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A departmental senior thesis submitted to the Department of English at Trinity University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with departmental honors.

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“Could Fulfillment Ever Be Felt as Deeply as Loss?”

By: Ambreen Hooda

“Could Fulfillment Ever Be Felt as Deeply as Loss?”: A Postcolonial Examination of the West’s Influence on India as Reflected by Kiran Desai’s Portrayal of Twentieth Century Female Education in *The Inheritance of Loss*

I. Introduction

Published in 2006, novelist Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* presents several interrelated stories exploring Indian characters’ relationships with the West. Often categorized as a diaspora novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* received immediate critical success, winning both the *National Book Critics Circle Award* and the *Man Booker Prize* in 2006, the latter of which distinguished Desai as “the youngest female winner of the prize” at the time¹ (“Kiran Desai Claims Booker Title”). Since the novel’s publication reviews have praised Desai for her realistic yet “unflattering view of the First World” and for her portrayal of Indian anglophile identities (D’souza). Literary critic Krishna Singh calls *The Inheritance of Loss* “a brilliant study of Indian culture,” emphasizing Desai’s portrayal of her Indian characters’ “craze for the Western values, manners, language and glamorous life style” and the realistic way in which she shows her characters “inferior, bounded and defeated by their Indian heritage” (Singh 55). Singh’s argument examines the novel in terms of Western and Eastern binaries that exist solely in conflict with one another. By emphasizing the differences between the West and the East, he views the relationship between the Western world and India as that of a colonizer and the colonized in which the colonized aspires to become just like the colonizer. However, in a 2008 interview, Desai claimed that she did not aim to present a specific image of the “First” or “Third” world. Rather, she argues that the novel’s story comes as “the result of many generations having gone back and forth between east and west, to the point that I don’t really think you can talk of the east and the west in blunt terms any more” (Desai, “Desai: If Only Bush Read Books!”).

¹ In 2013, Eleanor Catton became the youngest writer, either male or female, to win.

Desai's Indian-American novel takes place in postcolonial India, an India still tied to the Western world. *The Inheritance of Loss* focuses on two Indian characters in 1986: Biju, an illegal immigrant in America, and Sai, a formally educated teenage girl in India. The characters' respective location highlights the complexity of the relationship between the east and the west because neither character fits into the clear cut mold of their location. Although Biju's story takes place in America, he speaks little English and refuses to work in any restaurant that serves beef because it conflicts with his religious beliefs. Sai, on the other hand, lives in India but prefers English to Hindi and cares little about visiting religious temples outside of studying their architecture. Their locations play an important role in unpacking how Desai represents Indians who live in a postcolonial world. The novel's narrative alternates between the events surrounding Biju and Sai's life, between the events that take place in America and India, which allows the novel to tell two separate yet related stories. Sai's half of the novel focuses not only on her story but also on the stories of several Indian characters with whom she has long established relationships. Although Biju develops new relationships in America, most of these relationships stem from whichever job he has at the moment. He forms no long-term or deep connection and his half of the novel focuses solely on his story. His solitude highlights a sense of isolation associated with first generation immigrants who must learn to adapt to life without their friends, family, and native culture. Thus, on the surface level, Biju and Sai's stories connect only through their separate relationships with Biju's father, "the cook," who works for Sai's grandfather, Jemubhai, "the judge." In an interview with BBC's *World Book Club*, Desai emphasizes how she constructed no driving "plot" to unite the two stories ("Kiran Desai - The Inheritance of Loss"). Instead, she claims that Biju and Sai's narratives are two separate "stories" joined together by

common themes, themes of generational differences, literacy and education, identity and place, and, most importantly, themes of Western-Eastern conflicts.

At the beginning of the novel, Sai introduces the title theme when she ponders, “Could fulfillment ever be felt as deeply as loss?” (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 3). This central character’s question sets the stage for “the inheritance of loss,” that is, the question concerning generational growth: are the freedoms that the protagonists inherit worth the cultural loss they pay? The more each character inherits freedoms and ties to the West, the more he or she loses a connection with their Indian heritage, the culture of their parents and grandparents. This question is particularly complicated in relation to twentieth century India because Biju and Sai, who were born in the 1960s and 1970s respectively, only experience India as an independent nation. Their parents and grandparents, however, were born when India was still a British colony, and Jemubhai’s story includes flashbacks that begin in 1919 and span past Indian independence in 1947. Thus, even though the novel takes place nearly forty years after independence, “the inheritance of loss” must be approached in relation to the effects of colonization.

The novel, therefore, presents two postcolonial stories that examine the aftermaths of colonization in modern India. While Biju’s story portrays an Indian immigrant’s struggle for a better life in the Western world, Sai’s story demonstrates how, even after independence, England’s influence remains present in India. The binary-like differences between Biju and Sai paradoxically unite their narratives together. Their differences are most apparent in their relationship to gender and education: while Biju comes from a socially lower class and illiterate family, Sai comes from a higher class family whose stories revolve around education, particularly the tensions between formal and informal education. Both Biju and Sai’s stories are, therefore, linked because both are driven by the stories of their parents and grandparents, which

emphasize the importance of generational transitions. Additionally, Desai links their postcolonial stories by each character's response to the West and its influence on India, and to Indian nationalism. While Biju finds his love for his Indian culture in New York City, Sai becomes more aware of her western traits and upbringing as she witnesses Nepali nationalist rebellions in Kalimpong, India. However, both Biju and Sai simultaneously respond to the same issues while in different parts of the world, which highlights that the effects of British colonization play a role in Indian life regardless of Western or Eastern locations or identities. Desai creates these two very different stories, which focus on almost binary characters, to exhibit how the West presented opportunities to Indians, but also to emphasize how those opportunities come at a cost.

Biju immigrates to the famous and populated New York City, and while it is a city known for attracting immigrants, Biju quickly learns that the “innocence” of the American dream “never prevails” there (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 89). The idea of the American dream, wherein anyone can raise his or her status and become successful, plays an important role in Singh's interpretation of the novel, which emphasizes the “craze for the Western values, manners, language and glamorous life style” (Singh 55). Although Biju migrates to America rather than England, India's colonizer, his immigration still emphasizes the idea that only the West holds the key to freedom and new opportunities. He has opportunities in the West that would be denied to him in India, which would not be denied to him in the West where the idea of the American dream is so strongly emphasized. This dream, however, falls short for Biju when he finds difficulty maintaining a job without legal residency. Historically, his difficulty aligns with the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which President Ronald Reagan signed in 1986. While the law provided “a legalization program — and a possible path to citizenship — for those who are in the country illegally,” the process was ultimately ineffective and failed to legalize the

majority of the illegal immigrants in the country (Tumulty). Desai demonstrates this difficulty through Biju, who cannot even apply for a green card as “Indians were not allowed to” because “the quota was full” (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 90). He lacks any legal opportunity to raise his social status because of his race. Furthermore, the law also took “measures to discourage employers from hiring workers who lack proof of legal residency” (Tumulty). In the novel, these measures either prevent Biju from obtaining jobs or force him to leave jobs when immigration services become involved. His hopes at improving his lower-class status by emigrating to the West, fulfilling the American dream, turn out to be impossible because of the very laws put into place to help immigrants in his position. In the midst of this realization, Biju strengthens his ties to his religious beliefs, choosing to leave a steak restaurant because, as he decides, “one should not give up one’s religion, the principles of one’s parents and their parents before them” (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 151). He values the Indian culture that stems throughout generations and ultimately places that above the idea that the West provides better opportunities for him. His decision comes only half way through the novel, but it already answers the question of “the inheritance of loss” for Biju: the freedoms he inherits as a result of Western influence on India are not worth the cultural loss he must pay. Yet his answer comes as a result of his immigration, which stresses Desai’s point that the east and west are not “blunt terms” that stand in opposition because his experiences in the west shape his relationship to the east (Desai, “Desai: If Only Bush Read Books!”). Although he has the ability to leave India, which his father never could, Biju ultimately chooses to return to India.

Sai’s story, on the other hand, takes place in Kalimpong, a hill station in West Bengal, a northwestern Indian province. Kalimpong has been known for providing some of “the best schools for the eastern Himalayan region,” many of which were formed during the British

colonial period (Lama 33). However, the appeal of these schools began to fade in 1986 “due to the political disturbances” that emerged with the Nepali rebellions (33). These rebellions called for Gorkhaland, a separate state for the Gorkha, or Nepali, people of Western Bengal based on ethno-linguistic rights and the desire to identify as Indian Gorkhas. Both the educational emphasis of Kalimpong and the call for Gorkhaland emerge in Sai’s story through her relationship with Gyan, her boyfriend and tutor. Sai pays little attention to her Western habits, such as celebrating Christmas, until Gyan criticizes her for “copying” the “West” (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 180, 179). Gyan’s comments align with Singh’s idea that emphasizes Indians “craze” for Western lifestyles because Sai prefers Western holidays to Eastern ones. However, Desai refuses to align Sai, even with all of her Western habits, with Singh’s emphasis, instead stressing that Sai does not know why she celebrates Christmas instead of Hindu holidays, she just does. Unlike Gyan, a Nepali rebel who is the first in his family to directly associate with the West, Sai’s relationship with the West stems back generations because her grandparents had a strong relationship with Britain in colonial India. Although Anglicized, Sai does not actively distinguish between the west and the east in blunt terms because her generational relationship with the west blurs the lines between the two supposedly binary cultures, which in turn complicate her question of “the inheritance of loss.” This question combined with Sai’s relationship to the West sets up a complex postcolonial representation of the effects of British colonization in twentieth century India.

