Negotiating Cultural Identity in *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore three modes of cultural identification presented in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. With three intersecting plotlines, the novel focuses on three divergent modes of cultural identification in different spatio-temporal contexts. The first kind of cultural identification is imbued with a sense of foreignness, exemplified by the judge, Jemubhai, whose cultural identity is deeply shaped by imperialist ideology during British colonization of India. As Indian culture is negated by the colonial power, Jemubhai adheres to English cultural identification and disavows his Indianness. The second mode of cultural identification revolves around the issue of cultural authenticity in the diasporic context for Biju, a young migrant, illegal worker in various restaurants in New York. To survive in a foreign country, Biju forces himself to transgress cultural borders, which disconcerts Biju and further prompts him to pursue cultural authenticity. The third mode highlights Sai's and Gyan's trajectories of cultural identification. Just as Sai, Jemubhai's granddaughter, embodies the idea of in-betweenness, Gyan, Sai's math tutor, manifests the desire to escape narrow nationalism. Both Sai and Gyan evoke the potential of crossing borders. Juxtaposing the three modes of cultural identification, Desai's novel explores the process of negotiating cultural identity and gestures towards a field of border-crossing identity.

Keywords: authenticity, cultural identity, foreignness, Kiran Desai, in-betweenness, *The Inheritance of Loss*

Introduction

Situated in Kalimpong, a town at the contested Indo-Nepal border in north-eastern India, Kiran Desai's second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, weaves three intersecting plot threads into her narrative, spanning some five decades from the colonial past in the 1930s to the globalized present in the 1980s. One plot concerns the story of the retired judge, Jemubhai Patel, who is estranged from his Indian cultural roots and lives in the shadow of British colonization. Spending his solitary life in Cho Oyu, a dilapidated mansion in the Himalayas, Jemubhai immerses himself in memories of his youth during the British colonization in the first half of the 20th century, triggered by the arrival of his granddaughter Sai. Another plot is centered on Buji, a migrant, illegal worker who lives in the liminal space of the restaurants' basements in New York. The degrading poverty in New York and the media report about political agitation in Kalimpong galvanize Biju to relinquish his unfulfilled American dream. After much struggle, Buji, the son of the judge's cook, embarks on the journey to the dreamland only to realize that the outbound journey is also a return to the "imaginary" homeland. The other plot focuses not only on the conflicts between Sai, the Judge's granddaughter, and Gyan, a Nepali in Kalimpong, but also on political unrest, particularly the Gorkhaland Movement in Kalimpong.[1] Through Sai's and Gyan's perspectives, the narrative highlights the younger generation's discontent with the status quo.

With the interlaced story threads, *The Inheritance of Loss* maps three modes of cultural identification. First, Jemubhai's cultural identification is imbued with a sense of foreignness, which signifies non-Indianness or, more exactly, Englishness. Literally, foreignness is an attribute of something that comes from a foreign country, yet foreignness is a notion not merely racially but also culturally charged. Jemubhai's foreignness is acquired by turning himself into a non-Indian in terms of culture. Remarkably, intertwined with the sense of foreignness is the state of self-abjection. Forming his cultural identity in the colonial period, Jemubhai demonstrates how colonial interpellation constitutes the colonized individual as an abject subject and, thus, Jemubhai constructs his identity as a foreigner in his homeland so as to belie his self-abjection. Second, in the diasporic condition, Biju's cultural identification reflects his abiding concern over the choice between adherence to one's roots and coming to terms with "routes" or "the processes of adjustment and negotiation" (Sarwal, 2017, p. 2) while moving out of one's original culture. The third mode features a potential tendency to cross borders, exemplified both by Gyan, who longs for an escape beyond ethnic and national boundaries, and by Sai, who inhabits the in-between space, a space that accentuates "assimilation of contraries" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38). Examining the discrete ways that cultural identity is consolidated and contested, this paper investigates how the characters in the novel negotiate their cultural identity and what underlies the three modes of cultural identification.

Several critics have drawn attention to the relevant issues of colonialism, globalization, and nationalism in Desai's novel. Shalini (2009) focuses on the lingering effect of colonialism that causes the Judge's loss of self-esteem and dignity (p. 198). From the postcolonial perspective, Spielman (2010) argues that Desai's novel "shows us a radical postcolonial subjectivity in

[1] Historically, the region of Kalimpong belonged to Sikkim and Bhutan in the 19th century before the British launched wars with Sikkim (then an independent kingdom, but occupied by the British in 1861) and Bhutan to take over the three hill subdivisions of Darjeeling district, with Kalimpong being one of the three (Dasgupt, 1999, pp. 47–48). "Gorkhaland" comes from the Nepali language Gorkha, which creates a sense of unity for the Nepalis. In1986, a new violent movement was launched by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), a political party founded in 1980, to demand "official recognition of their language, and a separate Gorkhaland for the Nepalese community in Darjeeling" (Datta & Sengupta, 2020, p. 97).

which flexibility, assimilation, multiculturalism are preferable to maintaining difference" (p. 74).

