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*Social Exclusion in Postcolonial Fiction: A Reading
of Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss*

Ashok K Mohapatra



**Department of English
U.G.C. Special Assistance Programme (DRS-I)
Sambalpur University,
Odisha
INDIA**

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*The Inheritance of Loss***

Ashok K Mohapatra

A man was only what he saw of himself in others- V.S. Naipaul

Where man is at his greatest, he is unconscious – Rabindranath Tagore

This essay deals with the problem of social exclusion characterizing the existence of the major characters in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* from ontological and epistemological perspectives. Although social exclusion is usually an object of sociological enquiry with its own disciplinary justification, this essay critiques those tendencies of conservative social sciences that reify the social categories and generally claim as a virtue the positivist knowledge they produce – a knowledge that is devoid of ideology, value and politics. The novel exemplifies through the traumatic existence of each of its important characters social exclusion at an experiential level of the individual self as an experience that is leavened with the affective and ethical values of human relations within the state, community and the family in postcolonial history. Although it may sound commonplace, these values can be addressed with an empathetic rationality together with a keen historical sense as well as a political awareness of the ordinary moments of human triumph and failure, which the literary artist is usually capable of. This rationality is not only different from that of the natural sciences that are oriented towards technological instrumentalism, but also very unlike that of the social sciences that are biased in favor of an objective and “systematic knowledge”, an apolitical intellectualism that André Béteille would endorse (10).

The empathetic reason of literature affords to the literary critic access to the notion of self as a more adequately analytical category of symbolic exchange relations in a cultural system than ‘class’, a reductive social category, which is defined in the abstract and reified terms of labor and property relations. A perceptive social scientist, Beverley Skeggs tells us that “categories are not neutral terms. They are not only shaped by the conditions of their emergence, but also by the way in which they are continually cited” (27). If we take self as an ontological category, it is produced discursively and invested with cultural values. The discursivity is most well pronounced in literature, and particularly in fiction. What Skeggs persuades us to believe is that social exclusion may well be problematic, having its broadest range of ramifications in psychological, cultural and political terms rather than being a mere sociological proposition with its indexical proofs on an empirical foundation. Duly encouraged by Skeggs's proposition, I will proceed to explore the ontological and epistemological dimensions of social exclusion

of the major characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, the Man Booker Prize winning novel in 2006.

Social exclusion is both an ontological and epistemological problem that is ordinarily understood as the socio-economic marginalization of certain groups of people, their misrepresentation in, or complete omission from such systems of cultural signification as popular media, various knowledge formations and literary discourses. Ontologically, it is a mode of existence of the underprivileged, a lived experience on their part of existential hardship, humiliation, resentment and above all a painful sense of their alienation from socio-economic development process and identitarian politics. Epistemologically, the socially excluded are denied the means to formulate the modalities as to how to perceive the others and be perceived by the others, since they cannot design the template of their own cognitive autonomy. In other words, they are excluded from the knowledge producing mechanism imbricated in specific power relations, political conditions, economic processes and practices, which Foucault's "genealogy" (1980), a concept of historical and materialist knowledge, explains so well. They are denied opportunity for self-representation in their own rights, occluded from the public sphere as illegitimate subjects of knowledge. They are also made out to be deviant, sub-cultural, obscene and an exceptionable juridical category of "bare life" (Agamben 1995)¹, pushed beyond the threshold of the bio-politicking sovereign state, with its own knowledge/power regime of productivity, utility, normality, meaning and value. But this is just not all. The additional and more important point I wish to make is that the socially excluded are not always passive. Being excluded, they themselves try to exclude others as well, like the major characters in *The Inheritance of Loss* do, marking off for themselves an inside space, which may as well be deemed outside the dominant epistemic order of the empire or the first world state, even though ultimately they lose out to the dominant imperial and neo-liberal powers. To account for this dynamics, I would briefly draw upon some of Agamben's insights into the liminality of location, self and power, although my basic proposition is not reducible to his theory.

Agamben explains the curious negotiation between inclusion and exclusion that is effected by bio-politics and bare life. He points out the paradoxical nature of "bare life" not as something simply excluded, but as a category of "exception" and etymologically *ex-capere*: something "taken outside", included through its own exclusion" (109). Hence the ontological condition of exclusion is predicated upon its inclusivity within the materiality and historicity of the postcolonial sites. It is as much structured by the suppositions, notions, opinions and political knowledge as inflected by feelings and sentiments regarding what it means and feels to be a subject in the context of radical structural changes that came about in the politics, society and culture in colonial and postcolonial India. Further, he says that the sovereign power makes "situation of exception" in a "paradoxical threshold of indistinction" between situation of "fact" and

that of “right” by juridically legislating the suspension of rule (14). Agamben helps us understand how the sovereign power decrees the suspension of its own law in order to make the new law of exception so that some people can be socially excluded and abandoned as ‘bare life’ beyond the family, community, homeland, state and the dominant structures of rules and meaning. Agamben’s seminal concept of inclusion-through-exception/exclusion is in fact the very principle by which sovereignty and its modus operandi are defined. I will apply this basic theoretical concept of Agamben with necessary modifications in order to understand the ontological and epistemological liminality of the socially excluded characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

The modifications I suggest are quite a few. First of all, the socially excluded, instead of merely inhabiting the space of anti-structure passively, tries to posit in its own liminal site an ambiguous kind of centeredness and works out a resistant epistemic structure of its own to exclude the other/others. S/he excludes the other/others while being excluded by the other/others. Secondly, social exclusion is dispersive, since the object of someone’s exclusion can be the agent of the exclusion of someone else, and the liminality of the space of exclusion lies in the epistemological fuzziness as to who is in, and who is out, and what the center is and what lies outside it. Even the time of exclusion, as will be apparent from the representation of the complex patterns of thoughts and feelings of the major characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, is asynchronous. The characters inhabit the temporalities of past and present merging into each other. In this state of epistemological uncertainty the socially excluded ontology is constituted with its oppositional knowledge and has potential for excluding the others. Thirdly, the sovereign power that Agamben talks about is not just the state but also it can be used in a most extensive sense to signify an institution, a regime, a community, or even an individual. Fourthly, it is an ontological category that exists not *a priori*, but is constituted *a posteriori* in the very liminality of *inclusion-through-exclusion* across a dispersible space of exclusions. For this reason, lastly, one may as well argue that the socially excluded ‘bare life’ victim of a sovereign power can also assume an inverted form of sovereignty, irrespective of the fact that such a posture of resistance has no tangible results.

Kiran Desai’s socially excluded characters, I will show, try to formulate their own resistant ontological principles in response to the hostile or incompatible epistemic orders that occlude them. They struggle to overcome social exclusion in their individual ways. But liminal as they are, their struggle does not work out any resolution of their problem, nor any conclusive end of their stories. What the novel enacts is conflict among the competing structures of cultural knowledge and meaning such as race, ethnicity and gender that determine the meaning of self and its conflicting relation to the other/others. While the epistemic order of the sovereign power – in the most extended sense – ensures various official/political sanctions and culturally valid

definitions of self, the anti-structure is not the absence of it. Rather, the socially excluded self as a liminal category tries to set the protocols of its own inclusivity and centeredness, much like a real sovereign, in a system of resistant knowledge by suspending for itself the juridical rule, conditions normality, notions of truth and valid meaning as set by the sovereign power: the state, or the community, or the family, as the case may be. However, the resistant knowledge and strategies of resistance do not result in anything tangible in terms of a perfectly stable and sustainable world for the socially excluded self. Hence possibilities of resolution of the stories of these characters are foreclosed.

Through the irresolution of the stories of the socially excluded characters, Desai formulates a poetics of postcolonial dead-end. The ineffectuality of the epistemic and ontological resistance of the characters is played out against – and also because of – the backdrop of the beautiful and mysterious Kanchenjunga mountain peak, which deflects the reader’s attention toward a point of transcendence and stillness. It brings intimations of a peculiar kind of stasis and ideal state of being, a state of inaction and suspension of time, a nebulous zone of innocence and ontological purity that the Tagore epigraph alludes to, beyond the maelstrom of imperialism and nationalist politics². It seems to offer deliverance to the characters in question from the liminal space and time, and the semantic uncertainty of postcolonial politics and history. But this offer of deliverance being tentative, one should not conclude that the intention of Desai is to take the reader away from postcolonial history towards transcendence. On the contrary, once can see that Desai problematizes the aporia and contradictions of postcoloniality as the conditions of the loss of meaning both for the self and its world. This is because the ontological purity and its luminous knowledge of Kanchenjunga are ironically perceived through the sense of an ending and entrapment within time. In other words, Desai enriches our understanding of the historical process of exclusion-inclusion dialectics that constitute postcolonial ontology and epistemology.

