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DOMINATION OVER NEPALI NATIONALITY IN KIRAN DESAI'S NOVEL *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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Abstract

*This article explores the theme of ethnic domination in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, focusing on the socio-cultural dynamics that shape the characters' experiences of identity, marginalization, and power. Set against the backdrop of postcolonial India and Nepal, the novel delves into the tensions between cultural groups, mainly through the Gorkhaland movement, which seeks autonomy for the Nepali ethnic minority in the Darjeeling region. The narrative highlights the effects of colonialism, migration, and globalization, exacerbating inequality based on nationality. Through its complex characters, Desai portrays the struggles of individuals caught between cultures and histories, revealing how socio-cultural domination influences their sense of belonging, self-worth, and the pursuit of dignity. Desai's depiction of a postcolonial society — with its legacies of colonialism, economic inequities, and ethnic divisions — provides fertile ground for exploring how minority groups wield influence and control over majorities in ways that are both overt and insidious. The concepts of nationality, difference, and discrimination practiced based on cultural differences have been used to study the novel. The article argues that Desai's work offers a nuanced critique of the legacies of colonialism and the ongoing realities of cultural domination over Nepali nationality in the modern society of north-east India, which is a substantive Nepali-speaking people populace.*

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Introduction

In modern terms, nationality refers to the political ideology and movement that emphasizes the interests, culture, and identity of a particular nation or group that creates a particular identity. It is a shared racial, linguistic, or national identity of a social group. It can incorporate several forms of collective identity, including cultural, religious, national and subcultural forms. However, Fredrik Barth argues that nationality represents the social organization of cultural difference "... that ethnic groups are not groups formed on the basis of shared culture, but rather the formation of groups based on differences of culture" (1). In other words, the cultural differences from other groups make a cultural group an ethnic group, and the contrast between "us" and "others" is what is embedded in the organization of nationality.

A cultural group derives its identity from its distinctive customs, language, ancestry, place of origin, and style of dress, among others—nationality is the identification of a group of people based on a perceived cultural distinctiveness. Nationality is often confused with 'race,' the group of people who are often from the same ancestry. However, an ethnic group is primarily the connectivity of the people because of their culture, linguistics, and dress distinctiveness from other people.

The first primary marker of nationality is kinship, i.e., the group's presumed biological and descent unity. Commensality, the similarity and/or sameness in feeding habits, eating together indicating a kind of equality, is the second primary marker of nationality. The third primary marker of nationality is a common religious cult, implicating a value system or religious beliefs. These cultural markers of blood, substance, and cults separate an ethnic group from the others. The secondary nationality markers, according to Nash, are dress, language, and physical

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features, and (25) race and nationality are also the nationality markers, among others. Geertz says that people's sense of self remains in actualities of blood, race, language, locality, religion, or tradition (41). The feeling of being related to others as brothers, sisters, parents, sons, and daughters is one of the most powerful motivations of humankind. Moreover, for Fishman, nationality in the modern era is a consciously manipulated, massive, and dynamic social factor (64) within the realm of belongingness, which has been the primary cause of domination of one cultural group by the other.

Nepalis in India and Their Issues

Nepalis, in India, are linguistic and cultural groups because they have distinct cultural paradigms- customs, language, religious practices, etc. They have spread all over India and are densely populated in its northeast part. Despite their majority in population, they have been the victim of different kinds of discrimination from all corners- the government, non-Nepali population, and, in the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, author Kiran Desai herself in many instances.

India is a multi-cultural and multi-lingual country whose several states have been divided on this basis, where they can enjoy their political and cultural rights, like Nagaland, Tamil Nadu, Bengal etc. However, several ethnic groups are discriminated against or whose demands have been unheard of for a long time, even if they have a comfortable majority in the region. This is true for the Nepali ethnic group in northeast India. Nepali people are the majority comfortable there and have lived there for several centuries. Historically, those parts of India were once part of Greater Nepal before the Sugauli treaty.

Nepalis there share very unique cultural and linguistic commonalities. However, as an ethnic group, they have neither political rights, authority, nor cultural recognition. So, they initiated the Gorkhaland movement to shake the central government to woo their demands. They are ruled under the state of West Bengal, which exercises political and cultural supremacy over

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the Nepalis. Their common sentiment is "We are constitutionally tortured. Return our land from Bengal" (Desai 139). They want a separate state based on their cultural identity and manage their own affairs themselves. To quote Desai, "It was the Indian-Nepalis time, fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority. They wanted their own country, or at least their own state, in which to manage their own affairs" (10). The experience of the Nepali ethnic group living in India, as presented by Kiran Desai, is frustrating and can be observed and discussed differently.