An intrinsic part of these two critics' views is indeed the issue of identity; that is, how colonized people are deprived of their identity and how identity is inflected by differences in the postcolonial period. Highlighting the effects of globalization, Dennihy (2009) points to the negative picture of globalization shown in Desai's novel. Concilio (2010) categorizes Desai's novel under the label of "global novels," which bring to the fore the comparisons between postcolonial situations in India and diasporic conditions in New York (pp. 89, 102, 105–6). Jay (2010) underscores the fact that nationalism is not superseded but spurred by globalization (p. 73). Though not particularly pronounced, the issue of identity is embedded in these readings. In fact, all three plots of Desai's novel resonate with the pertinent theme of "who I am" or "what I belong to," not just ethnically but also culturally, by portraying the characters faced with the challenges of colonialism, nationalism, or diasporic conditions in the era of globalization.

In his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall (1990) conceptualizes cultural identity in two ways. First, cultural identities reflect "common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people," with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning" (Hall, 1990, p. 223). In this sense, according to Hall (1990), the conception of cultural identity underscores "oneness," the truth or the essence of a certain ethnic group (pp. 223–4). Second, cultural identity is "a matter of becoming" (Hall, 1990, p. 235). Acknowledging the fact that cultural identities, instead of being fixed, go through transformations, this conception of cultural identity recognizes "ruptures and discontinuities" (p. 235) and accentuates difference from the past or the origin. Hall (1996) states more clearly in "Introduction: who needs 'identity'?" that identification should be viewed "as a construction, a process never completed—always 'in process'" (p. 2). In line with Hall's notions of cultural identity, Desai's novel navigates through the process of constructing cultural identity in different historical contexts. Shifting between different characters' experiences, the novel tackles several critical questions: How is the construction of cultural identity mediated? Can individuals reject a certain cultural identity imposed on them? Can individuals transform their cultural identity in a certain way? In a word, how do individuals negotiate their cultural identity?

Unlike several essays which have addressed identity issues in Desai's novel in terms of identity crisis and cultural clash (Kondali, 2018; Subbulakshmi, 2019; Pandey & Wani, 2019), this paper delves into the dynamics of cultural identification in different historical conditions and further indicates the submerged theme of border-crossing inherent to Desai's novel. For one thing, borders refer to the geographic and political boundaries of a certain territory. With the story mainly set in Kalimpong, the novel posits a world where geopolitical borders between nations are contingent on political power and frequently contested.

These geopolitical borders manifest themselves as "arbitrary constructions" (Brah, 1996, p. 198). For another thing, geopolitical borders, by extension, serve as a metaphor for the social, cultural and ethnic boundaries which, though intangible, circumscribe a person's identity. In this regard, according to Anzaldúa (1987), the border functions "as a dividing line" (p. 3) that differentiates the legitimate from the illegitimate in terms of sexuality, ethnicity, and culture. Such a dividing line is interrelated with the way that identity is shaped. As Anzaldúa (1987) further notes, the struggle with identity issues coincides with "the struggle of borders" (p. 63). In the same vein, Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* demonstrates that the existence of tangible

and intangible borders is linked covertly or overtly to the way people constitute their cultural identity. This paper shows that towards the end of the novel, the possibility of border-crossing is indeed envisioned.

Jemubhai's Foreignness and Abject Self

In her interview with *The Guardian* (2009) after winning the Booker Prize, Desai offers a portrait of her grandfather, on whom the depiction of the main protagonist, Judge Jemubhai Patel, is based. Desai describes her grandfather in the following way: "As a child, he had sat under a streetlamp to learn the English dictionary by heart. He sailed to England on a scholarship; returned a judge; travelled from village to village holding court beneath the trees; dispensed justice under the fundamentally unjust colonial system. *His face was a mask*" (para. 2; emphasis added). Desai's words evoke Fanon's description of the colonized in *Black Skin, White Masks*. As Fanon (1967) suggests, "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (p. 38) and the colonized would become whiter as they gain "greater mastery of cultural tool that language is" (p. 38). To be assimilated into the colonizer's culture, the colonized like Desai's grandfather and Jemubhai make every effort to acquire the English language to the extent that they seem to wear a mask concealing their negated true self.

