



# Understanding Elements Of Postcolonialism Through Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance Of Loss* And Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*

<sup>1</sup>Atreyee Mukherjee, <sup>2</sup>Dr Manisha Sinha

<sup>1</sup>Student, <sup>2</sup>Associate Professor

<sup>1</sup>Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh

## Abstract

This research paper delves into the intricate elements of postcolonialism as manifested in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*. The study focuses on key postcolonial themes such as marginalization, the concept of the subaltern, identity, multiculturalism, migration, hybridity, and diaspora. Desai's novel illustrates the enduring impact of colonialism and the cultural identity struggles faced by characters in post-colonial India. On the other hand, Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* presents an alternative history focusing on the subaltern people and their overlooked contributions to scientific discoveries during colonial India. Both novels scrutinize power dynamics within colonial and postcolonial contexts, shedding light on the colonial encounters that have shaped modern identities and cultural knowledge systems.

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

## 1. Introduction

Postcolonialism as a term gained prominence in the late 1980s when imperialism waned into history. British colonized nations like India wanted to reclaim their lost identity and end the cycle of trauma. Postcolonialism encompasses the core values of rediscovering and redefining identity and culture. Anti-colonial political movements have preceded postcolonialism in countries like India which led to their independence and establishing self-governance. The space of postcolonial studies gives space to all cultures affected by colonial rule and enables the analysis of the impact of the oppression on native cultures and populations. It investigates both the literature influenced by the imperial process and that written in response to imperial domination and subjugation.

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

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

Gayatri Spivak, another acclaimed postcolonial critic talks about the agency of the subaltern, meaning the marginalized and oppressed class, in expressing their voices. Subaltern as a term encompasses the voices of all who were under the oppressive colonial forces. In her analysis, she highlights the conditions of the natives during imperial rule and the double marginalization of women who were subjected to patriarchy as well as colonial rule. She advocates for the voice of all those who were suppressed during the colonial rule. Spivak argues that identity construction happens through discourse and in this case, the discourse was tightly held by the colonial power holders. Therefore, the natives did not have any control over their own identities. Spivak further points out that the subaltern, especially the native or subaltern woman, is rendered voiceless within the prevailing walls of patriarchy and colonialism. The structural constraints imposed by these systems leave little room for the subaltern to articulate their thoughts and feelings independently.

As a response to these power dynamics, the late twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the Subaltern Studies Group, which challenged and critiqued the way history was traditionally written. This group questioned the dominant metanarrative of history, asserting that history is constituted by multiple parallel voices, each possessing its validity.

## II. Elements of Postcolonialism

The framework of postcolonial studies includes key elements like marginalization, multiculturalism and identity- exploring their implications and nuances in the postcolonial context.

### 2.1. Marginalization

Marginality is an important and pervasive aspect of postcolonialism as it is integrated in all aspects of life-societal, political, and economic. Societal marginalization encompasses the struggles of the marginalized in terms of livelihood and fundamental rights. Race, religion, creed, caste, and gender-based discrimination result in inequality and injustice.

### 2.2. Concept of Subaltern

The term subaltern originates from British English which is an amalgamation of the Latin roots- 'sub' meaning 'under' and 'alter' meaning 'others' (Abraham, 307). In medieval England, individuals of lower military rank such as peasants or servants were commonly called subalterns. Additionally, the lower-ranking troops in the 17th and 18th centuries were designated as subalterns, denoting their inferior positions. Antonio Gramsci introduced the term in his article "Notes on Italian History". He refers to the subaltern as a representation of the oppressed underclass within the society, where the ruling authority exerts hegemony. Colonial literature employs the concept of subaltern to showcase colonial power and imperialism. The utilization of such techniques was done to portray the marginalized native population. The portrayal of the natives as inferior is influenced by the Eurocentric ideologies of the West, which is a postcolonial discourse. Subaltern literature delves into the themes of operation, marginalization, subordination of the working class, discrimination, gendered discrimination, disregard for women, social class disparity, and other pertinent issues and concepts.

### 1.3. Identity

Identity is a pivotal concept within post-colonization which encompasses social, natural, personal, religious, and cultural dimensions. Personal identity is shaped by individual attributes, habits, personality, and appearances. Social identity is shaped by societal structures which are particularly caste-based. When marginalized communities strive to establish their identity, which unfortunately is often undermined by the privileged, it is restricted.

### 2.4. Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a multifaceted element of postcolonial studies. It refers to the coexistence of diverse individuals who come from different cultural backgrounds. Western countries like America and Britain have a variety of diasporic communities that have different and distinct value systems, cultural practices and religious beliefs. Countries like India have multicultural relationships within a country, for example, North and South Indians in India have diversity arising from cultural differences and ethnic identities.

### 2.5. Migration

Migration refers to the movement of individuals from one place to another in search of improved opportunities. It can occur within a country or can involve international relocation. In a post-colonial sense, migration is a significant term as it highlights the experiences of people from colonized colonies. Nations sought to build new and improve lives in colonized or other developing countries.