Ontology and epistemology are the easily recognized correlates of the characters in so far as they experience themselves historically in relation to the world within the epistemic zone of visibility and power as implicit in the concept of panopticon. Since the Naipaul epigraph(it is clearly antithetical to the Tagore one) to the essay exemplifies ontological captivity of the colonial self, one can extrapolate from it that the knowledge of power and the truth of being are constituted dialectically; knowledge and power are materialized being conditional upon the self-incarceration of the subject within both of them. As Foucault explains, the self “inscribes in himself the power relations” and becomes “the principle of his own subjection” “when...subjected to a field of visibility”, it sees and *knows* (emphasis added) as well as “assumes responsibility for the constraints of power” (1977: 202-203).

Indeed, whether according to Foucauldian model of panopticon consisting of the structure of the visible, non-corporeal power and visible self-incarcerated subject, or Agamben's model of visible sovereign power and the excepted, liminal "bare life", ontology and epistemology are integral, grounded in experiences that are "crucial indexes of our relationship with the world" as subjects, and they have a "cognitive value" (Mohanty par. 12). Here the experiential grounding of self and self-reflexivity of knowledge help prevent the rigidly static ontology-epistemology bind that Foucault can sometimes be accused of having formulated with regard to subject formation within power and bio-politics. It should be noted that the official and institutionalized epistemic knowledge and opinions of the sovereign power of the empire about the colonial agent of imperial power and the colonized subject may be at sharp variance with what these two persons think of themselves in a given historical situation. In *Heart of Darkness*, for example, Kurtz turned out to be quite the opposite of what Marlow's received imperial knowledge had persuaded him to think of the former. Later, Marlow was also made to revise the received official knowledge of the Congo project. What I wish to emphasize here is the point that ontology is much more a dynamic and mutable state of self than is made out to be in the official discourse of power and knowledge. Similarly, far from being invincible the official discourse of knowledge is challenged by its own purveyors and agents who work upon its contradictions and gaps to dismantle it from within. Ontology is mutable when one is historically configured in specific domains of knowledge and spatio-temporal dynamics. Also, her/his knowledge of the world as well as the others' knowledge of her/him too is alterable and revisable. And, of course, no less important also are the quickly changeable feelings and flighty sentiments that accompany the process of one forming knowledge of oneself and the others in a given set of power-relations. Examining the affective dimension of epistemic anxieties of the founders and agents of Netherlands's colonies in the East Indies, Ann Laura Stoler says:

"Ontology", as I use the term here, does not refer to the disciplined pursuits of analytic philosophy about real ontological status of things in the world. Rather, I understand ontology as that which is about the ascribed being or essence of things, the categories of things that are about to exist or can exist in any specific domain, and the specific attributes assigned to them. "Ontologies", as Ian Hacking writes, "refer to what comes into existence with the historical dynamics of naming". Pursuing an "historical ontology", then, demands something of that philosophical study of ontology *tout court* might pursue, but more often does not: identification of mutating assignments of essence and its predicates in specific time and place. On the face of it, the notion of essence implies stability and fixity...But if there is anything we learn from the colonial ontologies of the racial kinds, it is that such "essences" were protean, not fixed, subject to reformulation again and again.(4)

Stoler maps a genealogy of colonial formation by collecting archival materials that run counter to the principles and policies of the imperial Dutch government toward the Indonesian colonies. Using these materials together with theoretical insights of Deleuze,

Guattari and Foucault she destabilizes the supposed epistemic foundationalism of reason and ontological certainties underpinning imperial formation, and reveals the ontological fantasies, anxieties, irrationalities, hesitation and conflict inherent in a wide category of minor histories within the grand narrative of Dutch colonial project in the Indies. Of the people of the islands, the pauperized creole white, for example, were not *officially* (emphasis added) considered European. They could not speak Dutch. They lived outside the European quarters and suffered all forms of discrimination. The colonial power which was producing the social and racial categories of differences and taxonomy of colonial knowledge confronted its own epistemological limits vis-à-vis these people and their painful, dissentious stories. One may certainly wonder what these people are if not the liminal entities, having been excluded through their inclusion. Stoler's archival body of the minor histories enact a resistant ontology that has its own historicity and its own affective qualities or sentiments that muddle the epistemic order of the rational imperial state and meddle with the cool, rational choice and decisions the colonial officials have to take in matters of administration. The epistemological uncertainties of colonial formations that Stoler argues also do extend to the postcolonial formations in the post-independence India as well as the diasporan space in the global context which *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with. The stories of the major characters like Mr Patel, Biju, Sai and Gyan too act out powerfully the psycho-pathological sentiments and ideologies underpinning sense of themselves and affective dispositions in a racialized, ethnicized and politicized space and time of exclusion during the days of Raj and post-Raj in India and elsewhere in the globalized dispensation of the first world. The politics of their exclusion, which creates aporia and indeterminacy of the space for them, offers the condition for their centeredness and resistant knowledge scheme to exclude others. The net result of their resistant praxis, which yields no resolution in terms of ontological and epistemic gain of the self, brings into relief the theme of loss of the meaning of oneself and the world. Aside from this, their little stories, that are disjointed, disparate and incomplete, interrogate the triumphalist theme of the loss and recovery of homeland that the grand narratives of both imperial rule and anti-colonial struggle play out. Loss is shown to be a condition of the existence of the characters in the Himalayan foothills of Kalimpong in the turbulent times of 1986-87 during the agitation of the Nepali people for a homeland.

The sub-nationalist politics of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) in the hilly northern parts of West Bengal in the 1980s, which is the backdrop of the novel, is one among many instances of separatist forces – like the Khalistan movement in Punjab in the early 1980s and the Bodo insurgency in Assam in more recent times – that have risen time and again to challenge the unity and integrity of the postcolonial nation-state like India. These forces are the direct result of the short-sighted and improvised nature of demographic and territorial arrangements made for various reasons like the annexation of land by the colonial government, unrestrained exploitation of natural

resources by the colonial economy, rise of a comprador bourgeoisie to help the colonial administrative machinery, among others. At least this is what happened after Darjeeling was taken from Nepal and returned to the Sikkimese after the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814-15. In 1835, it was leased by the East India Company and made to develop as a tea producing area. After the Anglo-Bhutanese War of 1864, which was followed by the treaty of Sinchula, Darjeeling was re-organized in 1866, with the induction of Dooars and Kalimpong. Being a part of the state of West Bengal and different from the plains in respect of terrain, climate, customs and traditions, Darjeeling has remained somewhat unassimilated into the larger Bengali culture. Harboring sentiments of separatism, owing to reasons of their economic marginalization at the hands of Bengalis, the Gorkha tribes comprising Nepalis, Lepchas and Bhutias have agitated for a homeland, which they did in 1986-88, led by Shubhas Ghising under the banner of GNLF, and later in 2007 under a new party Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (JGMM), with Bimal Gurung as the new head. To mention yet another dimension to this complex scenario, the Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1850 also has been the cause of discontent among some section of the Gorkhas of Indian origin, since it does not specify their status as distinct from that of the Nepali Gorkhas, who are immigrants. Their objective has all along been to have a separate state for themselves, despite various political and economic concessions that have been offered to them by the Union government and the West Bengal government from time to time. This particular strand of events involving internal displacement of people and its aftermath of social exclusion render the postcolonial narrative of India as highly problematic. Being the result of a process of its decolonization social exclusion has not only called into play the fissiparous forces unleashed by socio-economically marginalized and recalcitrant ethnicities, but also activated linguistic jingoism and subnationalist tactics of middle-class pressure-groups with vested political and economic interests³ within India.

Desai interweaves this problematic aspect of Indian postcoloniality with its spin off: globalization and the resultant diasporic displacements. In the globalized diasporan space, new configurations of home in the first world are made, shot through with the anxieties and disaffections of racial and cultural exclusion from which Biju suffers. Here what is worth noticing is the sense of distinction between postcoloniality as an analytical and deconstructive category used by the third world intellectuals (including writers like Kiran Desai, despite her first world location) and postcoloniality as a cultural process that mystifies the re-invention and re-entrenchment of the earlier forms of imperial domination of the colonies with the rise of global capital and neo-liberal regime⁴. Thus the two modes of displacement, internal and diasporic, which the novel deals with, characterize Indian postcoloniality and the liminal space of exclusion it involves.