Cultural Domination

Lolita's conflict with Nepali characters is not confined to Budhoo alone; she has a problem with another Nepali character, Kesang, who is her maid. She does not have any other issues with her, but she has a shallow opinion of her because she is from a different cultural nationality. She describes her as less than the human race or has no human emotions, though she did nothing wrong for her. She '...always professed that servants didn't experience love in the same manner as people like themselves' (76). But "...she actually felt jealous of Kesang" (76) when she speaks about her adventurous and joyous love affair and the event of eloping with her husband, who pursued their love despite their cast difference. After hearing such an adventurous love story, she "...was forced to wonder now if it was she who had never experienced the real thing; never had she and Joydeep such a conversation of faith" (76). The character is named Joydeep, who is never allowed to be happy.

Sai, one of the major female characters of the novel, is a sixteen-year-old girl. She is a granddaughter to Jamubhai Patel, who is living his retired life on a pension. He cannot afford a standard convent school for her, nor is he ready to send her to the municipal school for his prestige. So, he has managed home tuition for her, which Lolita carried when Sai was seven years old. Lolita takes tuition class because "They lived on his pension, but still they need more money, what with endless repairs being done to the house, the price of everything rising in the

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bazaar, and the wages of their maid, sweeper, watchman, and gardener" (47). However, when Sai's grades increase, she finds it difficult to teach her mathematics. So, she advises Jamubhai Patel to take another tutor for her. She is "...westernized Indian brought up by an English nun, an estranged English living in India. The journey had started so long ago he continued in his descendants" (230). She has less idea about Indian culture, so it is a far cry for her about the cultural minorities. Here "...she had no idea how to properly make tea this Indian way. She only knew the English way" (7). She was kept in a missionary convent school from an early age till seven, when their parents died in a road mishap and could not deposit the fee. So, she has learned the missionary creeds from an early age: "And on top a flat creed: the cake was better than laddoos, fork spook knife better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ and consuming water of his body was more civilized than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds. English was better than Hindi" (33), which shows the clash of civilizations and domination.

Gyan's ancestors are from Nepal. "In the 1800s, his ancestors had left their village in Nepal and arrived in Darjeeling, lured by promises of work on a tea plantation" (158). In the novel, he journeys from cultural ignorance to awareness. He shows cultural belongingness with people from the same cultural values. This awakening pushes him to pursue cultural movement. At first, he does not know the value of his cultural and political movement. He is a college graduate from a poor family. He has part-time jobs to survive. Coincidentally, he has to teach Sai mathematics. However, their teaching turns into a romance.

Gyan enjoys the fancy relationship for a short time. However, he starts to see the cultural and conceptual gap between them as time progresses. The gap starts to widen when Gyan gets inspiration and value about his culture and language from the movement. He gets himself involved in the movement when he gets his old friends going for it:

It was after the new year when Gyan happened to be buying rice in the market that he heard people shouting as his rice was being weighted. When he emerged

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from the shop, he was gathered up by a procession coming panting up Mantri Road led by young man holding their kukris aloft and shouting "Jai Gorkha." In the mess of faces he saw college friends whom he'd ignored since he started romance with Sai. Padam, Jungi, Dawa. Dilip. (172)

After this, he starts to feel sorry about his past engagement with Sai, with whom he has hardly any common ground besides the infatuation. He indeed starts to feel masculine about himself, "It was a masculine atmosphere, and Gyan felt a moment of shame remembering his tea parties with Sai on the veranda, the cheese toast, queen cakes from the baker, and even worse, the small warm space they inhabited together, the nursery talk" (177), sometimes people are put into an awkward situation that they are not accustomed to and it becomes a matter of cultural humiliation.

Gyan jokes with his friends about them and their accents. He is bored by the job and, most importantly, the people. He is looking for a better job so he can leave the job and people.

How glad he would be if he could get a proper job and leave that fussy pair, Sai and her grandfather with the fake English accent and the face powdered pink and white over dark brown. Everyone in the canteen laughed as he mimicked the accent: "What poets are they reading these days, young man?" (193)

He is always very uncomfortable to be with culturally different people.