However, given the novel’s diaspora categorization and its attention to twentieth century illegal immigration through Biju’s locationally remote role, critics understandably focused on postcolonial arguments regarding immigrant identity. Oana Sabo, in “Disjunctions and Diaspora in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*,” argues that the novel places importance not only on

an immigrant's hopes of reinventing his or her identity, but also on "the costs of dislocation" (Sabo 388). According to Sabo, the novel functions as a way to remind the readers about the struggles and hardships that come with emigrating from one culture to another, including economic struggles, Indophobic attitudes, and myths about the American dream. While not untrue, critics like Sabo base their arguments on a definition of diaspora that Steven Vertovec argues refers "almost exclusively to the experiences of Jews," and thus "connotations of a 'diaspora' situation were usually rather negative as they were associated with forced displacement, victimisation, alienation" (Vertovec 278). Although Biju, like many other South Asians, emigrates to the West out of a felt necessity, he *chooses* to leave his homeland, which was not the case with the original diaspora. Applying the original idea of the diaspora to general groups of immigrants, refugees, and ethnic and racial minorities and conflates broad categories and "threatens the term's descriptive usefulness" (277). The reader should instead find a different definition or method of approaching the South Asian diaspora.

In "What Was Postcolonialism?" Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge attempt to undermine the association between postcolonialism and its association with the past. Instead of looking away from the colonial past, Mishra and Hodge, drawing from Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, examine contemporary postcolonialism by rehistoricizing the past. They argue that the postcolonial present "is not a matter of breaking off completely with a premodern past, but of making the latter inhere in modernity as a significant and empowering trace" (Mishra & Hodge 396). Thus, when examining postcolonialism, which encompasses the South Asian diaspora, it is not enough to focus on the present, especially at the expense of the past. The role of past generations, as Desai emphasizes, plays an important part in understanding *The Inheritance of Loss's* postcolonial response to ideas

of the West versus the East. Therefore, when literary critics concentrate on the Biju's immigration of the diaspora novel, especially at the expense of the native Indian culture he emigrates from, they fail in understanding the complexities of the South Asian diaspora and the importance of the past on the present. While Biju's immigrant journey is an important half of the novel, this exclusive focus on the destination ignores both women and India in an Indian-English novel written by a woman, since it focuses only on the immersion in the Western and male aspects of the story. It neglects Sai's story and the half of the novel that takes place in India, which runs parallel to Biju's in exploring how the West impacts and affects Indians in a postcolonial era. While *The Inheritance of Loss* portrays a man's story of immigration and the American dream, it also contains important stories about women's lives in twentieth century India. Because Desai uses past generations to complicate Sai's relationship with the West and postcolonial India, it is crucial to unpack not only her story but also the story of her grandmother, Nimi, an informally educated woman in the early twentieth century. Nimi stands in contrast to the Western-educated Sai, but Nimi's informal education reflects women's education in colonial India just as Sai's formal education represents a shift in women's educational rights in the postcolonial era.

Literary critics of Desai's work often overlook the relationship between Sai and Nimi, which presents an important example of how rehistoricizing India's colonial past can unpack its postcolonial present. Although the two women never meet, Nimi having died long before Sai's birth, their united stories reflect the shift in women's rights in India throughout the twentieth century. Unlike Biju who decides to return to his Indian roots while isolated in India, Sai's question of "the inheritance of loss" stems back generations to Nimi's story, which also runs parallel to Sai's. I argue that the clearest way to examine her question comes from exploring the

education each character receives and the social consequences linked with it. The generational differences between Sai and Nimi, particularly emphasized through the shift in female education from colonial to postcolonial India, reflect the changing conditions for women in India. This change demonstrates the presence and role the West plays in the twentieth century India.

II. Historical Background

Although India did not become a British colony until the nineteenth century, England first arrived in India at the start of the seventeenth century. The East India Company, a British trade company, acquired sovereignty over large parts of India in the 1757 and ruled for approximately a century. In 1858, after the Sepoy Rebellion, the Company transferred its powers to the British Crown, which made India an official British colony. While the British Crown acknowledged that they would eventually have to give India sovereignty, the Crown assumed that it could be pushed off into an indefinite future. In the mid-nineteenth century their assumption seemed reasonable given that the British's presence in India dated back approximately two hundred and fifty years.

However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, India experienced a vast array of political and cultural changes, especially in relation to education, which led to Indian independence. As Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf explain in their book, *A Concise History of Modern India*, although less than one percent of India's population was English educated at the turn of the century, Western-educated Indians had an increasingly audible voice in Indian public life. Educated Indians sought governmental job positions, which were associated with wealth and power, so an English education was crucial in achieving a high social status. This requirement limited the public role non-Western-educated Indians had. At the Shimla

Education Conference in 1901, England declared an education policy for India in which the British would control and direct Indian education. Although this education was offered and organized by Westerners, it was not considered “Western” education in the same way education obtained by travelling to England was, and non-Western-educated Indians were less likely to receive government jobs. Furthermore, as Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi explain in *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste, and Class in India*, primary education was taught in local languages, but higher education was only available in English, which meant that higher education was “virtually banned to ordinary people” (Liddle & Joshi 119). This division emphasized England and placed it in a higher category than India, which created a divide between the non-educated and the educated as well as between the non-Western and Western-educated in India. It also ensured that the British could use education to create imitators rather than intellectuals who could create original ideas and thoughts. Imitators would emphasize the importance of Western-education over Indian education, which would allow Britain to maintain control over India.

By the 1920s, however, Britain realized that their hope of postponing Indian self-rule, or *swaraj* as it would later be characterized, was coming to an end. Despite the divide between the educated in India, both the Western and non-Western-educated Indians sought independence from the British. This time period saw the raise of Mahatma Gandhi, a Western-educated man critical of modernity and who redefined the term *swaraj* to mean a self-rule that more strongly emphasized the importance of the self. Finally, in 1947, India received independence from England. Yet, at this point in time, the Indians who held government positions were generally Western-educated, which prevented India from fully breaking away from Britain, even after it broke away from colonization.

The effects of British colonization also played a part in shaping the ideals of female domesticity at the turn of the twentieth century. Liddle and Joshi note that educational opportunities were available for women, but their education focused on skills more suited for the household. The goal of women's education differed from that of men's because women's education was generally seen as something they did until marriage, as education was "regarded as an asset in marriage," at which point they would turn their attention to the household (122). Their education meant that even when women received an education, men still dictated the public sphere and women were more likely to encompass a private, domestic sphere. However, many women did not take advantage of their educational opportunities, because the shift in Western dominated education for men caused Indians to fear losing their Indian culture and traditions. Thus, in lieu of a formal education, women were meant "to be upholders of their sacred religious traditions... they were conceived of as bulwarks protecting what was seen as the 'uncolonized' space of the home against an outside world dominated by colonial values" (Metcalf & Metcalf 146). Women embodied religious traditions in order to protect and maintain Indian culture, which meant that their families and husbands kept them in the household. Similarly, in "The Difference: Deferral of (A) Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal," Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that women's position in the household "came to be written into the techniques of the self that nationalism evolved, which looked on the domestic as an inseparable part of the national" (Chakrabarty, "The Difference" 7). Preserving Indian culture and religious tradition in the domestic was an act of nationalism in the midst of India becoming immersed in Western influence. The importance of women as the maintainers of the uncolonized space was especially prevalent among the elite classes, where men were more likely to interact with the colonized space and sought methods to preserve

religious traditions. Thus, the idea of women as a source of cultural identity was not sociological but rather an effect of and response to British colonization.

C. Chakrapani and S. Vijaya Kumar, in *Changing Status and Role of Women in Indian Society*, argue that education demonstrated the lower social position of women, because while men were expected to have a job and support their families, Indian gender roles placed women in a domestic setting. In the earlier parts of twentieth century India, a boy received a formal education so that he could obtain a job, whereas a girl learned skills she would need as a traditional wife. Ila Patel explains that female education served “essentially a means of strengthening traditional Indian culture and values,” values that were predominately patriarchal (Patel 158). Women’s education was strictly limited “and they were meant to be primarily in their homes and under their husbands’ control” (Metcalf & Metcalf 146). Thus, this idea of an education to become a good traditional wife allowed a woman’s husband to maintain a certain level of control over his wife and power in their marriage. In the early half of the twentieth century, in order to maintain “the ‘uncolonized’ space of the home,” a woman’s education was an informal one that focused on her role as a wife. This education ensured that her place would remain in the household rather than in the workforce. A wife, therefore, financially depended on her husband, because she would not have any means of supporting herself. Chakrapani and Kumar emphasize how a woman’s dependence on her husband reflected her position in Indian society when they explain that “family organization” is “the basic institution of [Indian] society” (Chakrapani & Kumar 15). Therefore, the lessons about position and status that a girl learned in her home, a private domestic setting, also taught her how to behave in the public, or rather how not to behave. Public behavior, such as education outside of the home, “risked violation of the sacred space of the household and the proper, sacrificial behavior of women” (Metcalf & Metcalf

148). Women, thus, were expected to behavior in respects to maintaining the household, which placed them in opposition to men who were emerged in “colonial space.”

Chakrapani and Kumar add that Indian joint families were “always dominated by male members,” and thus “women would play a subordinate role” in the household (Chakrapani & Kumar 20). Because women were always dominated by men in the households, women played a subordinate role in society as well. Indian patriarchy reinforced women’s position in society by establishing that her education ensured her position in the household, and that her position in the household was subservient to her husband, which reflected her lowered societal status. Furthermore, because her position in society was predominately reflected through her subordinate role as a wife, a woman’s relationship to her husband defined her. However, this positional relationship also reinforced the effects of British colonization in India, because the husbands, who were immersed in the colonized and thus western space, were societally placed above women, who reflected traditional and religious India in the household. The positional relationship between a man and woman, and between the westernized and traditional Indian, play an important role in Desai’s work, particularly in Nimi’s story.