In an online interview, the Desai says that her novel seeks to “capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant” (*Rediff News*,

January 30, 2006). Since this novel deals with the displacement of people and their precarious cultural in-betweenness, it is natural to expect that the resultant experience of alienation, and a nagging sense of loss could have been written by none but an expatriate author like Desai, with an intricately hyphenated genealogy (German from the maternal grandmother's side and Bangladeshi from maternal grandfather's side and Gujarati from the paternal grandfather's side). She herself admits in the same interview that her own life "is no accident. It was my *inheritance*". One cannot help noticing that the word "inheritance" ironically accentuates the very loss of home, cultural affiliations, continuity and tradition within family and community that resonate in the title of the novel⁵. All these sad spectacles of the disintegration of home, family, community and loss of love, tender feelings, trust and sympathy in human relationship are played out against the disturbing historic backdrop.

2.

The Inheritance of Loss can be described as a novel of immigrant genre. The story of the illegal migration in search of better livelihood and life containing themes such as desire in the foreign land for the home left behind, exile, and the negotiation between the imagined 'home' and the host culture usually unfolds in the postcolonial and multicultural registers of the novels of immigrant genre. However, immigrant experience and the state of exile in the diasporan space is only part of a larger scheme of this novel because it includes other stories dealing with social exclusion not so much in the globalized diasporan space of New York as in the milieus of the imperial metropole of London and colonial and postcolonial India. All these stories, including Biju's, act out different types of homecoming – each with its specific kind of experience of social exclusion and effect of an enigma of arrival.

Mr. Patel returns home to his wife and family. Sai is sent away home from the boarding school to her maternal grandfather Mr. Patel, her only living relative, soon after her parents get killed in a freak accident in Russia. Biju, too, comes back to his father after an unsuccessful stay in New York as an illegal immigrant. The patterns of the events of union and separation, and also those of movement and stasis, and momentary hope of the gain of home followed by unmitigated loss of such a hope produce the effect of irony in anti-climactic modes. For example, Mr. Patel returns home to his uneducated, *desi* wife only to throw her out of his life and breaks his own home, as it were, to eventually live a life of seclusion after retirement at Cho Oyu, a rundown colonial house he bought from a Scotsman in 1957. *This* home that Sai comes to is much less than a home, and her union with the grandfather results only in their mutual distancing and a loss of love and future for her. Biju's homecoming is a misnomer, since he returns only to be robbed of all his hard-earned American dollars and the valuables on his way to Kalimpong, which he cannot call home ever; for the

GNLF activists already declare him as a foreigner. On the other hand, Gyan's activism in the militant GNLF movement for homeland results in his distance from Sai, the loss of love and the possibilities of raising a family and making home with her. Indeed, as said earlier, these stories of the loss of home, family, community and negation of love, trust and sympathy underscore social exclusion, its liminal sites and modalities.

Sai has been brought up in a Dehradun convent school in a most oppressive atmosphere, ridden with a sense of guilt and shame. This is because her grandfather Mr. Patel disowned her mother a long time ago for running away with a Zoroastrian boy of lowly antecedents, with whom she had fallen in love and whom she had eventually married. Not only has Sai been denied home and its comforts, but also a friend circle at school. The orthodox, heavily gendered standards of moral accreditation and social acceptability institutionalized in the missionary girls' school constitute the ontology of Sai's sinful loneliness, produce in her the knowledge of sin and precipitate her sense of guilt. The completely anglicized St Augustine's school in its elitist seclusion at Dehradun – and already culturally marginalized – is itself a liminal system of power to invoke its centeredness to exclude this “shameless girl” with her “unconventional background” (29) of cultural miscegenation outside the domain of purity. Sai understands the liminality of the school's coercive power over her developing sexuality and is conscious of the contradictions in the education she has received there:

The system might be obsessed with purity, but it excelled in defining the power of sin. There was *titillation* (emphasis added) to unearthing the forces of guilt and desire, needling and prodding the results. This Sai had learned. This underneath, and on top a flat creed...sipping the blood of Christ and consuming a wafer of his body than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds...Any sense that Sai was taught had fallen between the contradictions, and the contradictions themselves had been absorbed. “Lochnivar” and Tagore, economics and moral science, highland fling in tartan and Punjabi harvest dance in *dhotis*, national anthem in Bengali and impenetrable Latin motto emblazoned on banderoles across their blazer pockets and also on an arch over the entrance: *Pisci tisci episculum basculum*.(29-30)

Sai's formal learning at school involves her understanding of the liminal quality of sexual norms and moral standards of the convent, which is articulated in the subtly erotic registers of Catholic transubstantiation and held in opposition to the phallic worship of the Hindu god Shiva. While adapting to and assimilating so many curricular and co-curricular cultures in school, she understands multiple liminalities crisscrossing the epistemological terrain, and this precipitates in her the sense of not being anchored upon a solid cultural ground. She feels socially excluded. Were it not for her anglicized accent and westernized manners she would have been unwelcome at Cho Oyu in the first place, where she was sent after she became orphan:

Sai arrived, and he was worried that she would incite a dormant hatred in his nature, that he would wish to rid himself of her or treat her as he had treated her mother, her grandmother. But Sai, as it turned out, was more his kin than he had thought imaginable. There was something familiar about her; she had the same accent and manner. She was a westernized Indian brought up by English nuns, an estranged Indian living in India. The journey he had started so long ago had continued in his descendants. Perhaps he had made a mistake in cutting off his daughter...he'd condemned her before he knew her. Despite himself, he felt, in the backwaters of his unconscious, an imbalance in his deeds balancing itself out. (210)

Interestingly enough, *this estranged Indian living in India* finds herself included in the grandfather's life that has already been closed off to all else except Mutt, his pet dog and his only companion. This is how liminal position of Sai gets redefined and relocated in terms of her inclusion into an exclusive and exclusionary cultural and filial space of the grandfather because of her already excluded ontology. But, as we shall see, Gyan excludes her later as she cannot fit into his masculine world-view of history and homeland politics.

Mr. Patel lives superciliously, hated by the local people living around him. He thinks that Sai has now been thrown in his way by fate to reclaim him or "redeem" (210) him. Whether we mean redemption, a highly loaded expression, in the religious sense as an act of rescuing someone out of the order of time, or in the plain secular sense, i.e., to buy back, to ransom or to set free someone in a quotidian and social sense, it implies as much the notion of reclaiming or including one as that of releasing one from the inclusion-exclusion bind, or liberating one from the obligations and limits of knowledge. But neither of these notions holds good as this highly valorized idea is preposterously undercut when he immediately starts reasoning with himself that Sai's arrival could be quite welcome as the prospective caretaker of Mutt. And when the dog gets lost, Mr. Patel is overcome by a sense of loss and loneliness. That he has doted on this dog almost perversely is a sad reflection on his lack of bonding with human beings. His demented anger at his poor cook, whom he holds squarely responsible for the missing of the dog, finds greater justification in his universal hatred for humanity, which is matched with his righteous but misplaced love for all the beautiful and innocent creatures of the world, including his dog: "Human life was stinking, corrupt, and meanwhile there were beautiful creatures who lived with delicacy on the earth without doing anyone any harm" (292). He breaks down emotionally and starts calling out to this missing animal all kinds of ridiculous pet names. One cannot but observe that this is a curious inversion of Lear's famous dying speech at Cordelia's death, "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life/And thou no breath at all?" Even though Lear excludes Cordelia, and suffers the worst form of social exclusion at the hands of his other daughters, his anguish and rejection of life as a whole is incidental upon his vision of a life of extended human sympathy that is inclusive of the very best representatives of humanity like Cordelia. But Mr. Patel's exclusion of human beings is unqualified and

total. It is predicated upon his own social exclusion and the liminal ontology of a mimic man that is manifested in a state of psychic impasse perpetuated by regressive memory⁶ in the form of certain memory-images together with their affective qualities of nostalgia, pain and regrets. The acts of recalling specific events and situations on Mr. Patel's part seem to be sudden and involuntary, and the novel is full of such sudden moments of agonizing remembrance that seize the whole being of this man as a paroxysm in response to some disturbing events. On one occasion, he remembers suddenly a racial insult he had suffered in England at the hands of "six little boys at a bus stop", and was also witness to another fellow Indian, a boy, being kicked and humiliated by some racist miscreants behind a pub (209).

One can as well, perhaps, read a strain of negative-aggressive type of abandonment-neurosis in Mr. Patel's obsession with the past and memory trips⁷. This psychopathology of the colonized, his abnormal absorption in himself, his warped view of the people around, and neurosis are brought into sharp focus with reference to the portrayal of Jemubhai Patel's character.

