

# Understanding Postcolonial Identity Through the Perspective of Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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## Abstract

The multifaceted phenomenon of postcolonialism, which emerged from more than two centuries of British colonial control in India, has had a significant impact on the country's economic, social, and political environment. Through their literary works, Indian writers—most notably Amitav Ghosh and Kiran Desai—strive to reclaim and redefine contemporary Indian identity. This study examines the postcolonial identity as it is portrayed in *The Calcutta Chromosome* by Ghosh and *The Inheritance of Loss* by Desai. It does this by looking at the various facets of hegemony, power dynamics, orientalism, economic inequality, and identity politics that are present in postcolonial literature. *The Calcutta Chromosome* contradicts the prevalent narrative that downplays the contributions made by subalterns to scientific research during colonial India, while also highlighting their aptitude for intellectual thought. Ghosh's story undermines the Eurocentric ideology of hegemony and emphasizes the East's triumph over the West. Conversely, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* explores the intricacies of identity, hybridity, and cultural assimilation while delving into the interactions between characters who are Indian and Western. The protagonists in the book battle with their Indian heritage while becoming fixated on Western ideals and ways of life, reflecting the socioeconomic inequalities and internal colonialism that pervaded postwar India. Desai's depiction of the characters' psychological turmoil emphasizes the identity conflict brought about by the characters' inherited colonial cultural identities.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Identity, Subaltern, East, West, Hegemony, Hybridity, Social, Power Dynamics

## Introduction

Postcolonialism refers to the study of power structures and power relations between the colonizers and the colonized. Let us understand what postcolonialism means- 'post' means 'after' which symbolizes the end of British colonization and the colonized's independence. The word colonization reminds us of the British's attitude towards the suppressed and postcolonial literature questions the Britishers dictating attitude and treatment of the colonized as well as the lack of freedom of expression of the colonized. Colonization was a system of domination- political, social, psychological, and cultural. It established a myth of the West's superiority over the East's inferiority. It propagated a system of intellectual, social,

cultural, and physical inferiority of the colonized. Over the years, writers from the East have recognized the deteriorating effects of colonization. This has given birth to post-colonial consciousness which enables these writers to reject and accept power dynamics and power knowledge of the imperialistic country.

Postcolonialism is a multifaceted phenomenon that is a result of British occupancy and colonial rule. The British colonial rule spanned for more than two centuries and as a result, left a deep and irreversible scar on India's social, political, and economic landscape. Indian Writers such as Amitav Ghosh and Kiran Desai try to redefine and decolonize the minds of today's citizens through their writings. The act of decolonization is both cultural and political. It highlights the wrongdoings of the British forces as well as reconstructs identity by counteracting the legacies of British imperialism. Postcolonial writings as an amalgamation of hegemony, power dynamics, orientalism, economic disparities, and identity politics. It rejects the Eurocentric norms set by the British powerholders while shaping India's trajectory as a country that celebrates its roots and culture.

In the field of postcolonialism, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which emphasizes Western colonial power's dominance over the East and the Orient, is once again a seminal work. According to Said, Orientalism is the way that European ideology represents the East. He criticizes how North African and Eastern countries were portrayed in literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as pagans, savages, underdeveloped, and criminals by the Western colonial powers. By questioning the binary portrayal of the Orient as undeveloped, uncivilized, and non-Christian and Europe as developed, civilized, and Christian, Said's work had a profound impact on literary theory, cultural studies, and human geography.

The representation of colonial power on the colonized and the local people is examined by Homi K. Bhabha. According to Bhabha, identities formed during colonial encounters are never permanent, with Europeans building their identities via their relationships with the colonized based on their differences. He provides us with the three key elements of hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry that are prevalent in colonial and postcolonial literature. Among many other things, imitation of literature, culture, and religion is referred to as mimicry. In addition, he discusses the idea of a "mimic man," since imitation is never perfect. The absence of two or more cultures—mostly those of the colonizer and the colonized—leads to hybridity. The final one is ambiguity, which is the colonized and colonizer's love-hate relationship.

### **The Calcutta Chromosome**

*The Calcutta Chromosome* is a notable postcolonial work in the science fiction genre. Its foundation is the idea of "alternative history," with a special emphasis on the subject of subaltern populations and the life story of Dr. Ronald Ross, a Nobel Prize winner known for his ground-breaking studies on the spread of malaria. The protagonist of the book, Antar, works in the technology department and begins the story by using his advanced computer, Ava, to look for his missing colleague Murugan. The book's protagonist, Murugan, is the voice of reason who examines the hidden background of Ross's malaria discovery. In the process of uncovering the truth, he locates a subaltern group that is supported by Lakhan and is headed by the mysterious Mangala. Murugan believes that their "Pursuit is rooted in the quest for Immoral" (*The Calcutta Chromosome*, 87). Three points of view—the omniscient narrator, Murugan's perspective, and Sonali Das's contribution—combine to form the story.

Murugan presents Mangla, a woman from a lower social class, as a wise person whose knowledge exceeds that of modern Western scientists. This idea of the subaltern's intellectual capacity and role in scientific discoveries is expanded upon by Ghosh. He makes the argument throughout the book that prejudiced historians have disregarded the subaltern's intelligence and contributions to scientific study throughout colonial India. It refutes the conventional wisdom that says people from lower socio-economic status are incapable of being intelligent. Ross is not as important as the subaltern people who help Ross and whose stories are left out of the chronicles. His accomplishment would not have been achieved without the subaltern team's vital participation. Mangala portrays these individuals. She acts quietly and is the subaltern group's leader. For these people, silence serves as a kind of "religion," according to Murugan, who emphasizes the need to conceal their motivations and behavior. Using this tactic, one can communicate while staying in the background and expressing themselves more via their deeds than words.