Eating together they had always felt embarrassed-he, unsettled by her finickiness and her curbed enjoyment, and she, revolted by his energy and his fingers working the dal, his slurps and smacks. The judge ate even his chapattis, his puris and *parathas*, with knife and fork. (194)

He is surrounded by culturally different people who have degraded feelings about his culture, and he starts to feel a sense of exile. He is exiled in his own homeland. About exile, Edward Said remarks:

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Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unbearable rift forced between a human being and native place, between the self and its true home, its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exiles life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exiles are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. (173)

He spontaneously gets himself involved in the movement as a 'mystical experience of collective' described by Nietzsche. He cannot help but go with the rally and shout slogans along with the people of his own type culturally who share a familiar sensation. He has started to emotionally understand his cultural identity; as Barker opines, "Identity is best understood not as a fixed entity but as an emotionally changed description of ourselves" (166), primarily felt in the diaspora.

Now, Gyan has changed mentally about his essence and identity. He is no longer a fancy, romantic boy at all. He has a path to which he has to proceed, which is the right one. For Gyan, the fancy relationship is hard to resist. He does not go beyond the study. The cultural outlook of Gyan and Sai is the primary cause of the gap in their relationship. As we know, Sai is a culturally hybrid girl who knows very little or does not know at all about the taste of unique cultural identity. Now, he starts to analyze her culturally.

She who could not eat with her hands; could not squat down on the ground on her haunches to wait for a bus; who had never been to a temple but for a architectural interest; never chewed a *paan* and had not tried most sweets in the *mithaishop*, for they made her wretch; she who left a Bollywood film so exhausted from emotional wear and tear that she walked home like a sick person and lay in pieces on the sofa; she who thought it vulgar to put oil in

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your hair and used paper to clean her bottom; felt happier with so-called English vegetables, snap peas, French beans, spring onions, and feared-*fread-loki, tinda, kathal, kaddu, parel*, and the local *saag* in the market. (194)

The couple's taking is not as sweet as previous dates. Gyan has started to condemn Sai for her blind following of Western culture and religion, where she has her own cultural values if she wants to celebrate. She likes Christmas and English New Year more than Durga Puja and Dussehra. Here, he complains about her interest in foreigner's culture. Gyan says, "Why do you celebrate Christmas? You're Hindus, and you don't celebrate Id or Guru Nanak's birthday or even Durga Puja or Dussehra or Tibetan New Year" (179). He condemns her for being a slave to the West, blindly running after them when she is culturally as rich as or more than Westerners. He says to her, ". . . like slaves, that's what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself. It's because of people like you we never get anywhere" (179) because, in the name of being seen more civilized, the people have followed Western lifestyle blindly.

What is familiar about these non-Nepali Indians is that they are obsessed with Western lifestyle and mannerisms, disrespecting their own cultural values. They suppose their way is absolute. They are culturally hybrid, so, they cannot endorse the sentiment of cultural value of minorities. They neither strictly follow the West nor enjoy their own culture. They are just nostalgic about English life. About the dominance of such characters in the novel, a critic, Tom Wilhelmus, remarks:

All this is the substrate of Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* which documents the collapse of one kind of civility based nostalgically on English life, and the emergence of another rash, uncivil, chaotic, and violent at large in India today. In the wake of 9/11, it is an attempt to grapple with the human dimension of our current dilemmas by doing what novels have always done best, delineate

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the lives of a small caste of characters in reaction to the historic forces around them. (345)

This shows how obsessed they are with Western living despite the violent experiences in the West with the Western people. In fact, a large chunk of the Indian population has not been culturally independent even after the nation's political independence from the British Empire.

One of the famous critics, Mandira Sen in *Women's Review of Books*, has maintained:

The two elderly women who take up Sai – Lola, a widow and her sister Noni, who tutors Sai – live such a life. Their little rose – covered cottage is called Mon Ami, and its extensive landhouse perhaps the country is first broccoli path. At night, they listen to the BBC on the radio, drinking smuggled cherry brandy. They are conscious of their class; their superiority to Mrs Sen their Anglophonic neighbour, who is not quite as gentle as they are; their fellowship with Father Booty of the Swiss dairy, which makes real cheese, not the processed version that most Indians eat, and their relationship to Uncle Potty, a wealthy old Indian who is living off his inheritance. (27)

This is one of the best examples of how much hypocrisy these characters practice to make Western living and lifestyle the guideline of their lives, and they look down on the Nepali-speaking people as less civilized ones.

