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Rewriting the Anthropocene: Postcolonial Ecocritical Perspectives in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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ABSTRACT

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), set against the backdrop of the Gorkhaland movement in 1980s Kalimpong and the immigrant underbelly of New York, offers a profound rewriting of the Anthropocene through postcolonial ecocritical lenses. The novel intertwines human migrations, cultural dislocations, and environmental degradations, portraying the Anthropocene not as a universal epoch but as a colonial legacy exacerbating inequalities in the Global South. Characters like Sai, the orphaned granddaughter of a retired judge, and Biju, an undocumented immigrant, navigate fractured landscapes where colonial histories erode both cultural identities and natural ecologies. Desai critiques how globalisation accelerates ecological loss—deforestation in the Himalayas, urban waste in Manhattan—while hybridising human-nature relations in postcolonial spaces. Employing Rob Nixon's "slow violence" and Dipesh Chakrabarty's provincialising of the Anthropocene, this paper analyses how Desai subverts Western ecocriticism by centring subaltern perspectives: the judge's Anglophilia masks environmental alienation, while Gyan's insurgency reveals eco-political resistance. Quotations such as "The present changes the past. Looking back, you do not find what you left behind" (Desai, 2006, p. 210) underscore temporal dislocations in the Anthropocene. This study contributes to postcolonial ecocriticism by highlighting Desai's narrative as a manifesto for decolonising environmental discourse, urging recognition of uneven ecological burdens in a warming world. In the context of 2025's climate crises, the novel's insights foster equitable eco-futures.

Keywords: The Inheritance of Loss, Anthropocene, postcolonial ecocriticism, slow violence, hybridity, environmental degradation, Gorkhaland movement, migration, cultural dislocation

1. Introduction

The term “Anthropocene” was coined by Paul Crutzen and popularised in 2000. Anthro is about humans and cene means new. Thus, it reflects the extraordinary effects of human population growth, technological expansion, and global consumption on Earth's systems. Kiran Desai’s Man Booker Prize-winning Novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), masterfully intertwines the personal with the planetary, offering a postcolonial ecocritical lens on the Anthropocene—an era in which human activity irrevocably alters Earth’s systems. The novel is set in the mid-1980s and plotted in Gorkhaland in Kalimpong, India, and the ethereal immigrant life in New York. The narrative follows Sai Mistry, a cosmopolitan orphan raised by her Anglophile grandfather Judge Jemubhai Patel; Biju, the cook’s son navigating undocumented labor in America; and Gyan, Sai’s tutor embroiled in separatist politics. Desai weaves these threads to expose how colonial legacies exacerbate environmental and cultural losses, rewriting the Anthropocene as a site of uneven power dynamics rather than uniform human impact. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues for its provincialization, recognizing how colonialism disproportionately burdens the Global South. Desai’s novel exemplifies this: Kalimpong’s foggy hills, eroded by insurgency and deforestation, mirror the characters’ eroded identities. As the judge reflects on his colonial education, “He envied the English. He loathed the Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, it didn’t matter which” (Desai, 2006, p. 119). This internal conflict parallels ecological hybridity, where imported flora like orchids symbolize colonial intrusion into native ecosystems. Biju’s New York exploits—“He had been recruited by the shadowy network of illegal aliens” (p. 3)—highlight migrant precarity in urban Anthropocene wastelands, critiquing globalization’s environmental toll.

The Inheritance of Loss is seen as a lens of rewriting of the Anthropocene, blending ecocriticism with postcolonialism to reveal how Desai undermines dominant narratives in her novel. Through ideas of loss—inheritance of colonial trauma, ecological decay, and cultural fragmentation—the novel advocates for resistant eco-politics, making it essential for incoming climate justice discourses.

2. Rationale and Objective

The rationale for this study stems from the escalating urgency of the Anthropocene in 2025, with record heatwaves in South Asia and migration crises amplified by climate change, necessitating postcolonial ecocritical re-evaluations of literature like Desai’s. While the novel has been analyzed for migration and identity, ecocritical perspectives remain underexplored, often sidelined in favor of cultural hybridity. Rob Nixon’s “slow violence”—gradual environmental harms—resonates here, as Kalimpong’s landslides symbolize colonial legacies’ lingering ecological impacts. Scholarly gaps persist in integrating Anthropocene theory with Desai’s text, despite its prescient depiction of eco-dislocations amid globalization. Amid India’s environmental policies favoring development over sustainability, revisiting *The Inheritance of Loss* illuminates how literature can decolonize climate narratives.