### 2.6. Hybridity

Hybridity is another significant component of postcolonial studies. Scholars like Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak have played crucial roles in developing this concept of hybridity within the post-colonial context. Postcolonialism is an academic field that examines the effects of colonization and the resulting ramifications and its effects on cultural societies. It is a vital area of scholarly discourse that helps shape the perspectives of authors who explore the complexities of the post-colonial world. Hybridity can be divided into three categories- linguistic hybridity, cultural hybridity, and biological hybridity.

### 2.7. Diaspora

The term diaspora originates from the Greek word 'diasperien' where 'dia' means 'over' and 'sperien' means 'to sow or scatter'. This term was initially used to describe the exile of Jews from Palestine in 586 BC, now diaspora has become a common post-colonial term that refers to the dispersal or mass migration of a group from one place to multiple locations. It refers to the voluntary or forced movement of people from their homelands, which results in a sense of loss and alienation. Among the diasporic community, in terms of post-colonial fiction, diaspora refers to a growing sense of ethnic consciousness. According to James Procter, diaspora is commonly associated with the movements through and between locations, resulting in the haunting presence of one's homeland in their mind and the anguish of personal loss, which diasporic fiction writers of Indian descent often depict.

## III. The Calcutta Chromosome

Amitabh Ghosh is a renowned, award-winning Bengali writer famous for novels like *The Glass Palace*, *The Shadow Lines*, *Sea of Poppies*, and *The Hungry Tide*. He has also made significant contributions to the science fiction genre with works like *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Ghosh was born into a Bengali family in Kolkata and has had a keen interest in Indian history coupled with his exploration of the postcolonial world through the English language. He has drawn a lot of inspiration from writers like Phanishwar Nath Renu and Rabindranath Tagore.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* is one of his notable postcolonial works in the science fiction genre. It is based on the concept of 'alternative history', particularly focusing on the theme of subaltern people and the historical narrative of Dr. Ronald Ross, a Nobel Prize winner who was awarded for his groundbreaking research on Malaria transmission. The novel starts with Antar, the protagonist from a technological department who is utilizing his sophisticated computer Ava to search for his missing colleague Murugan. Murugan is the main character of the novel and is the voice of rationality, who questions the untold history surrounding Ross' Malaria Discovery. His search for the truth leads him to find a subaltern group led by the enigmatic Mangala and aided by Lakhan. Murugan believes that their "Pursuit is rooted in the quest for Immoral" (*The Calcutta Chromosome*,87). The narrative is woven together by three perspectives- the Omniscient narrator, Murugan's viewpoint, and Sonali Das's contribution.

Murugan portrays Mangla, a subaltern woman as an intellectual figure, surpassing contemporary Western scientists in knowledge. Ghosh extends this notion of the subaltern's involvement in scientific discoveries and their intellectual capabilities. Throughout the novel, he extends that the subaltern's intelligence and contribution to scientific research during colonial India have been overlooked by biased historians. It challenges the traditional narrative that subaltern individuals cannot have intellectual abilities. Subaltern individuals who assist Ross and have their stories omitted from the written history played a more pivotal role than Ross himself. His achievement would not have been possible without the crucial involvement of the subaltern team. Mangala is a depiction of such people. She is the leader of the subaltern group and operates with an air of silence and secrecy. Murugan extends silence as a form of 'religion' for these individuals, emphasizing the preference to keep their actions and intentions hidden. This strategy is used as a medium of communication and chooses to remain behind the scenes and express themselves through actions rather than their voice.

Beneath the fantastic explorations into spiritualism and reincarnation in the novel, Ghosh's central argument in *The Calcutta Chromosome* revolves around the proposition that Ronald Ross achieved prominence in India by leveraging the indigenous knowledge he had acquired through indigenous people. This assertion finds backing in the narrative of his Malaria research. Despite his concentrated efforts to portray himself as a solitary trailblazer in the relief of the colonial medical research process, accounts of the Malaria quest reveal a nuanced perspective that contradicts his attachment to establishing a solitary Pioneer image. Ghosh showcases the reality of Ross's findings- his success was due to his collaboration with the indigenous people and their knowledge. Despite his process efforts to position himself as the sole architect of his ground-making research, there are notable findings in his work that reveal the truth. The novel certainly underscores the prevalent belief that many Bengali intellectuals assert- that in his pursuit of finding the Malaria problem, he capitalized on and stole the knowledge from indigenous collaborators.

Ghosh works as both a fiction writer and a historian, blurring the lines between history and literature by recognizing their shared interest in power. He thematically and artistically engages in the deconstruction of conventional Western literary forms by his persistent border crossing between Fact and Fiction. This method does interrupt the traditional narrative element in fiction such as plot development, character portrayal, and the manipulation of time. He used this as a rich experimentation that helped him grant the double vision for presenting a cross-cultural critical analysis. Similar to Rushdie, Ghosh also employs Magic realism to convey the impossibility of events without sacrificing their experimental impact. In the novel *The Calcutta Chromosome*, he reconfigures the simplistic equation of life, death, and immortality through word manipulation which presents the theory that is both true and stranger than fiction.