III. Nimi and Early 20th Century India

The Inheritance of Loss weaves together several stories of characters: Biju, Sai, the cook, Jemubhai (“the judge”), Lola and Noni, and Gyan. Before the novel begins, the cook and Biju arrange to have Biju sent to America in hopes that he may raise his social status. Meanwhile, the cook, who remains nameless for the majority of the novel in order to stress the relationship between his social position and his occupation, resides with Sai and her grandfather, Jemubhai, in Kalimpong. Although she has an amicable relationship with the cook, Sai spends the majority

of the novel with either Lola and Noni, two middle-aged women who tutor Sai in literature while romanticizing British colonization, or Gyan, her mathematics tutor and boyfriend. Jemubhai acts as the link between the characters, housing his granddaughter and paying the salaries of the other characters, but rarely interacts with them. Instead, the majority of his story involves his thoughts and memories of his past.

Buried within Jemubhai Patel's stories, we meet Bela "Nimi" Patel, a sheltered and beautiful girl from a wealthy family who marries Jemubhai so his family may use her dowry to pay for his British education. In "Portrayal of Relations in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*," Anju Bala Agrawal describes Nimi as "a simple, illiterate girl born and brought up behind curtains," who "cannot stand on equal terms with her husband" (Agrawal 243). Unlike the other characters, Nimi dies before the novel begins, and her story emerges through Jemubhai's gradual flashbacks. Her father arranges her marriage to Jemubhai when she is only fourteen-years-old, but their relationship remains unconsummated for five years, because he leaves to study abroad. When he returns, their marriage takes an abusive turn; he attacks her verbally, physically, and sexually. These abusive behaviors are excused and even encouraged by characters in the novel because of Jemubhai's dominant position as Nimi's husband and educator. The flashbacks end when Jemubhai sends a pregnant Nimi away; they remain separated until her death. Desai portrays Nimi as a domestic character from the beginning, whose sheltered position aligns with early twentieth century Indian women's informal education and place in the private sphere. I argue the cultural education of Nimi Patel, Sai's grandmother, reflects female position and, thus, also reflects colonized India's position in the early twentieth century.

Although the novel does not directly date Nimi's story, it notes that Indian independence from Britain occurs in the midst of her marriage to Jemubhai, which places the flashbacks in the

first half of the twentieth century. In *The Hindu Woman*, Margaret Cormack explains that, at least during this time period, education in India focused on “‘education for life,’ not for literacy, and hence for girls it has consisted chiefly of training for marriage” (Cormack 51). Any important education a girl received was, therefore, informal and focused solely on her training as a traditional Indian wife, which would allow her to maintain the household. A formal education could introduce a girl to Western thought, drawing her out of the private sphere of the domestic and out into the public sphere of the “colonized” space, which threatened the preservation of Indian culture. Therefore, rather than focus on academic subjects as boys their age would, girls studied religious traditions as well as domestic skills in the household, such as cooking, sewing, and other daily chores. An informal education such as this limited what a girl knew outside of the household, so any opinions she learned about the public sphere would stem from the opinions of the men in the household. Her opinions about any space outside of the household were, thus, forced to match her husband’s, because she would know nothing else about it. Similarly, by incorporating British educated Indians into governmental positions, Britain ensured that India would depend on British thought and, once it became a free nation, the two would still be linked. Although England would not formally rule India, India, as educated by British thought, would still possess a colonized position because it would maintain and reflect liberal civility. Just as a wife depended on her husband for knowledge about the public sphere, India depended on British education to run its government. Furthermore, a formal education would postpone a girl’s marriage, which would give her time to see life outside of marriage. Therefore, girls married at a very young age. Cormack, in a series of interviews with Indian graduate students at Columbia University, found that interviewees emphasized how at this point in time girls “married at fifteen or sixteen [when they] don’t know anything else” (112). Prior to her marriage, she did not

receive any informal education about her role as a wife, because “it is tradition that she learn [it] from her husband” (117). Ideally, this form of female education ensured that a husband and wife would have a good marriage, according to a position that placed the husband’s position above the wife. A marriage formed under this model would supposedly last harmoniously through both of their lives, because this model of education emphasized the importance of imitation in order to maintain the status quo. It could only succeed if all parties were invested in maintaining the order and could fall apart if one party were to go against it.

Once a girl married she was expected to obey her husband. However, Hindu women in the early twentieth century, Cormack explains, were not specifically taught to obey their husbands because the cultural norms of India dictated that a woman should have the natural desire to serve her husband. And Hindu women, as maintainers of the “‘uncolonized’ space” and upholders of religious traditions, were expected to possess this natural desire. According to this cultural norm, a lesson on obedience did not play into female education in India, but rather served the basis from which it developed. Because society expected a woman to want to do as her husband told her, she could use what he said as a basis for how she should act. Similarly, India as the female and colonized nation would look to its colonizer for lessons in how to behave. Obedience from India could come from maintaining and reproducing British values and beliefs. However, in Desai’s novel, the tensions between Jemubhai and Nimi demonstrate that this system of education does not ensure a good marriage. Because Jemubhai receives his formal education in England and spends his formative years abroad, he does not return with the desire to have a traditional wife who maintains the Indian household. Instead, when he returns he attempts to “teach her” what he knows: how to behave in colonial space (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 186). Jemubhai’s years in England Westernize him into an Anglicized Indian, that is, an Indian

who converted from his Eastern norms and ideals to Western ones. His Westernization means that he and Nimi cannot harmoniously exist because the values and idea they have about the private sphere conflict, and his attempts to “educate” his wife on his ideals end in a failed marriage.

Desai presents Nimi Patel’s story through a series of flashbacks that come through Jemubhai’s thoughts and memories. These flashbacks imply that Nimi’s story is not a product of her life, but rather how Jemubhai perceives her. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak examines both British treatment of Indian women during the nineteenth century and male Indian treatment of Indian women in the twentieth century in order to determine if Indian women, as the subaltern, can speak. Ultimately, Spivak concludes not only that “the subaltern female cannot be heard or read,” but also that “the subaltern cannot speak” (Spivak 308). Spivak claims that women in India do not have a voice and, thus, they are controlled by those who can speak. Thus, without the ability to speak, Nimi’s story is defined by what her husband tells the readers about her. Her entire story stems from her relationship to him and she is forcibly linked to him, unable to escape. Nimi, even in death, reflects women’s subordinate position because she still reflects only her husband’s thoughts and opinions. Similarly, India’s position as a postcolonial country depended on its past colonization and relationship with England. A constant presence in India for three hundred and fifty years, Britain became integrated in India’s identity. Even Gandhi, as well as other key political figures in shaping Indian independence, whose methodology stemmed from turning inwards to Indian tradition and culture, were Western-educated. Although no longer a part of the British Empire, India cannot escape the influence of the West and will only ever be seen in relation to it.

Although the novel takes place in Kalimpong, Jemubhai's flashbacks occur in urban England and various parts of India, including Piphit, a small village in Gujarat, a North-West section of India, where Jemubhai and Nimi originate from. Anthropologist Barbara Diane Miller argues in "Wife Beating in India" that women in North India have the "lowest intrahousehold status in all of India" and that there is a "list of socially constructed disadvantages for a bride in the North" (205). These disadvantages made it harder for a woman to assert any sense of independence or rebel against her husband, which would have created a positionally unequal and imbalanced relationship. The only way a woman could elevate her position in the household, which was subordinate to her husband's position, was through her role as a wife. In Gujarat, the Northern part of India where Jemubhai and Nimi originate, it was even more impossible for a woman to escape her dependence on her husband. This impossibility meant that a woman could not escape her husband, no matter how violently or abusively treated her. Therefore, according to both positions in the household and female education, Jemubhai and Nimi's relationship serves as an example of a poor marriage, that is a non-harmonious and not lasting one, in North India, where women's opportunities were traditionally the most limited. Imbalance plays an important role in the development of Nimi's story, which aligns with Desai's desire to demonstrate different societal imbalances "and how that imbalance manifests itself in a personal sphere and a political sphere" ("Desai: If Only Bush Read Books!"). At a personal level, the imbalance manifests through Jemubhai's abusive "teachings." In the public sphere, the societal imbalance between Jemubhai, who reflects England, and Nimi, who reflects the religious traditions of India, also highlight the imbalances between the colonizer and the colonized, and how the imbalances are built into the system. Britain attempted to prevent India from changing its social position, gaining independence, by asserting its dominance through Western-education. In *Lineages of*

Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy, Partha Chatterjee explains that Rabindranath Tagore, an influential thinker in Indian independence, argued against the idea of India as a nation because a “nation” was a European idea based on Western history and culture (Chatterjee 105). Tagore, similar to Gandhi, believed that India needed to break away from British models and look to its own past and culture to develop a model of independence based on Indian history and culture. However, because the British controlled education in India, the education produced intellectuals who would imitate Western ideas such as that of a nation. Thus, just as women in North India had “socially constructed disadvantages” that maintain the imbalance in their relationship with men and prevent them from leaving, education in colonial India reflected a socially constructed disadvantage that preserved a cultural imbalance and inhibited India from breaking away from Britain.