Indeed, in the novel, Jemubhai responds to the imperialist interpellation of the colonial subject[2] by obtaining the mastery of English language and culture, which eventuates in his becoming a foreigner, alienated from his Indian culture. During British rule, the young Jemubhai strives to learn the English language and wins the chance to study in Cambridge, England, which paves the way to his recruitment into the Indian Civil Service. Back to India, he takes great pains to consolidate his cultural identity by performing English cultural practices. Eventually, internalization of the cultural hierarchy alienates him from his culture of origin and converts him into a foreigner. While searching for a place to ensconce himself, Jemubhai enters the mansion Cho Oyu and decides that he "could live here, in this shell, this skull, with the solace of *being a foreigner in his own country*, for this time he would not learn the language" (Desai, 2006, p. 32; emphasis added).[3] Built by a Scotsman who enjoys reading travel accounts during British rule, Cho Oyu materializes a westerner's idea of adventure, which is inspired by British writers' imagination of India. However, for Jemubhai, Cho Oyu is not so much a product of "adventure-imperialism," termed by Said (1993, p. 155), but it evokes Jemubhai's imaginary cultural identification. The foreign atmosphere of Cho Oyu appeals to Jemubhai, who is unable to feel at home in his homeland, India.

Jemubhai's cultural identity as a foreigner at home is constituted in the process of negating and disavowing his Indian self. Food acts as a catalyst for self-negation and self-disavowal. Just as he boards the ship, setting off to Britain in 1939, Jemubhai also embarks on the journey of jettisoning his native food culture. On the ship, the smell of Indian-style food prepared by his mother arouses discomfort in his cabin mate and triggers his feeling of shame. What further infuriates Jemubhai is his mother's concern that Jemubhai may not be able to use a knife and fork. With a sense of inferiority, Jemubhai furiously throws the whole package of food overboard, condemning his mother for her "undignified love, Indian love, stinking, unaesthetic love" (Desai, 2006, p. 43). Jemubhai's denunciation of his mother's food, prepared out of

[2] In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1967) uses the interpellation of "Dirty nigger!" or "Look, a Negro!" to describe the process of the colonized coming into being as an abject in relation to the colonizer (p. 109). Slightly different from Fanon's interpellation, Jemubhai in Desai's novel is called on by the imperialist power to become part of the colonial administrative system, the Indian Civil Service.

[3] Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* (New York: Grove Press, 2006). All the subsequent quotations are from this edition and followed by page numbers in parentheses.

maternal love, is an unequivocal gesture to devalue Indian culture. Nevertheless, such inferiority does not vanish along with the food; even after he discards the package of food, the smell of the food remains, exposing "the stink of fear" of being Indian (Desai, 2006, p. 43). Indeed, the uninviting smell of the food reveals Jemubhai's abject self.

The signification of food and smell deserves further interpretation. As Jay (2010) reminds readers, "food is culturally coded in the novel; what and how one eats regularly carries symbolic import among the characters" (p. 128). In Jemubhai's case, food, instead of providing beneficial nutritious substance for humans, is perceived to be offensive and threatening to his sense of self and functions as the abject in Kristeva's concept of abjection. Kristeva (1982) puts it directly, "Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (p. 2). In terms of human psychological development, abjection marks the moment when we confront the threatening other, distinguish ourselves from the other, and draw a boundary between "me" and the "(m)other" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 13). Elaborating on Kristeva's theory, Grosz (1989) points out that the abject refers to the improper, the unclean and the disorderly that disturbs order and system and thus has to be expelled so that proper subjectivity can be achieved (p. 71). In the novel, Jemubhai perceives the food prepared by his mother as the abject, which the self should be separated from. Jemubhai's act of throwing the food away is to cast out the abject that threatens to undermine the English cultural identity, or the ideal self, which he endeavors to construct. Nonetheless, his body odor affected by the food persists, distinctively marking him as the abject other during his stay in England. On the bus, no passenger would take the seat beside him as "girls held their noses and giggled, 'Phew, he stinks of curry!'" (Desai, 2006, p. 45). The smell of curry, exuded from Jemubhai's body, prompts repulsion.

Obviously, in England the smell of curry deepens his sense of self-abjection. The abject image of his self is not merely reflected in other people's eyes, but gradually he himself finds fault with his physical appearance and body odor to the extent that he eventually conceals himself in the shadows with a twisted mind. Jemubhai finds "his own skin odd-colored" (Desai, 2006, p. 45), and even under strict self-scrutiny as well as the constant gaze of others, he begins to "wash obsessively, concerned he would be accused of smelling" (Desai, 2006, p. 45). Identifying with the negated image of his self in people's eyes, he examines every part of his own body in a prejudiced light. Just as Fanon (1967) points out, "Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" (p. 110) and the colored body is "the burden of that corporeal malediction" (p. 111) that the colonized wish to throw off. In Jemubhai's case, he thus prefers "shadow to light, faded days to sunny, for he [is] suspicious that sunlight might reveal him, in his hideousness, all too clearly" (Desai, 2006, p. 45). After severe self-examination, Jemubhai starts "the process of making" (Singh, 2009, p. 55), transforming himself by using foreign things, adopting new habits, and "performing English identity" (Spielman, 2010, p. 77). In addition to correcting his English accent, he takes great pains to remove any physical differences or non-English characteristics. Particularly, Jemubhai cultivates the habit of covering his originally dark skin with white powder.