Being dislodged from his native cultural moorings by English education, and loathed and excluded by the Britons in London, the racist metropole of British colonial empire, Mr. Patel inhabits the in-between space of ontology. The more he develops self-loathing, shame and guilt having suffered humiliation and exclusion by the whites, the stronger grow his snobbery and arrogance in his dealings with fellow Indians back home. He is aware that he merely scraped through the ICS examination in 1942, and was lucky enough to be at the bottom of the list of successful candidates when it was expanded in consequence of the decision of the British government that very year to Indianize the service. It was a dole granted to him by the empire at the fag end of its life in the most condescending manner. This knowledge that he is excluded from the white world on the basis of skin color and the inferior status of the colonized, and yet he is part of the imperial ruling circle constitutes his agonizing ontology of self-captivity and inclusion-through-exclusion, with which he struggles adopting strategies of disguise, concealment impersonation and white masquerade in order to exclude the natives. Mr. Patel's regressive memory also works out an asynchronous temporal order, dubiously situated between the past and the present, and it is this liminal temporality that he inhabits, getting excluded by the whites while simultaneously excluding the natives.

While in England, he was never counted by the British society as one among the English men and women – so he remembers. London turned out to be inhospitable, forcing him to "retreat into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit. The habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow" (39). The narrator recounts:

Thus Jemubhai's mind had begun to warp; he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him. He forgot how to laugh...He began to wash obsessively, concerned he would be accused of smelling... To the end of his life, he would never be seen without socks and shoes and would prefer shadow to light, faded days to sunny, for he was suspicious that sunlight might reveal him in his hideousness, all too clearly. (40)

The knowledge on his part of the negative perception of him by the white people, the received opinion in the standard colonial discourse that the darker natives are intellectually, morally and racially inferior to their white masters wreaks an epistemic violence upon him and reduces him to someone less than human in feelings and some kind of an unsociable zombie, or a lonely shadowy presence. What is important is that in course of time "he *felt* (emphasis added) barely human at all, leaped when touched on the arm as if from an unbearable intimacy, dreaded and agonized over even a "How-do-you-do-lovely-day" with the fat woman dressed in friendly pinks who ran the corner store"(40). This shameful and crippling knowledge of self-inadequacy prompts him to hide as much from himself as from the others. For this reason he needs a mask to wear. The powder-puff, an essential item among his toiletries, is also the instrument of a white gloss of talcum powder, which he puts on his dark skin. When called upon by a pleading Lepcha woman to intervene on behalf of her innocent husband, who had been tortured by the police on the charges of the theft of a gun from his house during the days of Nepali insurgency, he "seemed suddenly to remember his personality, stiffened and said nothing, set his mouth in a mask, would look neither left nor right, went back to his game of chess... In this life he remembered again, you must stop your thoughts if you wished to remain intact, or guilt or pity would take everything from you, even yourself from yourself" (264). This inertia of colonial self-possession is the consequence of a conditioning, since he has been conditioned to act as the man "with the white curly wig and a dark face covered in powder, bringing down his hammer always against the native in a world that is *still colonial*"(205, emphasis added).

One would do well to call Mr. Patel a mimic man, comparing him with Ralph Singh of V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967) in order to discover how he is perhaps more pitiable than the latter and much worse off. Ralph, a middle-aged colonial politician from Isabella living as an exile in London, writes his memoirs partly to keep his past life in perspective, re-evaluate it and partly to get a grip on himself and examine how his postcolonial subjectivity has been constituted. Although this project leads to a disastrous self-perception of incompleteness, shapelessness, lack of self-image, and a crippling psychological impasse, the very act of writing can be a saving grace that Jemu Bhai Patel cannot attain. He lives as a foreigner in his own country, neurotic and therefore unable to piece together his past and the present discursively and to try to decolonize himself in the process. Ralph renames himself as Ranjit Kirpal Singh and imagines an idealized, originary past and reconstructs a history of his Indian identity, but

Mr. Patel would only name and re-name his dog in a maudlin way. He would inwardly gloat over the links with the identity of the imaginary white man he has assumed through the *JPP* monogram on a gravy boat he bought in a secondhand shop in London: “It had been “sold by a family whose monogram had happily matched, *JPP*, in an extravagance of flourishes...*James Peter Peterson* or *Jemubhai Popatlal Patel*. If you please” (170-71). He would also grow nostalgic about the name *James* by which his landlady used to call him in London.

If colonial epistemic order produces ontological liminality and social exclusion, it is not incorrect to say that Mr. Patel’s exclusion and liminality are the consequences of his colonial education and cooptation into the elaborate system of imperial power run by the English educated native civil servants like him. This education and its utilitarian rationalism propounded by Macaulay in his *Minute* in 1835 prepared the ground for the English educated natives like him to internalize the colonial discourse that comprised the Eurocentric, racist and narrow categories of knowledge about the natives, their history, society and culture. In this context one is reminded of Lord Curzon denouncing at a convocation ceremony of Calcutta University the morals and manners of the natives on the grounds of their lacking truthfulness (Chatterjee 75). That Curzon’s address was certainly much more than a stray ceremonial event is obvious, given its implication and the calculated effect of shame and belittlement it intended to produce on the young graduates, and to mould them as a breed of future officials who would be much like Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, having slavishly accepted the authority of Western knowledge and the imperial discourse⁸.

In England, Mr. Patel was obliged to read *Expedition to Goozerat*, only to be bewildered by the account of his home state in the book as it did not at all match with “what he remembered of his home”, but the fascinating details European history of Indian cities gripped his imagination before long, and “he felt greedy for a country that was already his” (110). This epistemological rupture lead him to fantasize himself as a white man, eager to see India with the eyes of the Englishman and all too ready to take over the affairs of this jewel of the imperial crown. In addition, as a native civil servant he had been indoctrinated in European culture, manners and taste, which facilitated his cooptation into the system of colonial power and *knowledge*. As a consequence, this widened the rupture at the cultural and psychic level, and distanced him from the native sensibilities. Bose, a fellow compatriot in England, introduced Mr. Patel to the music of Caruso and Giggly, encouraging him to pick up the right English accent, and together “they read *A Brief History of Western Art*, *A Brief History of Philosophy*, *A Brief History of France*, etc., a whole series”, and also a book on China and Glass, an essay on sonnet and its form. They also learnt about scones, jams and preserves etc. This zealous attainment of a potpourri of scrappy and superficial knowledge of European culture produces disastrous results:

He envied the English. He loathed the Indians. He worked at being English with a passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both. (119)

Soon after the forging of Mr. Patel in the colonial epistemic smithy is completed with his learning of Topham's *Law of Property*, Aristotle, *Indian Criminal Procedure*, the *Penal Code*, the *Evidence Act* etc., he returns home, now as a *pukka* brown sahib, an ontological absurdity, who is estranged from both the English and the Indians. The narrator describes him at a supremely ironic moment as reading *How to Speak Hindustani* on his homeward journey, "since he had been posted to a part of India where he did not speak the language". And yet, he "sat alone because he still felt ill at ease in the company of the English". (119)

This account of the formation of Mr. Patel's socially excluded and liminal ontology as a brown sahib and his subjection to the systems of the knowledge of the Empire also explains the aporia and contradictions within the imperial system of knowledge and power that Stoler talks about. The dynamics and sentiments underlying the knowledge the Empire produced about the colonial subjects are delineated by the nostalgia and longing soon give way to anger and shame when Mr. Patel and Bose shift perspectives on their Raj reminiscences. While Bose bursts out bitterly, "What bastards they were! ...Bloody white people. They are responsible for all the crimes of the century", Mr. Patel agrees, "YESYES! YES! They were bad. They were part of it. And we were part of the problem, Bose, exactly as much as you could argue that we were part of the solution". (206)

The self-recrimination of the likes of Mr. Patel and Bose for not being able to unlearn what the English masters had made them learn, and the anger about being deserted by them cannot be treated as sentiments extraneous to the Empire. This is because the brown sahibs constituted a significant segment of the government, and their anxieties of racial and political seclusion, dubious validation of self-interest, ambiguous affiliation toward colonial power as well as learning and uncertain attitude toward social relation at home etc subverted the foundational certainty of reason and power on which the Empire rested. The inclusion of these non-white civil servants through racial, social and cultural exclusion within the machinery of British government too lent liminality to their ontology that they and their posterity have – somewhat like *white, but not quite* – as members of the anglicized, professionally privileged, urban postcolonial middle classes. They in turn have excluded from their neo-liberal mindset various forms of subaltern and *dalit* identity politics, which has been dominant in various regions of India during the post-independence period.

The neo-liberal, consumerist ideology coupled with insular attitude toward any form of radical politics is what the minor characters, namely Mrs. Sen, Lola and Noni, the neighbors of Mr. Patel, exemplify. These avid consumers of whatever England offers – from broccoli to Knorr soup to Mark and Spencer panties to 19th century British novels to BBC – are snooty, shallow, decadent, culturally insular and perhaps somewhat overdrawn as caricatures of a section of colonial Indian middleclass Anglophiles of the Raj days. But refusing as they do to reckon with the ground realities of the armed agitation of the Nepali people and assume an air of indifference toward and contempt for politics, they represent the professionally upward, self-centered, apolitical, English-educated urban Indian middle class, which is valorized as the mascot of third world modernity in the neo-liberal discourse.