The lessons Jemubhai learns in England influence how he educates his wife and how the societal imbalances are maintained. While abroad, the British treat him as a second-rate human by ignoring him, refusing to sit beside him, and even mocking the way he smells (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 45). Not only does Jemubhai receive a formal education abroad, but he also “learns” the inferior status of an Indian as the colonized in comparison to an Englishman as the colonizer. He comes to find “his own skin odd-colored” to the point where “he could barely let any of himself peep out of his clothes for fear of giving offense” (45). His time abroad conditions him to associate tan skin, and thus all Indians, with an offensive sight, which “teaches” him the societal imbalance between the English and Indians. He believes this sight must be hidden and controlled by an outside force, which, in this case, is the Western clothing he wore. This lesson demonstrates how Jemubhai learns that Indians should never be seen directly, and must live under Western influence, because it is the only way to control the “offense.” The novel never

indicates that he attempts to hide his offense with anything other than Western clothing, although Indian clothing would cover him equally well. His clothing choice underlines how he does not think to find an alternative because his education teaches him to imitate the English. Jemubhai's "lessons" in England bias him against Indians because he learns that the British are socially above Indians. This informal education drives not only his view of himself but also of other Indians, which, in turn, effects how he treats and educates his wife, because he can only teach her what he has learned.

In Nimi's story, we first see the question of female obedience when she steals Jemubhai's powder puff, a beloved object he brings home from England. The novel emphasizes the powder puff's strict association with Britain because "there was no Gujarati word for this invention" (184). The powder puff, which lightens the skin with white and pink powder, acts as another way for Jemubhai to hide his offensively tan skin by imitating the West. Given that the readers know his education demands he control his Indian skin through Western coverings, we can understand why he would care about the powder puff. However, the lack of a Gujarati word for the object indicates that Jemubhai's non-educated Indian relatives, including Nimi, would not understand the importance he places on powdering his skin. Desai uses the powder puff as an example of how Western-education creates a divide among Indians that reinforces the position of the colonizer in the East. Therefore, because she does not share Jemubhai's English skin-related education, Nimi's disobedience violates her position as a wife more than she knows. As a preserver of the "uncolonized" space, she has no way of knowing about the importance of light skin in the colonized sphere.

Despite her lack of education on the colonized space, Nimi still knowingly disobeys her husband when she steals the beloved object. At the moment of the crime, she refers to it as

“childish thieving,” which she, as a married woman, is too old for, but does because “she was filled with greed” (182). She acts in a way that disobeys her husband’s desires because she places her needs above his, disrupting the harmony of their relationship. Nimi cannot learn from her husband because she focuses on herself rather than her husband, which means she shifts away from maintaining the established status quo. However, she can only make this shift after Jemubhai shifts the status quo by incorporating the powder puff, the colonized space, into the household, the uncolonized space. She breaks the status quo and steals the object precisely because he brings it into the household. Furthermore, although “filled with greed,” Nimi should have no greed for the powder puff, an object so foreign to her that she does not even have a name for it. She is the only member of the household other than Jemubhai to find any interest in the object, which indicates that her interest in the powder puff stems from *his* interest in it. She desires his desire, not the powder puff. Lay psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar explores this idea of female desire in Indian marriages in *Intimate Relationships: Exploring Indian Sexuality*. Kakar draws from both actual and fictional Indian women’s stories to examine the theme of “the woman’s wish to be valued by the husband as a woman and a wife,” and ultimately concludes that “the intense wish to create a two-person universe with the husband where each finally ‘recognizes’ the other, is never far from her consciousness” (Kakar 11, 22). The Indian wife desired a harmonious relationship with her husband, in which he recognized her as his wife and desired her. Nimi reflects this desire when she steals “that puff, so foreign” that only Jemubhai understands its importance. Yet, because it is important to him, Nimi takes it in the hopes that using the British object will make Jemubhai recognize her as his wife.

Because of the idea of wifely obedience, neither Jemubhai nor any of his relatives suspect Nimi of stealing the object. Only after no one else can tell him where the powder puff is,

he “finally accused Nimi” (184). Desai’s use of “finally” here highlights how Jemubhai questions her as a last resort, which emphasizes how he does not expect her to have taken it, because the theft would have been an act of disobedience and a violation of her role as his wife. Her desire threatens the structure of the household, and thus her position as a subservient female in society. By making this choice, Nimi acts against the rules of the patriarchal Indian society even if she does not understand the significance of her theft. Although his desire to whiten his offensive skin stems from a Western-Eastern cultural misunderstanding, in which the colonized space enters the uncolonized space, both Jemubhai and Nimi acknowledge her wifely disobedience as a crime. Therefore, Jemubhai, as her husband, must step in to teach her obedience, and put her back in her place. Cormack argues that the basic concept of wifely obedience, which Nimi lacks, stems from Hindu writings that “indicate the social necessity of wifely obedience and some sanction of physical punishment as enforcement” (Cormack 133). Thus, if a woman did not obey her husband, she could not learn from him, and therefore a husband enforced his authority, or taught his wife to obey him, through physical punishment. The first scene in the novel where Jemubhai uses physical punishment to teach Nimi obedience comes when she refuses to consummate their marriage. An aunt locks their bedroom door shut one night and orders Jemubhai to “break the bed,” because “that girl has too much spirit” (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 185). By “breaking the bed,” he teaches her to obey him and demonstrates that she cannot be so free-spirited, cannot make decisions based on her own desires, because that is not how obedient wives behave. Jemubhai acts to restore the status quo, placing his position back above hers.

The novel emphasizes the importance of wifely obedience through the aunt who pressures Jemubhai to teach Nimi her lesson. Desai only refers to this character as “an aunt,”

and, without a name, she lacks an individual identity. This lack of identity exemplifies the cultural expectations of the wife precisely because it does not matter who the aunt is, only that she, as a member of the household, pressures Jemubhai to consummate the marriage. The novel creates vagueness to emphasize the cultural expectations of a marriage, because the aunt's pressure demonstrates that not only does the husband expect his wife to obey him but also the entire family. Interestingly, the aunt pressures Jemubhai, not Nimi. Desai does not include a single instance that indicates anyone in the household pressures Nimi to obey her husband and consummate the marriage. Instead, the aunt speaks directly to Jemubhai and pressures *him* to force Nimi to obey him. The family expects the husband to educate his wife on how to behave, and no one else. Chakrapani and Kumar argue that the family reflects the larger society: the familial expectation represents a societal expectation and roles of not only a husband and a wife, but a man and a woman. Nimi's education comes from the lessons her husband teaches her in a domestic setting, such as their bedroom, while his education derives from the social expectations placed on him from the external world. These expectations reinforce the gender roles placed on husbands and wives, which helps maintain the imbalanced positional relationship in the household. Nimi, a representation of subordinate and sheltered India, receives lessons from Jemubhai, a representation of India, based on his experiences, but she never has the opportunity to become incorporated into the world of his experiences. Correspondingly, British colonization emphasized that Indians needed a Western-education, but refused to treat Indians as Westernizers, which maintains the inequalities between the two parties.

As Jemubhai continues to use physical punishment to teach his wife how to behave by forcing himself on her, his self-hatred grows. This hatred then becomes forced onto Nimi, who as a wife must be a reflection of him, because her status in society is based on her relationship with

her husband. Jemubhai enforces this reflection when he resolves to “teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself. In public, he never spoke to her or looked in her direction” (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 186). His neglect, however, reflects what he learned from the English. He displaces the same lessons the British taught him about Indian inferiority onto Nimi, but categorizes himself as the superior white man and her as the second-rate Indian. A lack of cultural understanding, driven by Jemubhai’s time in the Western world, interferes with Nimi’s informal education and her position as his good wife.

Western-Eastern cultural conflicts, which impacted women’s roles as upholders of religious traditions, influence Jemubhai’s lessons, which teach Nimi to hate not only herself as he does, but also to be a wife who is neither seen nor heard. He emphasizes that her role in the house should not only be subservient to him, but also in public. He teaches her that she, as his wife, and thus as an Indian woman, is subordinate to him, a Western-educated man. Jemubhai attempts to teach Nimi that women not only have a lower status than men but also that Indians are beneath their Western colonizers. And because Jemubhai does not speak or look at her, Nimi learns to be a silent figure. She takes his lesson and applies it to every day of their lives together: when her husband begins questioning her English, she does not answer him. Jemubhai assumes that she “learned no English... out of stubbornness” and that she refuses to respond to him out of spite (187). Yet Desai implies that Nimi remains silent not as an act of spite but as one of obedience, because Nimi reflects the silence her husband taught her by never speaking to her in public. However, because she also refuses to speak when spoken to, she disobeys her husband and disrupts the established status quo. Desai attacks the idea of a husband informally educating his wife, because if there was a problem with the husband, there would be a problem with the wife. As a wife in India, Nimi depends on her husband’s education, which does not work in her

favor when her husband forces her to reproduce what he hates, a hatred that derives from his Western-education. Jemubhai fails in properly teaching Nimi how to be a good wife because he teaches her how to be someone he learned to hate: himself. As Tagore argued, India could not exist solely by imitating the West because the ideas and values of the West reflected European history and culture, which India does not share. The more India copied British thought, the more India would fail to find lasting harmony. Consequently, the more Jemubhai teaches Nimi based on his British education, the more likely she is to fail.