A series of conflicts between Jemubhai and his family ensue due to his new habit. After his return to India, Jemubhai still follows the habit of applying white powder on his skin, which renders him a foreigner in his hometown. However, the powder puff triggers confusion. Out of curiosity, his wife, Nimi, rummages through his suitcase and belongings and finds several items for personal grooming in a toilet case, including "a jar of green salve, a hairbrush and comb set in silver, a pom-pom with a loop of silk in a round container of powder" (Desai, 2006, p. 182). All these objects convey "crisp light lavender scents…of a foreign place" (Desai, 2006, p. 182)

in stark contrast to the smell of dust and rain in Jemubhai's hometown. Unable to find the puff, Jemubhai panics, which creates chaos in the family and further reveals the discrepancy between the foreign thing and the local language. Jemubhai's family attempt to know what exactly is missing. Insomuch as this foreign thing that Jemubhai uses to transform himself has no word in the local language, it is almost impossible to translate what Jemubhai calls "powder puff" into something familiar to Jemubhai's family, who even have trouble vocalizing its foreign name. The act of transforming his self through this exquisite powder is to construct a cultural identity that differentiates and alienates Jemubhai from his family.

To reiterate his constructed Englishness, Jemubhai practices English cultural habits, among which keeping pets is a significant one. Jemubhai cultivates the modern, foreign habit of pet keeping as a symbol of English culture which he immerses himself in. While studying in Cambridge in order to be the member of the ICS, he is unable to have any connection or intimacy with humans for fear that his English accent would be the target of derision and his physical presence the object of abhorrence. Instead, Jemubhai builds up a friendship with the landlady's dog. This relationship with a dog is nevertheless foreign to Indian culture; as the narrator puts it, "[t]his was his first relationship with an animal, for in Piphit the personalities of dogs were not investigated or encouraged" (Desai, 2006, p. 122). Then back in India, despite his alienation from his family and relatives, Jemubhai retains this foreign practice of keeping a dog as his pet. Even when his granddaughter, Sai, comes to live with him, the only being that Jemubhai feels intimate with is his pet dog, Mutt. But more than building a relationship between humans and animals, pet-keeping instills a sense of superiority in pet owners. According to Grier (2010), keeping pets reflects the social, economic and cultural status of the owner (p. 7). For Jemubhai, keeping a pet is a modern, cultural practice which demonstrates and reinforces his English cultural identity. That is why the narrator describes Mutt as a "concept" (Desai, 2006, p. 354), and why Jemubhai's sense of self is totally lost when Mutt is stolen.

Jemubhai constructs his cultural identity through the abjection of his Indian self, and by performing English cultural practices, Jemubhai consolidates a new cultural identity for himself. As he claims to be a foreigner in his own country, his cultural identification is permeated with the sense of foreignness which denotes Englishness and superiority. Desai's narrative captures the way that Jemubhai negotiates his cultural identity in the shadow of colonial and postcolonial legacies. In the process of his negotiation, Jemubhai might console himself with the illusion of being a foreigner, but not without cost, the cost of losing kinships as well as his culture of origin.

Biju's Quest for Cultural Authenticity

In contradistinction to Jemubhai's rejection of Indianness, Biju's longing for pure Indianness arises in response to cultural displacement. Working illegally in New York, Biju yearns for Indian culture but finds nothing purely Indian. Gradually, he prioritizes cultural authenticity by demarcating the line between the authentic and the inauthentic. Biju's adherence to cultural authenticity is mainly reflected in his anxiety not only about food but also about cross-ethnic encounters in globalized, diasporic conditions.

Biju's experience of working in restaurants in New York exposes global culture as a mixture of the fake and the authentic. To be more specific, in those restaurants where Biju works illegally, the underground and the aboveground worlds are far different.

While those nominally "French," "colonial" and "American" restaurants are meant to offer fancy and high-class dining experience, illegal workers from different postcolonial countries converge in the underground world, which is crowded, unsafe, and unclean. The food signifies superiority, but the culinary process is marked by opposite connotations. In an ironic tone, the narrator describes the contradictory mixture as "the balance, perfectly first-world on top, perfectly third-world twenty-two steps below. Mix it up in a heap and then who would patronize [the] restaurant?" (Desai, 2006, p. 25). Despite the separation of culinary processes from customers' dining experience, the so-called French food inevitably turns out to be fake. In the cosmopolitan city of New York, such restaurants are a travesty of authenticity; as Biju wonders, "Do restaurants in Paris have cellars full of Mexicans, desis, and Pakis?" (Desai, 2006, p. 25). Though the term hybridity is not used specifically by the narrator while describing the scene of globalization, the conflicting mixture of the first and third worlds represented by the restaurants nonetheless captures the essence of cultural hybridity in terms of cross-cultural encounters and cultural fusion.[4]