Phulbani's contribution to the narrative's depiction of subaltern silence is noteworthy. As is customary in the literary world, he takes up a pen name, just like a lot of other Indian Bengali authors. Shayad Murad Hussain is his name. He is chosen by the underclass to be their chronicler because he gets into the eerie and enigmatic atmosphere that Lakhan has created. Based on this incident, Phulbani starts creating stories that effectively convey the essence of the subaltern existence. "Ghosh successfully deconstructs the Eurocentric discourse of hegemony by replacing the noble characters with silenced ones. Such characters, like Murugan, Mangala, Laakhan, and Phulboni come to the center of the narrative. It is not only that, but the novel is also a celebration of the victory of the East over the West, dismantling the Western sense of superiority." (Rudramuni, 27)

### **The Inheritance of Loss**

*The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai was well-received by critics in 2006 for its examination of the dynamics between Indian and Western characters. Desai became the youngest female winner of the Man Booker Prize when her work, which is referred to as a diasporic novel, won both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the prize money in the same year. The portrayal of Indian anglophile identities and the realistic yet critical portrait of the First World countries have garnered praise for their work. Krishna Singh and other literary critics see the book as an examination of Indian culture and highlight Desai's skill in capturing her characters' conflict between their battle with their Indian ancestry and tradition and their fascination with Western values and lifestyle.

The story, which is set in postcolonial India, centers on two characters: Sai, an educated adolescent in India, and Biju, an illegal immigrant living in America. Their unusual qualities within their respective places show the complex interaction between the East and the West. Whereas Sai in India tends to favor Western tastes, Biju in America stays true to his native values. The story revolves around the lives of Biju and Sai, who are unrelated but connected. The difficulties encountered by first-generation immigrants are reflected in Biju's life in America, highlighting the necessity for adaptability as well as the sense of isolation and alienation. In contrast, Sai's story explores the intricacies of hybridity and long-standing relationships in India.

The socio-economic disparities and internal colonialism of Indian society are reflected in large parts of the novel. The wealthy characters—Jamubhai, Lalita, Namita, and Ms. Sen—stand in sharp contrast to

Gyan and Biju's impoverished class. Caste-based discrimination serves as a framework for the internal colonization of the mind, which after independence shifts to class-based discrimination. In his portrayal of contemporary India, Desai presents an uncertain reality in which people sacrifice their own cultural identities to adopt Western lifestyles. The narrative takes place against the backdrop of individuals forsaking their traditional background in favor of working in America or applying for green cards. The story additionally glances at the stigma experienced by immigrants in the US, such as Biju, whose family takes great pride in their Western ties, despite their menial living and employment circumstances. The imitation of Western culture is a representation of modernity and the idea that those who adapt are better than others. Characters confront opposition and contest the marginalization of Native Americans in the nuanced representation of postcolonial Indians. The book portrays the shifting times; certain facets of disparities endure, resulting in fresh divisions and reincarnations of old fights.

Due to cultural differences in language, religion, and ethnicity, internal colonies arose. As a result, some minority groups were kept out of positions of prominence in society and politics, and as a result, both internal and foreign colonization were born. Because the Gorkha insurgency was an act of robbery, rape, looting, and anticipation, Desai focuses on the negative components of the movement. It is absurd that the Rebels despised anyone who extolled the virtues of the West when they desired to go to America or the British embassy. This exposes the opposing viewpoints that underlie their beliefs. The novel explores the emotional displacement and dislocation that ambivalent and hybrid characters go through. The work delves into the psychological upheaval experienced by individuals whose interactions with the contemporary world are broken as the story progresses. Sai has a shift in her perception of what it means to live; she becomes skeptical of her identity and that of her nation and comes to understand that there are many purposes and reasons for existence. Sai's upbringing is also a reflection of this cultural ambivalence that the judge faces. Sai is educated under the British system and speaks only in English. The legacy of the missionaries' education to create a class of Indians closer to the Britishers perpetuated the desire for a distinct Indian identity, which is often overwhelmed by the influence of Western living standards. Her upbringing is far from the realities of the world around her. She lacks compassion and understanding and fails to emphasize the sufferings of others, such as her indifferent behavior towards the cook. "No human had ever seen an adult giant squid alive, and though they had eyes as apples to scope the dark of the ocean, theirs was a solitude so profound they might never encounter another of their tribe. The melancholy of this situation washed over Sai." (Desai, 02)

## Conclusion

While shedding light on the colonial interactions that shaped modern identities and cultural knowledge systems, both novels examine power relations within colonial and postcolonial contexts. The Calcutta Chromosome explores the hegemonic force of colonial science, demonstrating how Western knowledge frequently marginalizes indigenous epistemologies and believes itself to be better. Comparably, *The Inheritance of Loss* delves into the long-lasting effects of colonialism and emphasizes how cultural identities' inheritance leads to an identity conflict that frequently manifests in the behaviors and self-perceptions of the characters.

In *The Inheritance of Loss* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*, female characters wrestle with issues of agency, empowerment, and identities in a patriarchal culture. Ghosh presents characters that subvert

patriarchal conventions in Indian society and are seen as agents of change. But because of the patriarchal nature of the era, masculine characters frequently eclipse their agency. In a similar vein, women like Sai who overcome the limitations of tradition and Western influence are highlighted in *The Inheritance of Loss*. The female characters in both stories exhibit persistence and autonomy in maneuvering within patriarchal structures, despite encountering diverse forms of operation. Their acts of resistance highlight how her gender interacts with both larger systems of operation, which helps to undermine prevailing power structures.

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