Since the notion of modernity available to the third world populace within the framework of postcolonialism is fraught with the fragmentation and discontent of the idea of nation, some pre-eminent academics and professionalized intellectuals among them have sought for a new self-serving paradigm of modernity mostly premised upon post-nation and the failure of decolonization. They have invoked a culturalist notion of diasporic globalism after the 1980s through the semantics and aesthetics of ‘hybridity’ and ‘third-place’. Nonetheless, however much may ‘mimicry’ be blithely touted in their favor as a means of *misrepresenting* the semantics of colonial discourse and claimed to be inaugurating “the logic of ant-colonial self-differentiation through the logic of inappropriate appropriation”, as done by Leela Gandhi (150), the ontological truth of the ignominy and anguish of exclusion, exile and half-a-life are far too glaring to be omitted in fiction. We have already been empathetically drawn towards the suffering and liminality of Jemubhai. Desai also makes us privy to similar ontological conditions of Biju⁹.

Many skilled professionals as well as semi-skilled, or even totally unskilled people from South Asia, Latin America and Africa, who dream of prosperity and escape from poverty and underdevelopment, reach the first world of the U.S. or Canada, testifying to another extremely distressful narrative of postcolonial globalization that is structured in terms of an ever increasing economic disparity between the rich and poor nations. The Nepali, Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi unskilled people arriving there illegally and living there without work permit, visa, health insurance and social security, working in restaurants and news-stands, contribute to a dark and bafflingly subhuman muticulturalist public sphere in Jackson Heights in New York or South Hall in London. They remain inassimilable and incongruent to the mainstream culturally. They are also sharply differentiated economically in terms of getting paid less than their first world peers for similar kinds of job in skilled and semi-skilled sectors, signifying a disjunction of temporality and of culture, and an unevenness of development under the neo-liberal economic regime. What these events prove is that the much vaunted postcolonial

narrative of emancipation from the fragments and differences of the third world nation goes askew to form a new narrative of unanticipated forms of economic discrepancies and cultural as well as epistemic disjunction in the new location of the first world. This is precisely what *The Inheritance of Loss* underscores.

Biju drifts from one menial job into another in the New York restaurants. At times he gets chucked out either from want of documents, or owing to alleged misconduct, and at other times he himself quits the job when it is not to his liking. Chapter Five of the novel presents a breathtakingly quick shifting of scenes where Biju whirls around among a mishmash of strange names of places and people, assorted skin colors, ensemble of nationalities, a *mélange* of cuisines from all over the world, all delineating the underbelly of global cultural place that is found but “in basement kitchens of New York” (22), not in the decorous dining space of swanky restaurants, nor on the chic West Side restaurants, nor in the downtown delis on the Broadway. What prevail here are differences among the “former slaves and natives” that overpower them. Having been sufficiently brainwashed by his father, the cook, to distrust a Pakistani workmate, he breaks into a spat with the latter, only to be thrown out of job by the French owner of the restaurant. The narrator ingeniously comments, “Here in America, where every nationality confirmed its stereotype – Biju *felt* he was *entering a warm amniotic bath*” (23, emphasis added). One cannot but notice that the ontological principle of Biju’s very being in the organic sense is structured in a differential epistemic order, and Biju’s knowledge of the difference turns out to be overwhelming:

Former slaves and natives. Eskimos and Hiroshima People, Amazonian Indians and Chiapas Indians and Chilean Indians and American and Indian Indians, Australian aborigines, Guatemalans and Columbians and Brazilians and Argentineans, Nigerians, Burmese, Angolans, Peruvians, Ecuadorians, Bolivians, Afghans, Cambodians, Rwandans, Filipinos, Indonesians, Liberians, Borneoans, Papua New Guineans, South Africans, Iraqis... Eritreans, Uruguayans, Nicaraguans, Ugandans, Ivory Coastians, Zambians, Guinea-Bissauans... coming at you screaming colonialism, screaming slavery screaming mining companies screaming banana companies oil companies screaming CIA spy among the missionaries screaming it was Kissinger who killed their father and why don’t you forgive third-world debt; Lumumba they shouted, and Allende; on the other side, Pinochet, they said, Mobutu; contaminated milk from Nestlé, they said; Agent Orange; dirty dealings by Xerox, World Bank, UN, IMF, everything run by white people. Every day in the papers another thing! (133-34)

The narrator rattles off a deliriously long paratactic list of post-colonial nationalities, interspersing it with heterogeneous bits and pieces of the news of disparate events and historically mediated knowledge of discontent – all apparently disconnected, but falling into a common field of an oppositional discourse across a dispersible space of epistemic and ontological differences, together with ideological and ethical claims pitted against

the neo-liberal regime. Underneath the disjointedness of the phrases and clauses appear the historical personages of the cold war period in the binarist political order of the U.S. and allies versus the Soviet block. In terms of this discourse the ex-colonies and their leaders were assigned meaning and value not long after they had achieved independence and tried to achieve distinctive identities. Acting partisan to the super powers, the politicians often exacerbated political factionalism as well as rivalry in the domestic politics, fomented violence, indulged in corruption and ended in disgrace¹⁰.

Postcolonial history thus seems to be a narrative of anti-climax for the third world nations, from which no escape is possible. As the uni-polarization of the world followed on the heels of the fall of the Soviet block and the end of the cold war, the neo-liberal economic regime gained ascendancy almost all over the world, with the trans-national flow of capital, technology and skilled labor. The effects of this change were in terms of a sudden opening of opportunities for jobs abroad, particularly in the industrially advanced countries, and consumerism of an unprecedented scale, leading to the migration of doctors, engineers, and IT professionals. All this constitutes the brighter side of globalization, while the darker side of it comprises not only exploitative practices of multinational companies and financial institutions in the third world in organized ways, but also subtle forms of racial discrimination, which the above passage alludes to. Another aspect of the darker side pertains to the unlawful immigration of Biju to New York, and thousands like him, who arrive there without education, contacts, money and skills. Biju manages to make his disgraceful, lawless presence officially invisible, and as an illegitimate object of knowledge he also ambiguously remains in a state of non-knowledge, since the State Department has no record of him. "He had been abandoned among foreigners... The green card the green card... Without it he could not leave. To leave he wanted a green card. This was the absurdity" (99).

It may be interesting to observe that if valid documents, together with their protocols of visibility and knowledge work out the machinery of socio-material epistemology and that of control and power, according to Foucault (1977), the lack of them would have spared Biju the subjection to surveillance of the state. But ironically, on account of not having the documents Biju has been doomed to the ontology of exclusion and a greater predicament of non-existence in the state-controlled episteme in the midst of unlimited ethnic and cultural differences. To overcome this state of being what he tries to invoke is the cohesive epistemic grid of Indianness consisting of cultural values, presuppositions, religious beliefs and family tradition in order to install himself in an ontological position of centeredness and inclusion, with its implications of purity and authenticity. He does so in imaging himself to himself, although the shameful futility of this ontological process of self-imaging is also suggested when narrator begins the first segment of Chapter Twenty-two in a piquantly ironic manner:

Brigitte's, in New York's financial district, was a restaurant all of mirrors so diners might observe exactly how enviable they were as they ate. It was named for the owner's dog... (133)

That in the postcolonial cultural space, self-image cannot be anything but fawning, dog-like for people from a former a colony now presses upon Biju's consciousness. Further, it is a painful gesture of self-reflexivity and a double consciousness that Samir Dayal defines negatively "less a "both/and" and more a "neither just this/nor just that" (47) position that is liminal and that "compels us to see ourselves and our others in the same mirror"(49). Biju is forced to understand this in course of time that the search for authentic self-image cannot but be a doubtful proposition, for it is internally fractured with in-built double consciousness or liminality.