Whereas cultural hybridity characterizing global culture undermines the possibility of certifying cultural authenticity, Biju, feeling disconnected in a foreign country, still struggles for authentic Indian culture which he belongs to. The question of what it means to be a true Indian recurs in his diasporic experience. For instance, in New York, working with Pakistanis, which is supposedly intolerable to Indians, unsettles Biju, for whom the line between Indians and Pakistanis is rooted in his cultural beliefs. Food becomes another source of Biju's anxiety especially when the line between the edible and the inedible is blurred. As he works in restaurants that serve beef, Biju is faced with the dilemma between his job and religious belief. To solve this dilemma, Biju attempts to distinguish between "a holy cow and an unholy cow" (Desai, 2006, p.151) in order to convince himself that cows in the United States are not sacred and therefore edible. Indeed, the idea of edible cows sums up Biju's struggles between roots and routes. On the one hand, Biju adheres to the root of his identity constituted by Indian culture and insists that "one should not give up one's religion, the principles of one's parents and their parents before them" (Desai, 2006, p.151). On the other hand, Biju is still inevitably confronted with the fact that the meaning of "holy cows," contingent on "a process of movement and mediation" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 19),[5] has been changed as a result of moving along the route.

In the era of globalization, with the increasing flows of people, cultural hybridity, though disturbing to Biju, is an ineluctable phenomenon. Biju's coworker Saeed from Zanzibar undoubtedly demonstrates the necessity of adaptation, transformation, and mixture in the face of cultural hybridity. As Saeed claims, he is willing to marry any woman for the green card, and in order to earn money, he has no scruple about working in a dress store named "Banana Republic," "synonymous with colonial exploitation and the rapacious ruin of the third world" (Desai, 2006, p.112). According to Horne (1999), Saeed can be viewed as a sort of post-colonial trickster, who "refutes colonial binary oppositions and definitions" (p. 133). Able to "transmute

[4] The term hybridity has many meanings. Though Bhabha (1994) develops the concept of hybridity to open up a space of negotiation and to destabilize cultural supremacy (p. 37), hybridity is not so much empowering as threatening and arouses anxiety in Biju's circumstances. In my analysis, I am in line with Grossberg's view of hybridity as an image of border-crossing, mobility, uncertainty and multiplicity (1996, pp. 91-92). See also Marwan M. Kraidy's *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (2005), Chapter One, for a broader meaning of hybridity.

[5] Through the image of "roots," Gilroy (1993) suggests the notion of a natural, stable and rooted identity in connection to the homeland while the homonym "routes" emphasizes that identity is in a process of continuous change.

himself" and "embrace fluidity" (Horne, 1999, p.133), Saeed adapts to different or even antagonistic principles in globalized, diasporic conditions.

Nonetheless, for Saeed, despite the adaptations in order to survive, the fundamental principle is never violated; that is, he would never relinquish his religious faith. Saeed prioritizes his multiple identities in this way: "First I am Muslim, then I am Zanzibari, *then* I *will be* American" (Desai, 2006, p. 152; emphasis in original). Obviously, religion forms the most essential part of his identification, and thus he refuses to eat pork and insists on his religious ritual every morning. Still, it is noteworthy that Saeed's religious practices have been adjusted to his diasporic conditions in the U.S. Given that it is not convenient for him to attend the real mosque, he purchases "a model of mosque with a quartz clock set into the bottom that was programmed, at the five correct houses, to start agitating: 'Alah hu Akbar, La ilhaha illullah, wal lah hu akbar...'" (Desai, 2006, p. 152).[6] It can be argued that Saeed's religious ritual practice is a mixture of the imitated, unreal mosque and the authentic words. In this way, the ancient words offer "sustenance to create a man's strength, his faith in an empty-bellied morning and all through the day" (Desai, 2006, p. 152). Saeed's faith remains unchanged despite all the transformations that he has to undertake in his diasporic experience.

Biju and Saeed embody two discrepant views of how diasporic subjects can negotiate their cultural identity. While Saeed strikes a balance between adaptation to the global, hybrid culture in New York and insistence on his religious roots, Biju decides to pursue authenticity which is not adulterated by differences and changes. Biju admires Saeed's religious insistence so much so that he inadvertently ignores Saeed's flexible adjustments. Inspired by Saeed's adherence to religious faith and thus motivated to "live within a narrow purity" (Desai, 2006, p. 152), Biju eventually works in a cafe named "Gandhi Café," which claims to be an "all-Hindu establishment. No Pakistanis and no Bangladeshis" (Desai, 2006, p. 155). Serving no beef meal, the owner of Gandhi Café emphasizes that his food is "the real thing, generic Indian" (Desai, 2006, p. 161). Authenticity is reiterated, which appeals to Biju's fascination with pure Indianness.

