is more than a setting; it's an emblem of the colonial past that is inescapable for the characters. This space is used differently for the women, according to their level of agency. For Nimi, Cho Oyu's previous home (Bonda) was a place of total confinement. Her father had already "put a lock on Nimi and her sisters" to maintain his honour and marriage to Jemubhai only put her in a new cage, but one that was even crueller. The judge's house becomes a place that Nimi is "used to being locked up" in, and it never occurs to her that she can leave. Nimi is a personification of the subaltern in this space, where her presence is characterized by her closeness to the judge's rage and her inability to deal with Western "refinement," including how to use a western toilet.

Sai's relationship with Cho Oyu is not of fear, but of intellectual exploration: it is an isolated space for her. During her time as an orphan and mostly in isolation she creates an identity for herself in the space of the library and the expansive landscape of the Himalayas. Sai's agency lies in her own ability of finding solace in the permanence of the top of Kanchenjunga, while Nimi's life is defined by the "dirty little rodent secret" of shared Indian suffering in the shadows. The crumbling mansion represents the "inheritance of loss" (decaying of old things), but Sai leads the reader through the ruins to discover "different windows of possibility".

Nimi as the Silenced Native

Double colonization is the best way to understand Nimi's situation in which she is being oppressed by the lingering British colonialism (through her husband) and traditional Indian patriarchy. After studying in England, the judge's "radical process of psychiatric traumas" leaves him with a deep self-hatred. He harbors this hatred for Nimi as a reflection of the "Indianness" he would like to expel from himself. His hatred is so strong that he hates her only for the nationality and the result is that Nimi is "punished and persecuted under the chauvinistic male domination".

She is a subaltern, who has been completely erased by her subaltern status. The change of her name from Bela to Nimi Patel is "typical" in order to consolidate class differences and is a direct hit to her true life, she wrote in her letter. Nimi is still a "minor character" in the story, and in life, she is a "minor" woman: she has no choice but to be decided by men who are in charge of her. All her resistance does is intensify her predicament, as she attempts to speak back to the judge, calling him "stupid," only to be turned back to her uncle's house where she's told to ask for forgiveness and it's her "husband's responsibility. Her death, over a stove, is described as the fate of the traditional wife in a land where "human life was cheap.

Sai's Convent Education

Unlike Nimi who is illiterate, Sai is based in education, her agency is rooted there. Education is the key that enables Sai to change from a "timid, easily subjugated woman" to a "New Woman",. Her experiences in the convent schools give her an "anglicised cultural refinement", which gives her the social mobility and intellectual independence. This education makes her a "foreigner in her own country" – as her grandfather was – but Sai capitalizes on her hybridity without the self-hatred that besets her grandfather.

This education allows Sai to "feel the truth of life" and thus eventually challenge the "rules" of the society. Sai can communicate her desires and frustrations with the "semantic structure", unlike Nimi who had to suffer quietly. She is independent, bold, and true to her own judgment, however, sometimes misjudging it, which causes her unhappiness. Her critical reading and thinking skills enable her to see the "foibles of society" and the "hangover of the past" and keep the judge and the other characters locked in the colonial neurosis.

The Bridge Between Generations is a story about Lola and Noni. The Bridge Between Generations is about Lola and Noni.

Other than Nimi and Sai, the middle generation represented by Lola and Noni is a key comparison to be made. They are also judge-like fond of the West and they retreat to the Western ways like the judge, but a more precarious position than Sai. They are "trapped by British ways", pining to live their life in their own way but prevented by their past. Noni, in particular, remembers when her father was an "old-fashioned type," who gave her no chance to pursue her dream of becoming an archaeologist.

Lola and Noni are, in part, emancipated; they can live alone as a widow and single sister; the agents of local insurgency cannot be outcompeted by them. The type of public humiliation they face from the GNLF leader Pradhan, which is degrading their dignity, shows that their "Westernized safety" is a dreamland and fragile. When it comes, Noni tells Sai to "take the chance," for otherwise it will "tarnish her life" living under patriarchy's expectations.

The 'Agency of Choice' versus 'Ethnic Conflict'

The dynamic between Sai and Gyan is the best example of Sai's emergent agency. While Nimi's love marriage is a choice of her parents, Sai's love affair is more of a personal choice. But this decision is made difficult due to the socio-political aspect of Gorkhaland movement. Gyan starts to scorn the bourgeoisie lifestyle and the westernised education of Sai as he gets more actively involved with the ethnic insurgents.

In this battle, Sai is more agile. She "challenges the stereotype of the "docile Indian woman" and faces Gyan on his allegiances with the "Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF)". When she doesn't back down from Gyan's sense of superiority, she argues and argues, telling him of the "caged urge for freedom" which Nimi never knew. The relationship is a heartbreak and Sai is still a "strong young woman", holding on to reality. Her agency is what enables her to survive the "vortex of loss" and the trust to follow her own journey, even though it sometimes puts her in the fenced areas of loneliness.

Conclusion

Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* purports that the "New Woman" has come a long way, but the road between subjugation and emancipation is far from finished. Nimi is the epitome of the lack of humanity of the patriarchy and colonialism, culminating in a "tragic loss of sanity and selfhood". A resilient hope, in the form of education and globalization, that allows Sai to carve out a space for herself in a world that is defined by "dislocation and fragmentation".

Both are bound together by their "inheritance of loss", however. Sai's life is lonely as a Cho Oyu and the unstable political situation around her. The novel ends with the conclusion that

the subaltern can now converse (as Sai does), but the structures of male domination and ethnic conflict remain strong barriers. Thus, the journey of Sai's resilience, coupled with her search for identity, provides a "glimpse of hope" for the modern Indian woman to continue to "struggle for liberty and right" in the "messy, complex, demanding" global society.

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