At first when Biju gets to see Indians merrily chomping beef steak in the restaurant he feels outraged and leaves this place in search of a place of "narrow purity" (137). After a lot of knocking about he lands up in the purely vegetarian Gandhi Café, a Hindu restaurant, claimed to be unpolluted by its owner as he does not keep Pakistanis and Bangladeshis among the staffers. But here the contradictions inherent within the notion of the purity of Hindu culture and cuisine become apparent, starting from the name of the owner Harish-Harry and extending to the commercialist fetishism of his so-called Hindu way of life, to his daughter becoming aggressively "American", to his meek Indian bride of a wife of the past having been metamorphosed now into a farcical ensemble of "white pantsuit, bobbed hair, vanity case" (150). Certainly, this too is not the right place for Biju, and he has "come home to no clarity of vision" (148). Later on Biju also realizes that no generalization can be made as to how the migrants image themselves to themselves. It depends on how long, old and tortuous one's journey away from home is. While Saeed Saeed, the first-generation migrant, says to him, "*First* I am Muslim, then a Zanzibari, *then I will BE* American" (136), Rajnibhai, the owner of Smokey Joe's, refuses to call himself a Gujarati, since he has undergone multiple displacements across generations, starting from Kampala, to Teepton, England, to Roanoke, Virginia, and finally to New York.

Further, Biju's experience of meeting freaks, cultists, deviant and promiscuous identities of all sorts threaten to destroy the epistemic grid of ontological notions of purity and cohesion, which he wants to hold on to. He is now prompted to ask certain questions that assume great thematic importance and are relevant to the psychopathological aspects of the liminality of Mr. Patel's being.

What was India to these people? How many lived in the fake version of their countries, in fake versions of other people's countries? Did their lives feel as unreal to them as his own did to him? (267)

These questions are heavily freighted with the ethical values of authenticity towards which he would now turn. He finds his life has been far too unreal in America. Lest he should “manufacture a fake version of himself like Harish-Harry, and “understand himself backward” (268) in terms of a chimerically originary India of the past, he decides to come back home to India to experience it all over again in its immediacy and realness. In a state of self-introspection he also begins to discover that life is not worth living all by oneself; one needs family, friends and society to dispel loneliness and exclusion. What is needed still more urgently is a modest life, which should help him overcome the ontology of self-obsession and reach one of least self-consciousness:

Year by year his life was not amounting to anything at all; in a space that should have included his family, friends, he was the only one displacing the air. And yet, another part of him had expanded: his self-consciousness and self-pity – oh the tediousness of it...Shouldn't he return to a life where he might slice his own importance, to where he might relinquish this overrated control over his own destiny and perhaps be subtracted from its determination altogether? *He might even experience the greatest luxury of not noticing himself at all.* (268, emphasis added)

Once, he bumped into a Lithuanian Hare Krishna Monk – already excluded from West Europe as its other. From him he averted his gaze of authentic Indian cultural episteme, looking down upon him and excluding him. Just as he had himself been looked down upon as an obscene object of knowledge by the agencies of the State, he treated this monk as though he were an “obscenity” (267), lurid and illegitimate.

In a bid to be ensconced in a position of the centeredness of authenticity all now he would seek for himself is to choose to come back home to India, the supposed repository of all its glorious values. But India has never remained the same as before and very unlike his homogeneous and purist national imaginary. But this is an illusion that he pursues. While perceiving in Harish-Harry and the Hare Krishna Monk the flaw of asynchronous temporalities, Biju himself embodies it in imagining authentic Indian-ness of a mythical time within postcolonial history.

While Biju was away, Indira Gandhi had been assassinated by the Sikhs in the name of their homeland; Rajiv Gandhi had taken over. (269)

Indira Gandhi's assassination on October 31, 1984, was both the cause and consequence of a real politicking by the political parties pandering to the forces of disunity from time to time for selfish gains. In addition, the politics of disunity has always been played out within the larger nationalist politics of the bourgeois state that constantly tries to paper over the regional anomalies and disunities and proclaim the myth that it is the “reconciler of differences” (Chatterjee *A Possible India* 147). The movements for homeland within India under various banners, beginning from the Khalistan movement

of the Sikhs and AGP (Assam Ganasangram Parishad) of the mid 1980s to those of Bodos, and ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) in the later times have been part of the political scene of post-independence India. In addition, instances like immigrant workers from North India getting beaten up by the MNS (Maharashtra Navanirman Sena) activists in Mumbai and the anti-Bihari rage in upper Assam in recent years seem to undermine the very notion the unity of India as a homeland. Indeed, home to whom, if some sections of Indian nationals domiciled for years in certain regions of the country are to be declared outsiders or foreigners?

And yet, Biju returns *home*. On his third-world flight, “he saluted himself” in the mirror of the bathroom of the plane (286). This self-imaging through the mirror is repeated as a powerful trope of his acknowledgement of the newly found ontology in *The Inheritance of Loss* and in many postcolonial novels.¹¹ It appears reassuring and real to him, notwithstanding its internally fractured nature and self-reflexivity. Even though it may have been uninformed, un-enlightened, and for that reason it is untainted, he returns home with the vulgar accoutrements of cheap T-shirts with “I love NY” and “Born in the USA” and caps that read “NYC” and “Yankees”, “I like My Beer Cold, My Women Hot”(270), and a mad jumble of gadgets that inscribe him in terms of the predictable semiotics of street-level globalization and assign to him the formulaic globalist ontology so that the neo-liberal West can regale itself in an epiphany of its modernity in the triumphal moment of having both appropriated and disenfranchised(economically and culturally excluded) the third world entity as a *dumb* consumer, and denying her/him not only autonomy and agency for economic and cultural freedom¹², but also ontological authenticity. So, the contradiction between Biju’s purist notions and consumerist predilections gives itself away. Therefore, however much impressive may be his attempt at self-reclamation after he steps out of Calcutta airport, with the comforting thought that he has finally shrunk back to his size, having gotten rid of the “enormous anxiety” of being a foreigner and “the unbearable arrogance and shame of the immigrant” (300), he cannot attain the greatness of purity and grace that is available only in an ideal, unselfconscious state beyond history. This state of being is ontology *sans* time and ego, and it is just the opposite of what Mr. Patel exemplifies. It is an ontology that tries to ignore the historical conditions of social exclusion, and, therefore, overcomes the anxiety of self-possession as well as fear of the dispossession of it, shame and anger. But it eludes Biju, since becomes the prisoner of history.

What awaits him is not just the trauma and indignity of being mugged at gun point of all his belongings – his hard-earned dollars, jeans, T-shirt and shoes – by the GNLF activists but a situation of social exclusion that subverts his ontological purism. The contradiction inherent in it between the disenfranchising cultural forces of globalization and nativist politics of homeland movement in Darjeeling creates an epistemic muddle. If, indeed, ontological purism needs to be translated into authentic identity within the

filial and culturally affinitive matrices of home, it is denied such scope in absence of the ethical value of authenticity in all forms of the homing desire here. The GNLFF activists have been shown by the narrator as a bunch of lumpen miscreants lacking in wholehearted faith in what they were doing:

Were these men entirely committed to the importance of the procession or there was a disconnected quality to what they did? Were they taking their cues from old protest stories or from the hope of telling a new story? Did their hearts rise and fall to something true? Once they shouted, marched, was the feeling authentic? Did they see themselves from a perspective beyond this movement, these unabashed Bruce Lee fans in their American T-shirts made-in China-coming-in via Kathmandu? (157)

What is brought to the fore is not just the shoddy, ersatz quality of the sartorial globalism of these insurgents, but also the dominance of a globalist epistemic order of fake signs and false labels that fudge the hard facts of economic inequality and blur the perception of the local and global in order to produce liminal ontologies across a diffusive space beyond national borders. Nevertheless they participate in an absurd politics for a homeland. Absurd because this politics is motivated by a mad zeal to revive the history of anti-colonial struggle, although being a far cry from the Gandhian ideology of *swadeshi* and boycott of foreign goods and clothes that characterized the struggle for the independence of homeland and *swaraj*. Gandhi's movement had the objective to attain indigenous ontology and legitimate it by anchoring it firmly upon one's own home and nation.

Understandably, the America-returned Biju has no home to come to. Although he meets his father in a gown which GNLFF hoodlums throw at him out of pity as they let him off, there is no prospect of his integration to a community, since there does not exist any. He has no money left for marrying and raising a family either. So, he is doomed to a state of social exclusion for ever despite all his attempts to gain centeredness and exclude others.

The inauthentic and illegitimate struggle for homeland also dooms Gyan, the tutor of Sai. This youth of Nepali origin struggles with the ontological conditions of a vacuous existence, which is grounded in the history of the displacement of his kinsmen from Nepal in the 19th century and their poverty and marginalization in the adopted homeland. When romance blooms between him and Sai and flourishes against the political turmoil as the background, he decides to stop being effeminate and namby-pamby. He wants to channel his passion toward the movement for the homeland in a bid to gain meaning, manhood, maturity and concreteness to his existence (259), for love is "fluid", not "firm" and wobbly (177). This passion excites him as he joins the insurgence, marching along with the crowd and mingling his voice "with largeness and lustiness" to experience a sense of relevancy and "an affirmation" of himself not felt by

him ever before and to be part of “the making of history” (157). The sense of relatedness to history and the comforting feelings of commitment to a cause and idea much larger than his nondescript, fragmented life are the desire for centeredness and ontological appurtenance of masculinity, which he desires intensely. This desire for masculinity and to seize history is exclusionary in its effect insofar as it is directed against Sai and her lovey-dovey immaturity. As a result she suffers exclusion at his hands. He also excludes his own father who he thinks is too “meek” and unmanly (60).