However, Miss Enid Pott, a British companion Jemubhai hires to teach Nimi English, sees Nimi as the failure:

Nimi seems to have made up her mind not to learn. You have a *swaraji* right under your nose, Mr. Patel. She will not argue—the way one might respond and have a dialogue—she just goes limp. (189)

Miss Enid Pott accuses Nimi of not accepting her education, an education that involves her speaking and arguing with others. The readers, of course, know that Nimi has learned what her husband taught her. Nimi acts based on Jemubhai's lessons, lessons that taught her to be neither seen nor heard because she is Indian. She remains silent not as an act of disobedience, but rather a sign that he has taught her obedience. If Nimi were to argue as Miss Enid Pott wants her to, she would not only not be silent, she would display signs of spirit. Nimi's first physical lesson from Jemubhai, however, taught her that she cannot have spirit, because that is the sign of a disobedient wife, and a disobedient wife threatens the structure of India. Jemubhai's attempts to teach Nimi English fail because these lessons directly contradict the ones he has already taught her. Jemubhai become angry at her for doing the very thing he taught her to do: to imitate him, remain silent, not be seen, be invisible and neglected. Through Miss Enid Pott's comment, Desai

reflects how Jemubhai failed in educating Nimi precisely because Nimi does exactly what her husband taught her to do: she remains silent, a silence that becomes a measure of her passivity, which reflects *satyagraha*, Gandhi's movement of non-violence in twentieth century India, a key aspect of *swaraj*.

Miss Enid Pott refers to Nimi as a *swaraji*, a person who participates in *swaraj*, a word that translates to "self-rule." On the one hand, this label implies that Nimi serves herself rather than her husband, which means she fails to properly obey her husband. Calling Nimi a *swaraji* can mean that she places emphasis on herself and her desires above those of her husband and society, disrupting and challenging the social imbalances. Miss Enid Pott not only accuses Nimi of failing in her wifely education, but also she accuses her of choosing to break away from her imbalanced position in the household. However, on the other hand, *swaraj* generally refers to Mahatma Gandhi's method of achieving Indian independence from England. Although British educated, Gandhi turned inwards to Indian culture and Hinduism to develop methods to break free from British rule, because he believed "religion must rule our worldly pursuits" (qtd. in Mehta 257). He emphasized the importance of developing independence by drawing from India's past because to gain independence on Britain's terms would be to make "India English, and, when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englistan" (Gandhi 26). Gandhi argued against following British models of government, which were tied to Western-education, and sought an alternative model of independence. Mehta, in "Gandhi on Democracy, Politics and the Ethics of Everyday Life," argues that Gandhi noticed the link between politics and violence, and rather than playing into that connection, he focused on non-violence, a passive move for which there is no response (Mehta 357). Mehta further quotes Gandhi in saying that "swaraj [self-rule] has to be experienced by each one for himself" and that anyone "can be

independent as soon *as he [or she] wills it*" (359). By focusing on the self, Gandhi proposed a method of independence that left the British unable to respond and, thus provided India with some sort of freedom from British control. When an individual focuses on his or herself, an outsider's response does not matter because the individual looks past the outsider, which eliminates the outsider's power. Nimi's limpness then portrays her not as a failure, but as India breaking away from Britain's lessons. Nimi refuses Jemubhai's lessons because she cannot pass them: "the quieter she was, the louder he shouted, and if she protested, it was worse. She soon realized that whatever she did or didn't do, the outcome was much the same" (355). Nimi cannot learn anything from Jemubhai's physical punishments because he does not allow for her to have a right answer for her to choose. She cannot learn to be an obedient wife, because Jemubhai does not want to see her as one. Nimi cannot choose a response that satisfies Jemubhai because he does not have a response; he only wants to punish her for failing. Thus, she chooses nothing, a non-violent move that provides her with her own *swaraj*. By associating Nimi with *swaraj*, and thus India, Desai once again associates Jemubhai with the British colonizer. Here Desai comments on Britain's treatment of India as a "limp" country, one that paternalist England says cannot take care of itself. However, the limpness only comes as a result of the British reign and treatment of India. Nimi, and therefore India, does not go limp until she receives her lessons from Jemubhai, the British representative. Just as Nimi's failure stems from Jemubhai's failed teachings, India's "limpness" responds to England's colonization. This "failure" highlights gendered imbalances because passivity is the only way that Nimi can respond to Jemubhai's violence.

Desai further emphasizes the gendered imbalance in early twentieth-century India because when Jemubhai responds violently, Nimi cannot change her husband's decision to beat

her. Desai demonstrates the futility of this educational system, in which husbands teach wives just as the British teach Indians, once it has become corrupt, because Nimi cannot learn and must suffer the consequences for her husband's hatred. Miller explains that a beaten woman in India only has two options: "Getting her husband to stop beating her or else leaving him" (Miller 210). However, a woman's position in the household, and thus in society, depended on her relationship with her husband. Therefore, the two options Miller presents are not plausible, because a woman had little luck getting her husband to stop if he believed himself justified in his actions and she could not leave because she had no solid identity outside of her husband. In alignment with Miller's argument, Nimi does not have either opportunity. We have already seen that no matter how much she obeys her husband, she fails every lesson and he continues to beat her. She cannot convince him to stop, because, as a Western-educated man, he sees himself as superior to Indians and "educate" her as he sees fit. The second option does not work either, because if she leaves, it will bring shame to her family. However, Jemubhai does not leave Nimi with either option, and instead he chooses to send her away, telling her, "If I don't send you back... I will kill you. And I don't want to be blamed for such a crime" (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 336). Desai creates a situation where a woman chooses an abusive relationship and then immediately takes that choice away from her, which reflects the idea that a woman is dominated by men in this society. Furthermore, Jemubhai places the importance on his criminal record rather than her safety, placing the emphasis on himself. Through Nimi's banishment, Desai reflects Spivak's argument about how subaltern women lack a voice outside of those in power, which highlights how easily a woman's agency can be stripped away, further emphasizing the societal imbalance. Jemubhai thinks only of himself and in doing so, eliminates the only two options Nimi had, and returns his

pregnant wife to her family's home. This breaks her relationship with her husband, and thus threatens her place in society, because she has no worth outside of her marriage.

Jemubhai's flashbacks end shortly after her departure, reminding the reader that Nimi, as the subaltern woman, cannot speak for herself and relies on Jemubhai's voice to represent her story. Years later, Jemubhai realizes that, even when he sent her away, he killed his wife, because "her life could only be useless after that" (339). Without a formal education or preparation for living in the colonized space, Nimi could not obtain a job that would allow her to support herself, much less her child. If work had been an option for her, she would not have been dependent on Jemubhai and could have left him of her own free will. Instead, Desai portrays Nimi as a woman who is a part of a culture that only allows her the opportunity to be an obedient wife to Jemubhai. The structure of their relationship remains imbalanced so Nimi must depend on Jemubhai. Desai critiques this education through Nimi's "failure" that stems not from her ability to learn, but from his desire to prevent her passing. Through *The Inheritance of Loss* Kiran Desai demonstrates how this early twentieth century system of female education creates an imbalance that Nimi can never escape. Correspondingly, when Britain granted India independence, India lacked the educational development necessary to allow it to develop its own governmental model, forcing it to imitate the Western idea of a nation. In *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective*, Ayesha Jalal summarizes Ashis Nandy's argument that "unlike in Western societies politics in India never made the transition from the private to the public domain," which "laid the basis for corruption, cynicism and dishonesty in post-independence Indian politics" (Jalal 30). India did not make the transition because the public domain represented the colonizer's world, which India never fully integrated into because it was not a Western nation. India's private domain, its cultural and

religious traditions, was the location both Tagore and Gandhi emphasized when they sought independence. Both Indian thinkers argued that India needed to turn inwards in order to find its own model rather than imitating British ideas of the nation. However, Indians lacked the education to develop such a model because Indians were only educated in Western ideas. Thus, when Britain granted India its independence, India copied the British model of sovereignty and fell to corruption because the Western model did not suit India. Just as Nimi fails as a wife when Jemubhai sends her away, India failed as a nation when Britain granted it independence.

In “Domestic Cruelty and the Birth of the Subject,” in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that one must possess both reason and sympathy in order to see and acknowledge suffering. He defines reason as “education in rational argumentation,” which Europeans believed Indian men did not possess in the nineteenth century (Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* 120). Western-educated Jemubhai reflects the reasoned Indian that came as a result of British colonization in the twentieth century. Yet when Desai was asked about the tragic end to Jemubhai and Nimi’s relationship she comments, “There was a moment of hope in his marriage... but that hope of love is destroyed by what he is transformed into by his experience of the world” (“Kiran Desai - The Inheritance of Loss”). This transformation in relation to his marriage is crucial in creating the tensions between the West and the East, because he only remembers liking his wife before he became a supposedly reason man. Before he left for England, Jemubhai and Nimi possessed a harmonious relationship because they were better able to understand their positions and each other without Western influences. His time and experience of Indophobic attitudes in England leads to the loss of his sympathy for anything Indian. As Jemubhai gains his “reason,” he loses his sympathy. This loss, which the characters blame on Nimi, makes him “a cruel man” (96). Of

course she does not cause the loss, but rather his time abroad, which conditions him to hate everything Indian, does. Nimi, however, suffers physically, mentally, and reputationally as a result of it. Desai demonstrates how the British colonizers' claim that Indian men needed to learn reason in order to understand Indian women's suffering actually causes women more suffering.

The gain of reason does not mean the maintenance of sympathy, and can, in fact, mean the loss of it, as demonstrated by Jemubhai's experiences of the world. Reason does not act as the necessary factor in understanding suffering, and Desai demonstrates how sympathy plays a more important role. Jemubhai only acknowledges his part in Nimi's death and regains some of his sympathy after Anglicized Sai, whose education I will examine in the following section, moves in with him. However, he limits this sympathy to her, referring to her as "this granddaughter whom he didn't hate," and remains unsympathetic to the other Indian characters (230). He only feels sympathetic towards Sai, a reasoned and Anglicized Indian, because he sees himself in her, albeit a version of himself he does not hate. Even when it allows him to feel sympathy, reason limits Jemubhai's sympathy and prevents him from seeing how non-Anglicized Indians suffer. His sympathy for Sai, moreover, only runs so far as not hate, and he never acknowledges any strong positive feelings for her, which stands in stark contrast to the young Jemubhai who liked Nimi, who had hope for love, before he obtained his reason. Therefore, the education the British gave to the colonized Indians prevented men from seeing women's suffering in India. Without his sympathy, Jemubhai cannot properly give Nimi the informal education she needs. Nimi fails her lessons because Jemubhai fails properly to teach her, but he fails properly to teach her because his British education fails him first. By focusing on female education, Desai demonstrates how colonization creates an imbalanced relationship between husbands and wives, men and women, colonizers and colonized.