#### IV. The Inheritance of Loss

Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* gained critical acclaim in 2006 for exploring the relationship between Indian characters and the West. The book is characterized as a diasporic novel and won the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Man Booker Prize in the same year, making Desai the youngest female winner to win the latter award. The work has been commended for its realistic yet critical portal of the First World countries and the depiction of Indian anglophile identities. Literary critics like Krishna Singh view the novel as a study of Indian culture and emphasize Desai's ability to portray her character's fascination with Western values and lifestyle as well as their struggle with their Indian heritage and lineage.

The central theme of the novel revolves around the inheritance of loss. Both the characters face cultural loss and a disconnect from their Indian Heritage. The theme intricately showcases the effects of colonization, considering the different timelines of Biju and Sai's generation. The novel presents the postcolonial story as a method of examining the aftermath of colonization in modern India. Biju's struggle for a better life in the Western world is in stark contrast to Sai's experience with her English influence that persists in India even after independence. Despite their stark differences, both characters are linked through the importance of generational transitions and their responses to the Western influence on India and Indian nationalism.

Major portions of the novel are a reflection of the socio-economic inequalities within Indian society and reflect their internal colonization. The privileged characters such as Jamubhai, Lalita, Namita, and Ms Sen are in stark contrast to the underprivileged class of Gyan and Biju. The reason for the internal colonization of the mind is rooted in caste-based discrimination and transforms into class-based discrimination after independence. Desai portrays an ambiguous reality of modern India where individuals adopt Western lifestyles which is at the expense of their own cultural identity. The story is against the backdrop of people striving for green cards or employment in America and forgetting their traditional heritage. The narrative also explores the discrimination faced by immigrants like Biju in the United States whose humble job and living conditions are in stark contrast to their family's pride in their Western connections. The mimicry of the West is a symbol of modernization, processing a sense of superiority amongst those who adapt. In the complex portrayal of postcolonial Indians, characters challenge the marginalization of natives and face resistance. The novel is a depiction of the changing times- some aspects of inequality persist, creating a new division and a new version of the same old struggles. The novel is an exploration of the emotional dislocation faced by characters whose encounters with the modern world are fragmented as the narrative unfolds. Sai goes through an evolution in her understanding of life's meanings she questions herself and her country's identity and realizes that life encompasses multiple meanings and goals.

#### III. Conclusion

While shedding light on the colonial interactions that shaped modern identities and cultural knowledge systems, both novels examine power relations within colonial and postcolonial contexts. The Calcutta Chromosome explores the hegemonic force of colonial science, demonstrating how Western knowledge frequently marginalizes indigenous epistemologies and believes itself to be better. Comparably, *The Inheritance of Loss* delves into the long-lasting effects of colonialism and emphasizes how cultural identities' inheritance leads to an identity conflict that frequently manifests in the behaviors and self-perceptions of the characters. In *The Inheritance of Loss* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*, female characters wrestle with issues of agency, empowerment, and identities in a patriarchal culture. Ghosh presents characters that subvert patriarchal conventions in Indian society and are seen as agents of change. But because of the patriarchal nature of the era, masculine characters frequently eclipse their agency. In a similar vein, women like Sai who overcome the limitations of tradition and Western influence are highlighted in *The Inheritance of Loss*. The female characters in both stories exhibit persistence and autonomy in manoeuvring within patriarchal structures, despite encountering diverse forms of operation. Their acts of resistance highlight how her gender interacts with both larger systems of operation, which helps to undermine prevailing power structures.

On the other hand, *The Inheritance of Loss* focuses on post-colonial India and reflects on the aftermath of the British Legacy and the lingering impact of colonialism. Set in the 1980s, the novel follows the lives of the

characters who grapple with questions of identity, belonging and cultural hybridity in the rapidly changing society. Desai portrays characters like Sai who is caught between traditional Indian customs and her Western influences and of those characters like the Anglo-Indian Lola who struggles with her sense of belonging in post-independent India.

Both novels interrogate power dynamics within the colonial and postcolonial context and shed light on the colonial encounters that shape today's identities and cultural knowledge systems. *The Calcutta chromosome* examines the hegemonic power of colonial science which shows that Western knowledge often perceives itself to be superior and marginalizes indigenous epistemologies. Similarly, *The Inheritance of Loss* explores the enduring legacies of colonialism and highlights how the heredity of cultural identities causes a clash in identity and often reflects in the ways the characters behave and perceive themselves. Both, *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Inheritance of Loss* feature female characters grappling with the question of identity, agency and empowerment within the patriarchal society. Ghosh showcases characters that are depicted as agents of change, challenging patriarchal norms within Indian society. However, their agencies are often overshadowed by male characters reflecting the patriarchal structure of that time. Similarly, *The Inheritance of Loss* showcases women like Sai who navigate the constraints of traditionality and Western influence. Despite facing various forms of operation, female characters in both novels showcase resilience and agency in navigating through these patriarchal structures. Their acts of resistance contribute to subverting dominant power structures by showcasing how her gender intersects with both broader systems of operation.

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