Nonetheless, Biju's quest for authenticity is frustrated, since the so-called Indian restaurant is not established on the basis of the owner's identification with Indian cultural roots, but rather it aims to fulfill the market's demand. In the first place, Biju is convinced that the Gandhi Café is a place without any contradictions. According to the narrator's depiction, "as [Biju] approaches the Gandhi Café, the air gradually grows *solid*" (Desai, 2006, p. 154; emphasis added). The word "solid" succinctly signifies Biju's desire for something unmixed with differences so as to guarantee a pure, authentic Indian identity. But it later dawns on Biju that the owner's hyphenated name Harish-Harry implies "a deep rift" (Desai, 2006, p. 164) and even alienation from the real Indian culture. It is the principle of capitalism that Harish-Harry follows: "find your market. Study your market. Cater to your market" (Desai, 2006, p. 161). In short, marketing, demand-supply, and profits are what Harish-Harry identifies himself with.
While encountering ethnic, cultural and religious diversities, Biju still longs for a cultural identity that is authentically Indian. Overwhelmed by a sense of loss, Biju turns to the memory of his past life in the village with his grandmother. For Biju, Kalimpong becomes the distant, "imaginary" homeland,[7] urging him to return. But his return to Kalimpong does not lead to the

[6] These words are a common Islamic Arabic expression, used in various contexts by Muslims in their prayer in times of distress or to express determination.

[7] Here the term "imaginary" has two connotations. One is the images transmitted by the printing press. In the novel, Biju receives the news of the political conflicts through the newsagent who sells copies of "*India Abroad*" (Desai, 2006, p. 250) and at that moment, the news reconnects Biju with his homeland, which is, as Benedict

realization of cultural authenticity. Indeed, as Biju ends up being robbed of all his possessions on his journey back home, Biju's move is ironic, and his quest for cultural authenticity is futile.

Towards Third Space and Beyond Borders: Sai's In-Betweenness and Gyan's Desire for Escape

The third storyline of Desai's novel deals with how Sai and Gyan negotiate their cultural identity within the region of Kalimpong, which is traversed by ethnic and cultural borders. Indeed, both Sai and Gyan engage with the issue of border-crossing. Border-crossing occurs on two levels. On the literal level, it is defined as the act of crossing the geographic and political borders between nations, such as Biju's transnational border-crossing. On the other level, there exist borders between classes, cultures or ethnicities. In the novel, Sai never travels abroad and even seldom moves beyond the hill village where Cho Oyu is located. But Sai's family and educational backgrounds increase her chances of crossing over the dividing line that differentiates people and, as a result, Sai tends to interact with those from different classes and cultures, such as the sisters Lola and Noni, who have assimilated into British culture, Biju's father the cook in Cho Oyu from a lower caste, Father Booty the Indianized priest from Switzerland, etc. Similarly, inside India, Gyan's Nepali identity forces him to confront the ethnic and cultural demarcations. In the narrative, the conflict between Sai and Gyan due to their different cultural and ethnic identities triggers their contemplation of the way that the construction of identity is based on the demarcation of boundaries. Despite their different trajectories, both Sai and Gyan manifest the desire to transcend borders that may lead to the exclusion of otherness.

Diverging from her grandfather's identification with English culture and his abjection of his Indian self, Sai's cultural identity is infused with the sense of in-betweenness owing to her family backgrounds. Sai's father, a Zoroastrian who grows up in a Zoroastrian charity for orphans, completes his college education with the financial support from a donor.[8] After college, he joins the Air Forces and later is recruited as an astronaut for the Indo-Russian space project. To some extent, Sai's father has achieved a sort of social mobility from the dispossessed orphan to the professional elite. On her mother's part, given that Sai's grandmother Nimi is abandoned during pregnancy by Sai's grandfather Jemubhai, Sai's mother is never close to her father, but she is sent to St. Augustine's Convent, where she receives English education as Sai later does. With all these family backgrounds, Sai's identity is characterized by in-betweenness. Being both Indian and Zoroastrian, while culturally English, Sai occupies a location imbued with ethno-racial as well as cultural heterogeneity.

Throughout the narrative, Sai embodies the state of in-betweenness. Though she performs more English than Indian cultural practices, Sai harbors doubts about cultural hierarchy ingrained by the nuns in St. Augustine's Convent. Her westernized education in the convent notwithstanding,

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Anderson argues, imagined. The other connotation is Biju's imagination (Desai, 2006, p. 112), from which his longing for homeland emerges. Either mediated by images in the printing press or formed through his imagination of those good old days, Biju's homeland might not correspond to the real place but suggests "a mythic place of desire" (Brah, 1996, p. 192).