IV. Sai and Late 20th Century India

In a 2009 interview, when asked about the different generations in the novel, Desai remarked, “I could only see my own journey in context of earlier journeys” (Kiran Desai, “Booker Prize Winning Author”). An individual’s journey can mean a physical excursion from one place to another, as Biju does in the novel, but it can also serve as a metaphorical voyage from one understanding of life to another, as Sai experiences. Desai, however, stresses not only the journey but also the context from which the journey emerges. Just as an inheritance implies both a receiver and a passer, an individual’s journey depends on the stories of his or her ancestors because unpacking the past is crucial to understanding the present. Thus, Nimi’s story sets up the basis from which Sai’s story emerges. Only now that I have rehistoricized the story of the previous generation, one that represents the direct conflict between the colonizers and the colonized, can I examine Sai’s story and her question of “the inheritance of loss.”

In contrast to Nimi, who plays a small role in the novel and whose appearances are limited to Jemubhai’s flashbacks, large portions of the novel center on Sai’s story. Sai’s story portrays a sixteen-year-old girl who receives a formal Western-education in Kalimpong, India. The novel also includes two of her tutors: Noni, a woman who lives with her widowed sister, and Gyan, a Nepali boy who also becomes Sai’s boyfriend. However, the novel makes it clear that Sai, even at her age, surpasses both tutors: Gyan comes to tutor Sai only after Noni can no longer teach her mathematics and science, and Sai only pretends to learn from him so that he may keep his job. Gyan and Sai’s relationship, however, falls apart as the novel progresses because of their different social statuses, which comes to light through her education and Anglicization. Ultimately, Gyan attempts to win Sai back, but her story ends with her realizing the opportunities

she has as a result of her societal position and her education, and with her resolve to leave Kalimpong, the small village Gyan will likely be trapped in for the remainder of his life.

We meet Sai as she sits on the veranda “reading an article about a giant squid in an old *National Geographic*” to pass the time (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 1). This introduction of Sai reveals her position in both the public and the private sphere, because she incorporates an English magazine into an Indian domestic location. Although Desai presents Sai as an educated and intelligent character, as demonstrated by her choice of reading material, Sai does not strictly fall into a Western or Eastern category. Nimi, on the other hand, is introduced as her father’s “most beautiful daughter” and who “would be the wife of one of the most powerful men in India” (100). The novel introduces Nimi, in the early twentieth century, as a woman defined in relation to the men in her life, a figure who resides solely in the private sphere, marking her as distinctly Eastern. Although Sai’s English magazine may demonstrate a colonized sphere, she conflates that sphere with her domestic location. Unlike Nimi whose story begins in a well-defined position and place, Sai begins in a more tenuous position, which demonstrates a shift from colonial to postcolonial positions in India. Furthermore, Sai appears as the first character in *The Inheritance of Loss*, which invites the reader automatically to associate the novel, or at least the half of the novel that takes place in India, with her. Just as Nimi reflected female position, and thus the position of colonial India in the early twentieth century, I argue that Sai’s formal education in the latter half of the twentieth century represents the potential shift in female position and thus the position of postcolonial India.

With the exception of distant flashbacks, Desai’s novel takes place over a single year, 1986. Thus, the novel provides little information on how Sai came to be so educated, and what little the readers do learn is vague and brushed over. The importance then, as I will come to

argue, is not *how* the shift from in women's education occurs but *that* it does. This shift allows Sai – who, as the granddaughter of Jemubhai “the judge” Patel, is a member of an elite class – to maintain her strong social position. Akhil Gupta in *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty* examines Levi-Strauss's analysis of written language and argues that

Writing may not explain why social inequalities exist or come to be established in the first place, but it does facilitate or enable the reproduction of those inequalities... Progress in the modern scientific sense, Levi-Strauss maintained, is possible only with the accumulation of knowledge, which requires writing. (Gupta 193-194)

Literacy then becomes a tool in maintaining an already present social inequality rather than creating it. It functions not as a *how* it happened but rather a *that* it happened. In order for an individual to “progress,” which would allow for a change in social status that would equate social imbalances, he or she needs to be literate enough to learn. Literacy thus serves as a prerequisite to more literacy, and education, as we have already seen, plays an important role in social class in twentieth century India because it allows for social mobility. Social mobility, as the result of education, opens opportunities in the public sphere that would allow for better paying jobs, which in turn would help take care of the private spheres. Jemubhai, as a Western-educated Indian in the early twentieth century, obtains a government job, which places him at a higher social position than many of his contemporaries. His job affords him the ability to financially support his family in colonial India and pay for Sai's private education in postcolonial India, which in turn will provide her with similar opportunities. However, in order for Jemubhai to receive a formal education in England, he needed an initial education and a strong background in English, which was not available to the vast majority of Indians in colonial India. His social

mobility stems from obtaining a Western-education, which stems from a background in Western-education that comes from a higher social position. Consequently, Sai's education stems from Jemubhai's position and education.

In this paper I will synonymously refer to literacy as formal education, which stands in contrast to the informal education Nimi was "taught" by Jemubhai. Sai's literacy allows her to develop skills that other contemporary illiterate characters, such as Biju or the cook, are denied. Her formal education not only prevents her from falling to a lower social status, as Biju does when he immigrates to America, but also presents her as someone in a higher social position than many of the other characters in the novel. For example, although she and the cook are often amicable, when he attempts to tell her how certain ethnic groups are more intelligent than others due to their historical diets, Sai dismisses his comments as "silly" or "stupid" (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 81, 82). Although he attempts to explain his conclusions as scientifically as he can, he bases his information on the idea that "everyone knows" it rather than any sort of scientific knowledge (82). Even if his argument is true, although the tone of the novel implies it is not, his argument lacks enough credibility for Sai to accept it because he cannot prove it. However, he cannot prove it because he does not possess the basic knowledge necessary to research his argument and present it in a manner Sai would not reduce to "silly" or "stupid." Thus, the very factor that creates a social inequality between Sai and the cook also keeps that inequality intact. Sai, reducing the cook's argument to degrading terms, presents herself as superior to the cook because he lacks the ability to reach her position, despite their age difference. While Sai continues to study, which will allow her to gain a higher level of superiority over the cook, the cook continues to work for her grandfather, and thus to an extent her as well, because he has neither skills beyond preparing meals nor the access to additional

skills the way Sai does. Her education reaffirms a social inequality between her and the cook, placing her in a social status superior to an Indian male in an older age grade. Unlike with Nimi, whose social inequality came from her place as maintainer of the Indian household, Sai is not limited to the uncolonized space and acquires a formal education, which demonstrates the shift between generations. Sai's high social status can only be fully understood in comparison to Nimi's lower social status. Nimi's social position was bound by her status in the household, which locked her in a domestic position, unable to integrate into the public sphere even if she wanted to. Sai, by contrast moves freely between the public sphere and the domestic, less bound to the household than the cook, whose name and thus identity in the novel, is even reduced to his domestic occupation.

Social inequality is not limited to the age difference, which may allow Sai, as the younger of the two characters, social mobility that the cook cannot have. The novel demonstrates that Sai's formal education creates a social gap between her and other illiterate characters in her generation as well. Desai best presents this through Biju, the cook's son, who struggles to find a job in America without any legal paperwork and a limited amount of English. Biju serves as a contrast to Sai because the novel alternates between each of their experiences. While Sai constantly sees herself as a character superior to those around her, Biju finds himself at his lowest social worth in the novel. Although Biju travels across the globe in hopes of fulfilling the American dream, he does not gain a higher social position, and becomes miserable in the foreign land. His story resonates with Jemubhai's, except, unlike the latter, Biju lacks the privileged education that would allow him to succeed abroad. Jemubhai legally travels and consistently studies in England for years, while Biju remains in America illegally and shifts from job to job. Sai, on the other hand, realizes her social power as almost every character she interacts with

works for her grandfather and, by extent, her as well. Like Jemubhai, she comes from a background that allows her the privilege of studying and gaining more knowledge, which creates a larger gap between her and the characters that surround her. Female education shifts to demonstrate the educational opportunities elite females have over uneducated Indian men.