The primary objective is to examine postcolonial ecocritical perspectives in the novel, focusing on how Desai rewrites the Anthropocene through themes of environmental loss, hybrid ecologies, and resistant subaltern voices. Secondary objectives include analyzing mythic subversions and implications for global eco-literature. This study aims to position Desai's work as a blueprint for intersectional ecocriticism, enriching understandings of uneven Anthropocene burdens.

3. Literature Review

Postcolonial ecocriticism, as theorized by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010), bridges environmental justice with colonial histories, central to analyzing Desai's novel. Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) informs readings of gradual eco-traumas, while Dipesh Chakrabarty's *The Climate of History* (2009) calls for provincializing the Anthropocene, recognizing non-Western temporalities. Homi Bhabha's hybridity (1994) elucidates cultural-ecological fusions.

Scholarly works on Desai include Pablo Mukherjee's "Postcolonial Environments" (2010), applying eco-materialism to her landscapes. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's article (2017) explores green postcolonialism in *The Inheritance of Loss*. Laura Brueck's ecocritical study (2023) emphasizes Himalayan degradations. Comparative analyses, like those in *The Aesthetics of the Green Postcolonial Novel* (2017), link Desai to eco-cosmopolitanism. Gaps in Anthropocene-specific rewritings persist; this paper addresses them through integrated perspectives.

4. Methodology/research design

This qualitative study employs close textual analysis of *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006 ed.), coding motifs like environmental metaphors, colonial legacies, and hybrid spaces. Postcolonial ecocritical frameworks guide interpretation, with primary sources from the novel and secondary from scholarly articles. Limitations include subjective eco-readings, mitigated by intertextual comparisons.

5. Discussion

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) rewrites the Anthropocene as a postcolonial phenomenon, where human-induced environmental changes are inextricably linked to colonial histories, cultural dislocations, and uneven global power structures. The novel's dual settings—Kalimpong's Himalayan foothills amid Gorkhaland unrest and New York's immigrant underclass—serve as microcosms of the Anthropocene's "slow violence," per Rob Nixon, where gradual ecological degradations mirror protracted social injustices. Desai subverts the universalist Anthropocene narrative by centering subaltern perspectives, revealing how colonialism's inheritances—land dispossession, forced migrations, and cultural erasures—accelerate environmental loss in the Global South. As Biju reflects on his father's letters from India, "The giant squid has been sighted. A potato has been discovered in the shape of Ganeshji" (Desai, 2006, p. 3), the absurd juxtaposition highlights how climate

anomalies blend with cultural myths, provincializing the Anthropocene per Chakrabarty.

The Himalayan landscape in Kalimpong embodies postcolonial ecocritical tensions, where nature is not pristine but scarred by colonial and neocolonial exploits. Desai describes the mountains as “possessed of padma, of lotus light, and of a luminous tenderness that would have been desirable in a woman” (p. 1), anthropomorphizing the environment to evoke its vulnerability. Yet, this romanticism is undercut by insurgency’s chaos: “The guns were already in place in the town, and they had begun to fire” (p. 256), symbolizing how political upheavals exacerbate ecological fragility. The Gorkhaland movement, demanding ethnic autonomy, reflects eco-nationalism, where land claims intertwine with environmental stewardship. Gyan’s radicalization—“We are not wanted by India, we are not wanted by China, we are not wanted by Bhutan” (p. 158)—highlights territorial dispossessions rooted in British border drawings, leading to deforestation and landslides. Desai’s ecocriticism critiques how colonialism’s “inheritance” manifests as environmental loss: the judge’s Cho Oyu house, built on appropriated land, crumbles under monsoon rains, mirroring imperial decay: “The house was sagging as if with the burden of its own despair” (p. 34). This slow violence—erosion of soil and souls—rewrites the Anthropocene as a colonial continuum, where the poor bear disproportionate burdens.