[8] Seldom do critics pay attention to the ethnic and religious identity of Sai's father as a Zoroastrian probably because Desai mentions this piece of information in passing. Nevertheless, this paternal inheritance should contribute in some degree to Sai's in-betweenness. Also, it reinforces the fact of ethno-racial heterogeneity in Indian society. The population of Zoroastrians in India was estimated at 61000 in 2012 according to Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (https://www.fezana.org/files/Demographics/Zworld6Sep12.pdf). For the history of the Zoroastrian migration to India and the diasporic condition of Zoroastrian community and religion in India, see Monica M. Ringer's *Pious Citizens: Reforming Zoroastriaism in India and Iran* (2011).

Sai does not uphold the belief that Western culture is superior to Indian culture. To Sai, the dichotomy between the West and the East is suffocating and full of "contradictions" (Desai, 2006, p. 33), which she constantly brings into question. Sai's in-betweenness renders her receptive to differences[9] and sympathetic towards such a character as the cook in Cho Oyu, with whom Sai forms a close tie. By the same token, the community that Sai associates herself with, including Father Booty and Uncle Potty, can be described as a mixture of Indianness and foreignness. Particularly, the narrator portrays Father Booty, the Swiss priest who lived in India for more than four decades, as "an *Indian foreigner*" (Desai, 2006, p. 242; emphasis in original), who has made foreign cheese localized. Within this heterogeneous community, Sai establishes a cultural identity that tends to be more inclusive than exclusive, transcending borders.

On the other hand, Gyan is positioned differently from Sai in terms of ethnicity as well as culture. Unlike Sai, Gyan cannot use a knife and fork with ease, nor can he celebrate Christmas without feeling anti-Western sentiments. Gyan's ancestors migrated from Nepal to Darjeering in the 1800s; later, some of his family members are recruited by the British Imperial Army to fight, but none of them has ever won any acknowledgement from the British Empire. They have never been to England but have been left in poverty. In other words, in the social hierarchy under British colonization, Gyan's ancestors occupy the lowest rank, being totally dispossessed. As a Nepali, Gyan's ethnic background marks him as an outsider in Indian society, posing an obstacle in his search for a decent job despite his college degree.

Unemployment further worsens Gyan's situation and leads him to the involvement in political conflicts accompanied by the rising nationalism rekindled by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) in the 1980s to call for the creation of a separate Gorkhaland state in the Nepali-speaking areas of northeastern India. Indeed, it is not so much Gyan's political stance as his frustration with the status quo that motivates Gyan to join political demonstrations. Even when he is accidentally driven into the crowd of protesters on the street, Gyan's attitude cannot be characterized completely by enthusiasm but punctuated by detachment and skepticism. Caught in the political turmoil, Gyan is overwhelmed by the tension between reality and history so much so that he appears detached, moving "beyond this moment" (Desai, 2006, p. 173) and looking back skeptically at the demonstrators from a different perspective with "a feeling of history being wrought, its wheels churning under him, for the men were behaving as if there were being featured in a documentary of war" (Desai, 2006, p. 173). The protest scenario seems familiar, virtual, yet unreal not only because the scenes of political demonstrations have been broadcast in the media but also because history often repeats itself. What is transpiring at the moment already seems like déjà vu, whereas Gyan finds reality unchanged. Years after the end of British colonization and after India's independence, inequality still remains entrenched in Indian society. Scanlan (2010) pinpoints the irony evoked by Gyan's skepticism: "Shrug off the Empire, shrug off the nation, and who is to say that one will not feel oppressed in the homeland" (p. 271). Gyan's skepticism engenders a desire to "[f]ly away. Free from history" (Desai, 2006, p. 173). This desire to be free implies a wish to evade confinement within the borders of nations and ethnicities, for Gyan gradually realizes that national or ethnic identity politics may lead to a narrow strip which can be oppressive rather than liberating.

The underlying issue of borders that surfaces in Gyan's reflection on the contemporary political protest is also confronted by Sai. Books, mainly the *National Geographic,* symbolize Sai's

[9] Similarly, Spielman (2010) notes that Sai becomes used to "a life of seemingly incongruous things" and wants not only "English but also Indian things" (p. 83).