Yet Gupta argues that having a formal education is not the key to closing all social inequalities in modern South Asia. He writes that “the attainment of literacy by the poor does not have the magical effect of empowering them” (Gupta 198). Education, therefore, acts as a method to maintain social inequalities, not resolve them. Literacy acts as a tool to help social mobility, but only in combination with other tools, such as an already well-established social position. In 1986, Kalimpong possessed some of the top schools in West Bengal yet no other character, except perhaps Jemubhai, compares to sixteen-year-old Sai. The closest is Gyan, a poor Nepali boy who excels at school, yet he demonstrates Gupta’s point in Desai’s novel. When the novel reports his first physical appearance – as opposed to the mentions of him earlier in the story, which I will examine later – it prefaces his entrance by describing him as “a promising student who had finished his bachelor’s degree, but hadn’t yet been able to find a job” (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 79). Gyan, to an extent, also mirrors Jemubhai as a character who uses education as an attempt to transcend his social position. However, unlike Jemubhai who can afford to travel to England to study, Gyan’s education comes solely from an Indian government school, the very place Jemubhai refused to send Sai because he feared she would “come out speaking with the wrong accent and picking [her] nose” (38). Thus, the novel again presents Indian education in contrast to Western-education, with Western-educated characters still looking down on Indian educated characters. Despite the shift in female education from colonial to postcolonial India, the novel implies that most Indians still place a Western-education at a

higher value than an Indian one, because while Jemubhai immediately finds a job upon returning from England, Gyan settles for a tutoring position because he cannot find work. Furthermore, Gyan's position as Sai's educator does not necessarily mark him as the more educated character. Sai tells the cook that Gyan "isn't very intelligent. The more we study, the less he seems to know...I can tell," which demonstrates how, despite having completed his bachelor's degree in India, Gyan's knowledge does not surpass that of a sixteen year old Western-educated girl (193). The emphasis on Western-education in comparison to Indian education demonstrates how postcolonial India still lives in the shadow of its colonizers, and how there is not necessarily a clear cut break from being a colony to being an independent nation. Although Sai possesses the formal education Nimi never had the opportunity for, which presents a change in female education, both characters are still controlled by Western ideas of education. While Nimi is defined by her lack of a formal education, Sai's formal education defines her and her position for other characters in the novel.

The position of Sai as the more educated character depends on how India defines educated. Gyan, as an Indian educated student, speaks English among other native languages, which complicated the issue of his intelligence in comparison to Sai's. Although he is at a lower class position than Sai, he reads, writes, speaks, and understands more languages than Sai. Yet Gupta explains that in a country as multi-ethnic as India, *literacy* is not as simple as literate or illiterate. One, Gupta argues, must "ask how speaking, reading, and writing functions are distributed across languages. Literacy, then, conveys not just the ability to read and write but also the differential ability to read and write a *particular* language" (Gupta 197, emphasis added). If we examine the education of the elite characters and take their opinions to be the superior ones due to their class access, formal education and literacy as presented in my argument becomes

synonymous with formal *Western*-education and not any sort of formal education, such as the Indian governmental schools open to Gyan. Unlike Gyan, Sai only fluently speaks one language, English, which he thinks “marked her status” (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* 194). Both Gyan and Jemubhai speak native Indian languages, which includes Hindi, while Sai can only manage to speak “pidgin Hindi” despite living in India for the majority of her life (193). However, the text continuously acknowledges that Sai will be the character to escape Kalimpong, which neither Gyan nor Jemubhai ever fully could. Jemubhai, as I have demonstrated in the previous section, lives torn between England and India. Although he represents the colonized space and the colonizer to Nimi’s colonized, he, as an Indian, never fully belongs to either country. Racial prejudices keep him from integrating into either England or India, and he is unable to find the place best suited for him, likely because no place exists. We should not, however, conflate his cultural divide with Sai’s, because while Desai presents Sai as oblivious to her blurring of Western-Eastern cultures, Jemubhai obsesses over it and calls other characters’ attention to his lack of belonging. Jemubhai lives in the colonial world, with more defined boundaries between the West and the East, while Sai lives in postcolonial India, where the distinct lines blur together. Gyan, on the other hand, demonstrates no desire to leave India and criticizes Sai for “running after the West” instead of embracing her Indian country and culture (179). However, Gyan, as a Nepali-Indian in West Bengal also does not find a place in Kalimpong and joins GNLF, a violent group advocating for a separate Nepali state. Joining this group demonstrates that, despite his fluency in English and education based off of the West, he wishes to create a new India without Western influences. It also demonstrates that despite his Indian pride, he still does not feel as if he belongs in the place where he resides: postcolonial India, which reflects the India influenced by the West. Historically, the Nepali rebellion does not succeed and so he, like Jemubhai, is

caught between cultures. Sai, however, leans furthest West out of all the characters in the novel, because her literacy dominantly comes from English. Here she also stands in contrast to Nimi, who spoke no English but was forced to live among English educated Indians because of her marriage to Jemubhai. Sai's identity, unlike other characters, is the least culturally conflicted, despite being so Westernized in her little Indian village.

Yet Sai does not see herself as the furthest West leaning character. Unlike other characters in the novel, she does not differentiate between ideas of the East and the West, which is partially due to her lack of exposure to non-Western-educated Indians. Although she shifts back and forth from the public and the private spheres, she spends the majority of her time at either her home or the homes of other educated Indians. The few times the readers see Sai venture into the public sphere – for example, to see a Bollywood film or visit a temple – are in Gyan's story when he angrily reflects on her Westernization, noting that Sai views these ventures as exhausting excursions rather than normal activities. Here Sai mirrors Nimi and the position of colonial female education because, despite Sai's ability to cross between the private and public sphere, she predominately remains in the private sphere. Nimi's position as the wife in the household served as a nationalist response to colonization, while Sai as a student brings the Western-education into the household. Thus, the shift in female education also demonstrates a shift in Western-Eastern tensions because the private sphere hosts Western influences while the public sphere hosts Eastern culture. Although Sai's role in society is not linked to maintaining the household as Nimi's was, Sai's position reflects Nimi's because she maintains the influences of British colonization in the domestic. Thus, the "uncolonized" space becomes the colonized space. For Jemubhai, Sai then succeeds where Nimi failed because she incorporates the West

into the domestic, making his home Anglicized in comparison to the un-Anglicized India he lives in.

Earlier I demonstrated how Jemubhai only feels compassion for Sai because she, like him, represents an Anglicized Indian. However, he not only sees himself in her, he believes that “the journey he had started so long ago had continued in his descendants” (230). Sai’s journey should be seen in relation to the journeys before hers, which includes not only Nimi, as a female in twentieth century India, but also Jemubhai, a Western-educated in twentieth century Indian. Sai’s journey as a continuation of Jemubhai’s reflects a fundamental change in women’s rights in the twentieth century because it demonstrates how Sai will be able to transcend the cultural boundaries both Nimi and Jemubhai were burdened by in colonial India. Sai, unlike her grandparents in previous generations, can cross from India to a Western world. Desai further highlights this transcendence at the end of the novel when she reflects on her life in Kalimpong: “She thought of all the *National Geographics*... Of the judge’s [Jemubhai’s] journey... If the globe twirling on its axis. / And she felt a glimmer of strength. Of resolve. She must leave” (356). Her thoughts preceding her moment of decision greatly contribute to her ability to actually leave. The *National Geographics*, which opened her story and the novel defines her as a character of an elite class. Her education maintains her class and her class allows her the opportunity to be educated, because, as demonstrated through Gyan, a formal education is not enough to allow a person to achieve his or her goal. Additionally, her grandfather’s journey to England, which allowed him to receive the Western-education that established him as an elite in Indian culture and provided him with enough income to pay for Sai’s private and Western-education, also factors into her decision. She can leave because her family history puts her in a societal position that categorizes her as a Western-educated and Anglicized Indian. Yet, unlike

Jemubhai, she can continue and complete his journey because she does not possess the same Indianness that he did when he left for England. As a character born out of Western influences, Sai fits into the Western world in a way that native Indian Jemubhai never could. Sai's resolve and ability to leave demonstrates a fundamental change in women's rights in twentieth-century India because ultimately only the female protagonist possesses the ability to achieve her goals, thus opening a door previously closed.

Immediately after Sai's decision, however, the novel presents Biju's return from America, a scene in which he returns home with literally nothing but the clothes on his back. On a surface level, his appearance could imply that Sai will fail to truly ever get out. Yet Biju departed from India without any of the resources Sai possesses due to her formal education and her class position, or without a previous generation's journey to continue. Thus, the scene implies that she will succeed in her journey precisely because Biju, who serves as an almost-foil to Sai throughout the novel, fails. This comparison, once again, demonstrates how Sai, the female protagonist, transcends the gender limitations her grandmother faced in early twentieth century India, which reflects a fundamental change in women's rights. Sai not only resolves to leave a situation she does not wish to be in, but the novel implies she will succeed. Her success, of course, stands in stark contrast to Nimi, who, as an early twentieth century Indian wife, had no control over her situation and position in the domestic. The shift between Nimi's failure and Sai's success also demonstrates the shift between the positions of colonial and postcolonial India. Nimi's domestic position reflects a colonial India placed in opposition to Jemubhai, the colonizer. By contrast, Sai, as postcolonial India, blurs the lines between previous Western-Eastern expectations. Gyan fails when he attempts to associate her solely with the West because Sai does not recognize the distinctions between what is Indian and what is Western, and does not

fall strictly into either category as Nimi had. However, by aligning Sai with postcolonial India, Desai reminds her readers of the emphasis placed on maintaining certain elements of colonized culture in India, such as formal and Western-education, which maintains British presence in India.