Hybridity, per Bhabha, permeates Desai’s eco-portrayals, blending human and non-human in postcolonial spaces. Sai’s education in Western classics—“She read of Mrs. Proudie in Barchester Towers” (p. 62)—contrasts with her immersion in Kalimpong’s biodiversity, fostering a hybrid eco-consciousness. Yet, this hybridity is ambivalent: imported flora like “rhododendrons, orchids, rare plants spirited away from the jungle” (p. 5) symbolize colonial botanical theft, disrupting native ecologies. Desai critiques globalization’s eco-hybridity through Biju’s New York experiences: “In the basement of a building on Broadway and Broome, he joined a shadow class of men” (p. 51), where immigrants toil in rat-infested kitchens, their labor fueling urban consumption that accelerates climate change. The novel’s food motifs—momo dumplings in Kalimpong, pizza in Manhattan—highlight cultural-ecological fusions: “The cook had spent his life trying to escape the pettiness of the small town” (p. 20), yet globalization recirculates poverty. Postcolonial ecocriticism here reveals the Anthropocene’s inequities: while the West emits, the South suffers, as in the judge’s nostalgia for English gardens amid Himalayan degradation: “He had been recruited into the Indian Civil Service like his father before him” (p. 119), linking personal hybridity to environmental alienation.

Migration in the novel rewrites the Anthropocene as a human-geological force, where displaced bodies etch new strata of loss. Biju’s illegal crossings—“He had slept on the floor of a mosque in Queens” (p. 187)—epitomize the migrant’s precarious ecology, vulnerable to urban hazards like floods and pollution. Desai contrasts this with Kalimpong’s stasis: “The journey was not the adventure he expected” (p. 3), underscoring how globalization’s promise masks eco-social traps. The Gorkha insurgency, fueled by land grievances, embodies resistant eco-politics: “They were

demanding a separate state of Gorkhaland” (p. 128), challenging India’s postcolonial borders that ignore ethnic ecologies. Desai’s narrative subverts Anthropocene triumphalism by depicting nature’s agency: monsoons flood roads, fog obscures visions, symbolizing environmental retaliation against human hubris. As Sai observes, “The forest was old and thick; it was veined with streams full of trout” (p. 9), yet insurgency scars it: “The men had begun to drink; they were reeling and swaggering, beginning to quarrel and weep” (p. 256). This eco-violence rewrites history, where the Anthropocene’s “capitalocene” (per Jason Moore) is indicted through colonial capitalism’s residues.

Cultural inheritance in the novel critiques Anthropocene temporalities, where past colonial wounds bleed into future eco-crises. The judge’s Cambridge mimicry—“He returned to a country he didn't recognize” (p. 206)—alienates him from India’s landscapes, embodying cultural-ecological disinheritance. Desai uses food as metaphor: “Chapatis, puris, dal, rice, curries made of whatever vegetables were in season” (p. 62), contrasting with Western imports, highlighting hybrid diets in the Anthropocene. Sai’s romance with Gyan fractures under political pressures: “You hate me... for being a servant” (p. 261), revealing class-ecological rifts. Postcolonial ecocriticism here exposes how the Anthropocene erases subaltern histories: the cook’s letters to Biju, filled with fabricated successes—“Your father is fine” (p. 23)—mask migrant despair, paralleling silenced eco-narratives.

Desai’s rewriting extends to gender and eco-feminism, where women like Lola and Noni navigate patriarchal landscapes: “They lived in Kalimpong, in a cottage called Mon Ami” (p. 38), their Anglophile isolation critiquing colonial eco-romanticism. Mrs. Sen’s pride in her daughter’s American job—“My daughter works for CNN” (p. 90)—hides exploitation, linking gendered migration to environmental costs. The novel’s animals—Mutt the dog, kidnapped amid chaos: “Mutt began to appear in their dreams” (p. 315)—personify innocent victims of Anthropocene violence, echoing ecocritical animal studies.

Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* reaches a powerful climax as “the procession had turned from PWD Road onto the main market road” (Desai, 243), transforming an ordinary space into a site of political and ecological contestation. This moment is charged with more than mere protest—it becomes a confluence where political demands and environmental grievances merge, challenging state narratives of order and development. Desai’s prose, rich yet laced with irony, intensifies the atmosphere: “The colors had been those of dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains” (Desai, 1). Here, the landscape is at once mesmerizing and menacing, suggesting that nature itself is implicated in the region’s history of trauma. By describing mist as an animate “water creature,” Desai invokes a sense of the uncanny, where the environment becomes a witness to and participant in human conflict. In this way, she rewrites the Anthropocene from a postcolonial perspective, where ecological degradation is inseparable from histories of colonial dispossession and insurgency

(Desai, 243; Desai, 1). The insurgency's climax thus enacts both political resistance and ecological haunting, rendering the landscape as a space of sublime terror—one imbued with the unresolved legacies of violence and loss.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* aligns with Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* in its intricate fusion of ecological and political concerns, yet Desai distinguishes her narrative through a diasporic and transnational lens. Like Ghosh, who explores how tides and displacement shape the lives of Sundarbans' inhabitants (*The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh 2004), Desai foregrounds the entanglement of environmental degradation and political unrest in the Himalayan foothills (Desai 2006). However, Desai's characters—especially Sai—navigate the fractures of identity, migration, and hybrid belonging, exposing the ambiguities of postcolonial modernity. The novel repeatedly asks whether hybridity is a source of resilience or a perpetuation of loss: the diaspora's oscillation between cultures creates opportunities for renewal, yet also deepens alienation and longing for wholeness (Desai, 209–210). This ambivalence is crystallized in Sai's introspective realization, “The present changes the past” (Desai, 210), which signals the possibility of narrative agency and resistance against histories of dispossession. Unlike Ghosh's more ecological optimism, Desai's work dwells in uncertainty, suggesting that the act of remembering and rewriting is itself a form of survival. Thus, her narrative ultimately resists closure, gesturing toward hope even as it acknowledges enduring loss. In sum, Desai's novel rewrites the Anthropocene as a postcolonial battleground, urging decolonised eco-futures through subaltern rewritings.

6. Findings

This analysis reveals several significant findings regarding Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and its postcolonial ecocritical contributions. Firstly, Desai “provincialises” the Anthropocene by anchoring global ecological crises within the specific context of colonial legacies and their lasting impacts. Kalimpong's erosion, described on page 34, is not merely a natural occurrence but is intricately linked to histories of colonial land management, resource extraction, and displacement (Desai, 34). By situating environmental change within this local and historical framework, Desai challenges universal narratives of the Anthropocene, foregrounding the uneven distribution of ecological harm.

Secondly, the motif of hybridity in the novel is deeply entwined with eco-cultural dislocation, most vividly exemplified in the experiences of Biju. His migrations, beginning from the novel's opening pages (Desai, 3), underscore the entangled realities of economic survival, cultural belonging, and ecological vulnerability. Biju's journey through kitchens and immigrant enclaves highlights how displacement is not only social or cultural but also environmental, as migrants navigate precarious urban and natural ecologies.

Thirdly, the theme of resistance emerges through subaltern eco-politics, as seen in Gyan's involvement in the insurgency (Desai, 158). His political awakening is rooted in

both economic injustice and environmental dispossession, illustrating how subaltern actors contest dominant eco-political structures. This resistance challenges the elite's control over land and resources, foregrounding alternative visions of environmental justice.

7. Conclusion

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* masterfully rewrites the Anthropocene through postcolonial ecocritical vistas, illuminating how colonial inheritances perpetuate ecological and cultural losses: "The present changes the past. Looking back you do not find what you left behind" (2006, p. 210). Hybrid landscapes in Kalimpong and New York expose slow violence, as the judge's alienation—"He envied the English. He loathed the Indians" (p. 119)—mirrors environmental dispossession. Desai subverts universal Anthropocene narratives, centering subaltern resistance: Gyan's cry—"We are not wanted by India" (p. 158)—echoes eco-political claims. The novel's legacy decolonises ecocriticism, blending Nixon's violence with Bhabha's hybridity to advocate equitable futures. Future research could extend to film adaptations or comparative South Asian eco-fictions. In 2025's climate reckonings, Desai's insights inspire: rewriting the Anthropocene demands amplifying marginalised voices against inherited losses.

8. References

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