However, at one point of time he begins to suspect that his political passion is puerile, and the homeland movement is run by a motive no nobler than selfishness. Gyan’s viewpoint comes mediated through that of the narrator’s, and his naïve suppositions of the grandness of the independence movement of India are ironically qualified:

The patriotism is false, he suddenly felt, as he marched; it was just frustration – the leaders harnessing the natural irritations and disdain of adolescence for cynical ends; for their own hope in attaining the same power as government officials held now...Gyan remembered the stirring stories of when citizens had risen up in their millions and demanded that the British leave. There was the nobility of it, the daring of it, the glorious fire of it... If the nation had such a climax in history, its heart, would it not hunger for it again? (157-58)

Gyan begins to feel the *disconnectedness* of this movement from the larger and meaningful anti-colonial movement, which was the *climax* of the history of the nation. The narrator’s tongue-in-cheek quip that this historic high moment can never be relived again, though longed for, is obvious, given the notoriety of strong sexual flavor the word has. Whatever follows is a mere falling movement – more of an anti-climax than a denouement – toward something second-rate, unoriginal, inane and pathetic. It characterizes the postcolonial historicity and predicates the loss of originality, authenticity and contentment as the very ontological conditions of the postcolonial nation and the postcolonial subject, which are mere derivatives of colonialism. Gyan is ill at ease with himself. Just like Mr. Patel and Biju, he is all-too-conscious of his smallness as well as his poverty, and he becomes desperate “to be part of the larger questions... politics and history” (272). But his grandiose ontological plan cannot be sustained in these postcolonial times. He plays a mean role in the forceful eviction of Father Booty from his dairy farm and the stealing of the gun from *Cho Oyu* and feels ashamed of himself, though maintaining a brave and aggressive front when Sai confronts him. In reaction to this he desires for a reprieve into childhood, a realm of innocence and purity (which is a space excluded from manhood), much like Biju’s longs for the purity of Indianness. But the guilt of his betrayal in love and shame haunt him, and the possibilities of innocence and purity are lost to him forever. In other words, Gyan keeps wandering across ontological borders and asynchronous time frames of childhood and adulthood, not only excluding others, but also getting excluded by them.

He also tries to exclude himself into childhood, but gets trapped by perpetual knowledge of guilt of adulthood within history.

We have already seen quite much how Mr. Patel's obsession with the power and authority of colonial whiteness and Biju's zeal for pure Indianness are fraught with liminal possibilities of inclusion through exclusion and epistemic contradictions. Similarly, Gyan's foray into the homeland movement to redeem his manhood and its historical and political meaning in the context of the struggle for homeland too ends in his own exclusion from Sai and self-entrapment in perpetual guilt and ignominy. In all these three cases, love and marriage as important factors of ontological relatedness within family and community have been disabled. Jemubahi Patel, who gets excluded, has himself pushed his wife away from his life; the prospect of Biju's marriage is doubtful, since he has been robbed of all his money; and Gyan discards Sai and spoils the chances of reunion with her in love and marriage. In grappling with the compulsions of their ontological exclusion and liminality within the contradictions of postcolonial history they have lost those elements in their lives that can afford simple pleasures devoid of either the anxiety of self-consciousness or the embarrassment of smallness. Caught up in asynchronous time orders and epistemological confusion through double consciousness of liminality, they are doomed to a sense of incompleteness of their lives and uncertainty about the knowledge they form about themselves and the world. The only way out of this ontological impasse and knowledge of loss within postcolonial history is a state of un-self-consciousness and timelessness which the Kanchenjunga mountain peak embodies. But it is mediated through the time-consciousness of a closure on the part of the characters.

In the opening chapter, we find Sai reading about the giant squid in an old issue of *National Geographic* and the judge playing chess against himself in the cold, quiet Cho Oyu, while the mountain peak looms in the distance in its magical beauty. What strikes us is the contrast between the infinitely liberating and profoundly mysterious beauty of the mountain peak and the impossible longing of the girl for escape from the monotony and tedium of her ontological exclusion, which is symptomatic not only of her passion for exotica on the pages of the magazine but also of the hopeless self-enclosed ontological condition of Mr. Patel. Kanchenjunga seems as if it has been "whittled out of ice gathering *the last of the light*, a plume of snow blown high by the storms at its summit". Sai yearns for it, observing its "wizard phosphorescence" in the opening chapter (1, emphasis added). The ephemeral quality of its beauty and the desire for it are accentuated through a sad, unfulfilled sense of an ending in the last chapter. The mountain peak forms the backdrop, "glowing a *last pornographic pink...*" (223, emphasis added), to the gathering of Sai, Father Booty and Uncle Potty, who are in a state of utter dejection at life being suddenly robbed of beauty and certitude with the onset of Nepali insurgence. The renewal of desire in greater intensity through denial of its

fulfillment and the concomitant disillusionment, which pornography brings about, constitute the affective qualities of the ontology of these characters. The imagery of the mountain peak works out the frame of the fictional events of asynchronous temporalities in terms of a profound and mysterious truth of an immaculate, golden luminous presence that flashes when Biju meets his father in the closing scene of the novel:

The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent.

All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it. (324)

The novel ends on an ambivalent note that is keyed by the statement "...truth was *apparent*". Though the narrator proclaims one could reach out and pluck the truth that is felt to be anything but remote, one could scarcely do so because the moment of its perception is too brief. The meaning of apparentness as both clarity and illusiveness lends ambiguity to perception and knowledge of the existence of a truth that is pure, timeless and complete. In other words, the social exclusion, which the characters experience in their consciousness of fleeting time and a distinct sense of an ending within the entrapment of postcolonial history, entails its epistemological limits and contradictions even when possibilities of liberation from the consciousness of time and one's own being are close at hand. These possibilities of ontological purity are prefigured as a lyrical form of humanity and homeland that are ordinary and free from greed, ambition and human conflict in the poem of Jorge Luis Borges that Desai cleverly chooses as the epigraph to her novel:

More silent than my shadow, I pass through the lofty covetous multitude.
They are indispensable, singular, worthy of tomorrow.
My name is someone and anyone.
I walk slowly, like one who comes from so far away he doesn't expect to arrive.

The speaker excludes himself from the "covetous multitude", which are driven by ambition, greed and vainglory. Unlike them he does not have stakes in tomorrow, and unlike the speaker and his horse in Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" he is free to that extent he unencumbered by the obligations to the future and expectations of arrival. His ontological freedom suggested by the silence, unspecificity of name, unexpectedness of arrival is the ideal ontological state that has "delivered men their freedom and thinned clogged human hearts to joy" (277), which the cook once realized, gazing upon its extraordinary beauty and power of Kanchenjunga. But this ontological state of purity as well as freedom and the permanence of luminous knowledge remain unattainable, and social exclusion persists unabated as a postcolonial paradigm of loss.

In conclusion one can say that the novel does carry substantial autobiographical burden, particularly with regard to Kiran Desai's nagging feeling of being an outsider in the first-world location, irrespective of her Booker-acclaimed name and fame location. In various ways the characters, namely Sai and Biju, resonate feelings of exclusion in cultural terms in Kalimpong. In an interview which she combinedly with her mother Anita Desai gave to Maggie Gee, she said:

My first experience of really feeling like an outsider was when we left and it was just the two of us going up to the mountains to this town called Kalimpong which I write about in *The Inheritance of Loss*, when we were suddenly strangers on a hillside that was completely different. It was my first growing up moment when I realised that I was not the centre and my story was the only story – there were many books on the shelf. And when we left very quickly for England and then the United States and I think I became even more acutely aware of the fact – and all my work, I think, has also been about outside, not fitting in. Perhaps that is just one of the qualifications for being a writer in the first place, but I find that is true about everything that I have written. (35)

In postcolonial discourse we often come across jubilant and sanguine pronouncements like the following one that Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin make about the possibilities of independent ontology and identity:

The colonial condition involves “a dialectical relationship between the ‘grafted’ European cultural systems and an indigenous ontology, with its impulse to create and recreate an independent ontology, with its impulse to create and recreate an independent identity. Such construction or reconstruction only occurs as a dynamic interaction between European hegemonic systems and peripheral subversion of them. (195)

But *The Inheritance of Loss* seems to give the lie to it in portraying ontological and epistemic liminality not as an enabling condition of postcolonial hybridity but one of enervating social exclusion.