Sai inherits a level of Westernized freedom from her family's history but, as the title of the novel suggests, she loses something as a consequence: her "Indianness," her heritage, and her culture (194). We most directly see this loss through her Western-education, which limits her language skills to mostly English, but it also appears through other aspects of her behavior and preferences. Gyan notes that she "could not eat with her hands... had never been to a temple but for architectural interest... left a Bollywood film so exhausted from emotional wear and tear... and feared *–feared–* ... the local *saag* in the market" (193-194). Her lack of connection with her Indian culture manifests in not only a few traits, but rather most of the traits commonly associated with Indian culture. Few of Western preferences, such as not eating with her hands, can easily be overlooked in examining her Indianness. However, other aspects, such as her literal fear of certain Indian foods or her exhaustion from watching a Bollywood film reflect extreme reactions, and problematic responses, to her native country's culture. But most dramatically, her indifference to her religious roots – especially in comparison to Nimi and previous colonial women's positions, whose role was to maintain traditional religion during British colonization, only forty years prior – suggests Sai may be straying too far from her heritage. At first her disinterest in Indian culture seems unimportant in the larger picture of her narrative and a small price to pay for the freedom she inherits as a result. However, Desai implies that there might be more dire consequences if she continues to let go of her Indianness in favor of Western mentality. In the novel, the readers meet one other character who attempts to shed his or her

Indian culture in favor of becoming Western: Jemubhai, the man who beats and rapes his Indian wife. Jemubhai, as I have demonstrated above, is a violent man, blinded by his hatred of all that is Indian. Although he feels compassion towards Sai, Desai still presents him as a character who abuses and rapes his wife, refuses to help those in need, and cannot emotionally connect with another human being. Even Sai, who he does feel compassion for, only receives a praise as high as “not hate.” Jemubhai, who claims Sai will continue the journey he once began, serves as a potential window for what Sai will become if she leaves her Indian culture behind.

Sai, of course, is not a direct copy of Jemubhai and we cannot assume she will turn into a woman who abuses her spouse just because she continues “the journey [her grandfather] had started” (230). Sai, as far as we can tell, will neither return once she leaves nor suffer as much of a cultural confusion because her position in postcolonial India does not present her with oppositions between the West and India. However, the novel, through its structural placement of Sai and Gyan’s relationship scenes in relation to Jemubhai’s flashbacks of Nimi, still implies that Sai’s journey can lead down a similar path to his. For example, chapter twenty-seven consists entirely of the beginning of Sai and Gyan’s fights, which come forth as a result of her “running after the West” (179). Chapter twenty-eight immediately begins with a one line scene: “The judge [Jemubhai] was thinking of his hate,” which then follows with scenes recalling how his relationship with Nimi took an abusive turn once he returned to India from England (180). The latter scene provides no background for why he would think of his hate and the only textual sign leading up to it is Sai and Gyan’s conflicts over the West’s place in India, which mirrors the conflict between Jemubhai and Nimi. Just as Nimi could not understand Jemubhai’s connection to the West, Gyan struggles to understand Sai’s adoption of Western culture in India, because neither Nimi nor Gyan are “privileged” to become fully Westernized. These mirroring scenes,

therefore, imply, that although Sai is a key example female education in the latter half of the twentieth century and reflects Nimi's example as female education in the earlier half, Sai also aligns with Jemubhai and Desai also presents Sai's journey in context of his. This alignment also places Gyan, the Nepali nationalist, in relation to Nimi, the traditional embodiment of Indian culture, thus flipping the gendered positions of the West and the East.

Correspondingly, gendered positions in romantic relationships also shift from colonial to postcolonial India. While Nimi's father refers to her as "the wife of one of the most powerful men in India," the novel introduces Gyan as Sai's "mathematics tutor" (100, 2). These introductions demonstrates how, in the early half of the century, a woman was defined by her relationship with her husband, but in more contemporary times Sai's boyfriend is defined by his relationship to her. Gyan's entire position depends on his relationship with Sai; if she reported his inability to properly tutor her, he would lose his job, his position as an educator, and his source of income, which he depends on to support his poor family. In contrast to Nimi and Jemubhai's relationship, without Sai, Gyan's life fails. On one hand, Desai uses the example of female education to demonstrate how, in less than fifty years, the position of women shift from being dependent on their husbands, to relationships where men can be dependent on women. However, Gupta's argument about literacy as a method to maintain imbalanced relationships reflects the significance of Western mentality in India. Jemubhai maintains a higher social status than Nimi not only because of patriarchal Indian attitudes, but also because he reflects the British colonizer to Nimi's colonized India. Sai represents the elite and educated in India because she possesses only a formal Western-education, unlike Gyan who still clings to his Nepali and Indian identity. Thus, the question concerning "the inheritance of loss" is not limited to Sai, but actually applies to the state of India as a whole.

V. Conclusion

In an interview with BBC's *World Book Club*, Desai explains the importance of parallels in the novel:

I wanted to draw the parallels... between different emotional parallels, different historical parallels, between an older time and my time... realizing that there were so many patterns that the world that we think of as being such a new world is actually not all that new. There are many old things still going on in a different way. (Desai, "Kiran Desai - *The Inheritance of Loss*")

The parallel between Sai and Biju shapes the structure of the novel. Their alternating narratives almost foil one another to tell different stories that reflect how the Western ideals play into postcolonial Indian life. Although Biju travels to America and Sai remains in India, at least during the novel, both characters encounter crosses between the West and their Indian heritage. Other, smaller, more complicated parallels appear throughout the novel: between Nimi and colonial India, Sai and postcolonial India, Sai and Jemubhai, Biju and Jemubhai, Gyan and Jemubhai, Gyan and Nimi, among others. Although sets of parallels may conflict with other sets, each of these parallels ultimately reflects the same theme: the lasting presence of the West in Indian daily life. As Desai stresses, although they may manifest themselves in different ways, important topics appear repeatedly. Each character, no matter how distanced he or she may appear from the West, has his or her life impacted by it.

For the journey Sai makes throughout the novel, her most important parallels are those with her grandparents. Nimi parallels Sai's story as a reflection of female education in India, which remains linked to the domestic sphere. Nimi reflects the female as the embodiment of culture in colonial-India and how women were expected to preserve their religious traditions in

the household, the uncolonized space. This position simultaneously prevented Nimi from becoming exposed to the public, or colonized, sphere, which Jemubhai came to represent. Jemubhai, however, disrupted the harmony of keeping the private sphere uncolonized when he brought British colonization into the home and punished Nimi for not being Westernized. Yet he does not attempt her to introduce her to the public sphere, but rather punishes her for not learning to be Western in the domestic sphere. Sai also remains in the domestic sphere, where she receives private and Western-education. Sai, however, chooses to stay in the private sphere because she prefers her domestic Anglicized sphere to the public Indian one Gyan lives in. Through her preference for the West, Sai simultaneously parallels Jemubhai because Desai portrays both as the Anglicized and formally educated characters living in India. Their Western-education marks them as elites among other Indians, but only their elite positions allow them the opportunity to be Western-educated. Sai's social position, like Jemubhai, rises because she has opportunities that other Indians do not. Desai uses the shift in the development of female education to explore India's complex and entangled relationship with the West. Although India shifts from identifying women as preservers of culture in the household to figures whose education can surpass their male counterparts, both positions come as an effect of British colonization. British colonization shapes the lives of both characters because while Nimi faces it directly, Sai's identity is shaped as a result of the relationship between the colonizers and the Indian colonized.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha examines the idea of cultural hybridity, which emerges in the postcolonial world as a result of the West's influence on non-Western cultures. Using Renée Green's idea of the stairwell as the liminal space between upper and lower levels, which she explores in *Sites of Genealogy*, Bhabha argues the stairwell creates a

connection between two distinct levels and “this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains differences” (Bhabha 4). Once the stairwell connects two levels, it allows the emergence of an in-between level, a cultural hybridity, which does not fully belong to either level. Sai, as the postcolonial grandchild of Jemubhai and Nimi, exemplifies Bhabha’s idea of a cultural hybrid. Her story parallels and comes as a result of both the Western colonizers and the Indian colonized. She can remain in the Indian private sphere while still embodying an Anglicized lifestyle, because she is the result of the East and the West. Sai can represent both the shift in women’s position and the oppression of non-Western Indians, because her story parallels both Nimi’s and Jemubhai’s. She is the cultural hybrid “that entertains differences.” She represents postcolonial India as the result of combining the uncolonized with the colonized.

However, in *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective*, Ayesha Jalal emphasizes the corruption that came to India after independence. Rather than turning inwards and developing a model of governance based on India tradition and history, a history that included both India’s past and its interactions with Britain, India imitated British politics. This model ensured that those who were Western-educated in colonial India would remain in power in postcolonial India. Ideally, those in power would reach out to those of lower classes, which would allow for a fuller sense of representation in Indian government (Jalal 41). However, this system fell to corruption because those in power did not reach out to the lower classes. In her novel, Desai demonstrates this corruption through the generational shift from Nimi and Jemubhai to Sai. Sai, as postcolonial India, comes to life through the union of Nimi, colonial India, and Jemubhai, the West. However, Jemubhai “killed” Nimi before she had the opportunity to influence Sai, which meant that Sai was predominately

influenced by Jemubhai, who I have already demonstrated fell to corruption (Desai 339). Sai, like Nimi, also fails to reach out to the lower classes, generally preferring to remain in her private “colonized” sphere, mostly interacting with educated Indians. She maintains her position because she makes no attempt to reach out or help those who are not Western-educated. However, unlike Jemubhai who asserts the difference between him, the Westernized, and Nimi, the Indian, Sai does not see the differences between West and East, which is partially because she, as the descendent of both, blurs the two together as a hybrid. Yet it is also because Sai does not realize that she has inherited her Westernization and lost her Indian ties. Without Nimi, she lacks the connection to the uncolonized sphere and, thus, only lives in the colonized space. Ironically, unlike Biju, Sai cannot answer her own question of the inheritance of loss because she does not realize that it is even a question. Her lack of knowledge becomes particularly problematic at the end of the novel when she resolves to leave. Sai, as a Western-educated Indian, cannot reach out to the less educated classes if she does not stay in India. By leaving and continuing her grandfather’s journey, she leaves behind the India her grandmother died preserving. Thus, Kiran Desai uses Sai to represent that the idea of an equal hybrid between the West and India cannot exist when British colonization still threatens Indian culture, even in the postcolonial era.

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