tendency for border-crossing.[10] Indeed, the *National Geographic* plays a critical role in Sai's imaginings of the world. The fact that the narrative begins with Sai reading the magazine and often portrays Sai being immersed in the world of the *National Geographic* demonstrates the significance of the magazine in Sai's life. To a large extent, the world presented in the *National Geographic* inspires Sai's imagination as well as her desire to explore and go beyond the boundary of places. The logo of the *National Geographic*, a yellow frame, suggests a border between the inside and the outside, between here and there in Sai's case, stimulating a desire to explore the natural world or the cultural landscape and the pictures in the *National Geographics* trigger in Sai the "urge for something beyond the ordinary" (Desai, 2006, p. 77). Undoubtedly, the *National Geographic* projects a different world vision that encourages Sai to move beyond. Towards the end of the narrative, such an urge to move beyond recurs in Sai's mind as she thinks of "all the *National Geographic*s and books she had read. Of the judge's journey, of the cook's journey, of Biju's. Of the globe whirling on its axis. And she felt a glimmer of strength. Of resolve. She must leave" (Desai, 2006, p. 356). Here, "the globe whirling on its axis" refers to an Inflatable Globe, given by the *National Geographic* as a present to readers, and the globe invites Sai to travel, to cross the borders of the framed, stagnant life in Cho Oyu. More significantly, the image of the globe highlights the original round shape of the earth without being demarcated by all sorts of visible as well as intangible borders.[11]

In sum, both Gyan's wish to escape and Sai's inclination to move beyond borders suggest the young generation's potential of crossing into a "third space," which, according to Bhabha (1994), may open "the way to conceptualizing an international culture, not based on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (p. 38). In this third space, cultural identification is not based on exclusion of differences, but on inclusion of otherness, hybridity, and heterogeneous mixtures. Once binary thinking and either-or constraints are challenged, cultural border-crossing would be feasible. Though Bhabha does not directly address the connection between cultural hybridity and border-crossing, Grossberg (1996) does associate the idea of hybridity with that of border-crossing, arguing that both suggest "an image of between-ness which does not construct a place or condition of its own other than the mobility, uncertainty and multiplicity of the fact of the constant border-crossing itself" (pp. 91-92). Indeed, Gyan's desire for escape resonates with Sai's tendency to cross boundaries. Both invoke a different mode of cultural identification, not constructed within certain borders but motivated by a force to transcend borders.

Conclusion

In Desai's novel, three different kinds of cultural identity are presented by the main characters. In different historical, political, and cultural contexts, Jemubhai, Biju, Sai and Gyan embark on different journeys of negotiating their cultural identity. Jemubhai's identification with English culture turns him into a foreigner in his homeland. Biju's diasporic experience of cultural displacement leads to his quest for cultural authenticity. Sai's in-betweenness as well as her tendency to cross the boundaries between different cultures provides a space for cultural

[10] Noting the symbolic role of the *National Geographic* in the narrative, Bălănescu (2010) suggests that the magazine provides Sai with a venue to construct her imaginary travels (p. 255). Further than that, my reading focuses on the implication of border-crossing carried by the magazine.

[11] While using a different term, G. C. Spivak (2003) offers the concept of planetary as an alternative to imagine "an undivided 'natural' space rather than a differentiated political space" (p. 72). Sai's contemplation on the Inflatable Globe evinces similar imaginings of the world that cross borders.

heterogeneity. Gyan gestures towards border-crossing in the aftermath of the political uprisings, being aware that nationalism ultimately incurs oppressive confinement.

Desai's novel eventually draws attention to the issue of border-crossing, which becomes a constant act in the era of globalization. Indeed, the question of borders preoccupies Desai's narrative. In the beginning chapter, depicting the spectacular view of the Himalayas, the narrative foregrounds the arbitrariness of borders that nation-states have endeavored to demarcate in the mountainous areas. As the narrator puts it, Kalimpong is situated at the center of international political contestation, a place on a "messy map" where great amounts of "warring, betraying, bartering had occurred; between Nepal, England, Tibet, India, Sikkim, Bhutan; Darjeeling stolen from here, Kalimpong plucked from there–despite, ah, despite the mist charging down like a dragon, dissolving, undoing, making ridiculous the drawing of borders" (Desai, 2006, p. 10). Contingent on political power struggles among different nations, these man-made lines cannot withstand the natural force of the mist, sweeping over borders that are proven absurd, tenuous and permeable. To some extent, Sai and Gyan, like the mist among the mountains, have the potential of transcending borders. In transcending borders, Sai and Gyan could conceive of an identity which is endowed with the capacity to accommodate differences.

Though Gyan's tendency to go beyond national boundaries and Sai's inclination to cross borders remain unfulfilled, the juxtaposition of their cases points to the novel's central concern about the prospect of an alternative identity not restricted within political, ethnic and cultural borders that entail division and exclusion. As Desai remarks in an interview: "In a world obsessed with national boundaries and belonging, as a novelist working with a form also traditionally obsessed with place, it was a journey to come to this thought, that the less structured, the multiple, may be a possible location for fiction, perhaps a more valid ethical location in general" (as cited in Monaco, 2017, p. 314). *The Inheritance of Loss* exemplifies Desai's effort to search for such an ethical location that can accommodate heterogeneity.

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