Notes

¹ All references are made to the online PDF format of *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* as originally published as *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, © 1995 Giulio Einaudi editore <http://korotonomedia2.googlepages.com/GiorgioAgamben-HOMOSACERSovereignPow.pdf>.

² Tagore takes an apolitical and humanist position in his lectures on nationalism in the West, India and Japan, and he pleads for a universalist human order through a passionate refusal of imperial political economy and denial of cultural incommensurability and political conflict between the East and the West. He valorizes an ideal state of being that is devoid of history and politics.

³ Prompted by regional imbalance in development and socio-economic backwardness, region-based, sub-nationalist politics has led to the process of carving out separate states of the Union of India from the existing states in recent years. In 2000, three states, namely Jharkhand, Chhattishgarh and Uttarakhand, were formed out of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh respectively. In December 9, 2009, the Union Minister of Home declared that the Government of India had consented to the formation of Telangana out of Andhra Pradesh. This move by the government has given various regional pressure groups in different regions of India enough motivation to press their demands for many more states.

4. Arif Dirlik's comment in this context is very pertinent as he argues, "Postcolonial as a description of intellectuals of third world origin needs to be distinguished... from postcolonial as a description of this world situation. In this latter usage, the term mystifies both politically and methodologically a situation that represents not the abolition but the reconfiguration of earlier forms of domination. The complicity of postcolonial in hegemony lies in postcolonialism's diversion of attention from contemporary problems of social, political, and cultural domination, and in its obfuscation of its own relationship to what is but a condition of its emergence, that is, to a global capitalism that, however fragmented in appearance, serves as the structuring principle of global relations" See Dirlik 331.

5. Another novel, Indira Ganesan's *Inheritance* (1997) – an abbreviated namesake – too has worked out an additional motif of Sonil's return to her grandmother's home who, lives in the island of Pi. Notwithstanding the ambiguity of this *topos* between India and Sri Lanka, Sonil is predestined towards an inheritance of gain. But Kiran Desai goes to the extreme point of the inheritance of and enacts homecoming as an enigma of arrival at a space where home does not exist.

6. I use the term regressive memory in a sense as opposed to that of Bergson's "memory of habit" and "pure memory", which is progressive. The regressive memory is personal, evocative, spontaneous and capricious in their reproduction, fugitive in their retention, directed towards the past, with proclivities towards dreams, and not controlled by necessity and conscious will. See Chapter III of Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory*. 152-162.

7. See G. Gueux's *La Névrose d'abandon*, whom Frantz Fanon cites in *Black Skin, White Mask* as a colonial psycho-pathological condition in Lesser Antilles:

In a patient of the negative-aggressive type, obsession with the past and the frustration, its gaps, its defeats, paralyzes his enthusiasm for living. Generally more introverted than the positive-loving type, he has a tendency to go over his past and present disappointments, building up in himself a more or less secret area of bitter, disillusioned resentment that often amounts to a kind of autism...His aggression and a constant need for vengeance inhibit his impulses. His retreat into himself does not allow him to have any positive experience that would compensate for his past. Hence the lack of self-esteem and therefore of affective security is virtually total in such case...Others have betrayed him and thwarted him, and yet it is only these others from whom he expects any improvements in his lot. (73-74)

8. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), which expatiated on the moral justification of imperialism as a necessary phase in the evolution of Western Civilization and the salvation of humankind, was recommended as one among the essential readings for the edification of the young imperial officials. The underlying accent of this classic of Enlightenment philosophy on utilitarianism later constituted a line of thinking formalized by Macaulay through English education, and it continued through James and John Stuart Mill, James Fitzjames Stephen, John Strachey, Gladstone, Morley etc. This legacy of Macaulay continued until the end of the empire in India, and has survived beyond it in many mutated forms in the fields of English education and bureaucracy. See Chakravarty 191-92.

9. Biju is haunted by an ontological condition of exclusion like Nuruddin Lalani in M.G. Vassanji's *No New Land* (1991), or Karsan in Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song* (2007), or like Santosh in the story "One Out of Many" by Naipaul in *In A Free State* (1971), or even like Chanu and Nazneen in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003). He is but one among a long array of fictional characters exemplifying the painful and debilitating conditions of diasporic liminality that cannot be mitigated by the ludic and subversive mimicry theorized by Homi Bhabha.

10. The politicians and statesmen referred to in the passage have ambivalent reports and claims about themselves. Mobutu Sésé Seko (1930-1997), the President of Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) rose to power through a bloodless coup in 1965, claiming to rid the country not only of corrupt communists, Soviet sympathizers and the hangers-on of Lumumba, but also the same time root out capitalists, under the Popular movement of Revolution. However, he ended up as a kleptokrat, having mismanaged the country's finances and resources for personal aggrandizement. Patrice Lumumba (1925-1961), the prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, was fiercely anti-colonial, but a Soviet sympathizer, having many political opponents, including President Mobutu, Kasa-Vubu and CIA. Eventually he was ousted by Mobutu and executed in January 1961.

For his part, Salvador Allende (1908-1973), Socialist President of Chile, was also the eye of a political storm. During his tenure the tension between the poor indigenous people who supported his reforms and the white settler elite intensified. Opposition to him by the Christian Democratic Party and CIA also mounted as he was accused of leading the country towards a Cuban-style dictatorship and Soviet-style Communism. He was ousted from office by a coup in September 1973. As for Augusto Pinochet, he assumed power of Chile, overthrowing Allende, and turned towards a liberal economy that brought about a substantial rise in the GDP and FDI. However, the government reduced public spending, increased military expenditure, and Chile became a Fascist state during his tenure. In 1998, he was arrested and indicted on grounds of the violation of Human rights during his tenure while

undergoing medical treatment in England. He returned home to Chile in 2000 and faced charges of indictment, but died having suffered disgrace.

11. Mirror-gazing as an ontological trope in the postcolonial novel is freighted with enormous semantic load in terms of race and gender. What I have in mind is not the metaphoric mirror image of the other in terms of which the white race has imagined itself variously as in the fiction of Rider Haggard or Joseph Conrad or Rudyard Kipling, among others. Nor, indeed, do I have in mind the trope of mirror image as an inverted and inescapably hostile one that Amitav Ghosh deals with in *The Shadow Lines*. I refer to the literal act of one looking into the mirror, which can lend itself to strikingly opposite themes of self-reclamation and self-possession on the one hand, and self-obsession, self-captivity on the other hand, producing opposite effects of empowerment and enervation, respectively. Nevertheless, self-empowerment in itself is fraught with the risk of the radical action it initiates no less than the terrible burden of existential loneliness it entails. To cite a few examples, in Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's *Devil on the Cross*, Jacinta Wariinga chooses to dress herself in the traditional Gikuyu attire and gazes into the mirror(217) before she walks off to her prospective father-in-law, a neo-imperial agent and her seducer, to shoot him. This gesture in the climatic moment of the novel is suggestive of her self-possession, confidence and reprisal, and she is prepared to face the consequence of her action. In Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Shadrac, the black disbanded soldier from the World War goes to prison on charges of vagrancy and drunkenness, but is filled with self-assurance at the image of his "indisputable presence"(13) in the water of the toilet bowl. Although he defines the ontology of his blackness in his own terms and "falls to the first deep sleep of his new life" (14), this act is shot through with the mordant irony of the abominable circumstances in which it takes place. In the same novel, Nel also looks at her face in the mirror, whispering: "I am me"(28), but she cannot hold out against the terrible effect of the loneliness this self-empowerment involves, and soon yields to conjugal relationship, allowing herself to be defined what she is by her husband Jude.

In contrast to the above examples, the glass-gazing on the part of the prostitute Jagua in the presence of male voyeurs is an act of reducing herself into a sex object in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*, (5, 111). But she exonerates herself at the end by leaving Lagos and running to the country-side and reintegrating herself with the community of women of Onitsha, where all she does is dream in a state of self-liberation. As for Amu in *The God of Small Things*, her glass-gazing in he bathroom in full nudity (222) is a pathetic indulgence in her own sensuality to compensate for the horror of hurtling down an uncharted, joyless road towards an unknown destination. Much as she wants "her body back" (224), to own herself, and not to be owned even by her children, she sinks into the ontological condition of self-captivity. In a state of despondency and utter loneliness after she has broken up with Gyan, Sai also flings herself "at her reflection in the mirror: What will happen to me?!"(265). The closed frame of the mirror and the pathetically lugubrious self-dramatization instantiate a hopeless ontological state of self-captivity and isolation.

12. See López and Mohapatra for an incisive critique of the neo-liberal epiphany with regard to India in a Global age 1-10.

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