Linguistic Domination

Nepali people in India have made an ethnic group based on the common language rather than common descent. Nepalis there are called 'Neps' because they have a common language-Nepali. Noni takes the severe political issue of the linguistic rights of the Nepali people, who are deprived of linguistic opportunities because their language has not been included in the schools. They have to read some other language, Bengali. She says, "Obviously, the Nepalis are worried... "They've been here, most of them, several generations. Why shouldn't Nepali be taught in

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schools?" (143). Obviously, language is part of cultural identity, and more importantly, the Nepali community in India is largely tied together because of their linguistic commonality.

She becomes sympathetic and supportive of the Nepali community in regard to how they are being suffered in neighboring states or countries. She argues with her sister that "...you have to take it from their point of view," said Noni. "First the Neps were thrown out of Assam and then Meghalaya, then there's the king of Bhutan growling against" (142). It is like Japanese people were traumatized by being called 'Japs' just after WW II in America.

Domination Based on Commensality

Another character, Jamubhai Patel, also has a derogatory approach to Nepali people and culture, though less than that of Lolita. He always complains about Nepali food- 'dhido' (porridge made of millet flour) which, he supposes, does stop Nepali people from being brilliant and intelligent but physical labourers. He believes "Coastal people are more intelligent than inland people" (Desai 81) because of their feeding habits. He further describes:

Costal people eat fish and see how much clever they are, Bengalis, Malaylis, Tamils. Inland they eat too much grain, and it slows the digestion-especially millet- forms a big heavy ball. The blood goes to the stomach and not to the head. Napalis make good soldiers, collies, but they are not so bright at their studies. (Desai 82)

It is not based on fact but rather attitude. He just plainly remarks about 'invaders' and Nepalis as physical laborers who are not good at their studies. He puts forth awkward reasoning that is unscientific. He needs to go through the dossiers where he can find several 'inlanders' and Nepali people who have achieved success in the area of study or intelligence. So, it is an entirely biased perception against Nepalis there.

Other minor non-Nepali characters also have a similar outlook for Nepali people. The cook of Jamubhai Patel also has a low opinion of Nepali people. In this incident, the judge's

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cook also exhibits his attitude toward the Nepali nationality, remarking, "It is strange the tutor is Nepali" (Desai 81). It is because his impression of Nepalis is that they can just be coolies and soldiers, but they can never teach or do any higher-level professions.

Social Domination

Most non-Nepali characters' attitude is far too biased and derogatory in the novel. They often look at them as 'robbers,' 'murderers', and people 'without principle' who 'will kill for fifty rupees', etc. (Desai 49). This clearly shows the social position of Nepali people in the region where they '... are eighty percent of the population' (Desai 175). Eventually, the government also showed partiality and unequal standards for Nepalis in terms of socio-political rights.

Kalimpong is a panoramic hill station chosen by the Britons, where people from different parts of India and the world would like to spend their retired lives. Begalis and Gujaratis are the dominant outsiders there. However, most of them have negative attitudes toward the Nepali people, culture, and language. In the novel, the retired judge Jamubhai Patel, a Gujarati, his cook, a Bihari, Lolita, and Nonita, Bengalis, are some such characters who have such perceptions for them.

Nonita is such a typical character "who lived with her sister Lola (Lalita) in a rose-covered cottage named Mon Ami. When Lola's husband had died of a heart attack, Noni, the spinster, had moved in with her sister, the widow" (Desai 47). She often uses the derogatory term 'Neps' for Nepali people, time and again in her conversation throughout the novel. She often expresses her hatred toward Nepalis, describing them as 'robbers' and 'murderers.' She projects Nepalis as the headless, malicious and barbaric people who '...will kill for fifty rupees' (Desai 49). She often advises other characters not to believe Nepalis because she thinks they are untrustworthy. She advises others about Nepali people, "These Neps can't be trusted. And they don't just rob. They think absolutely nothing of murdering, as well" (Desai 51). It is too much of Desi to characterize Nepalis as nothing else but criminals.

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She projects Nepalis as just running after money, not for faith or principles. They can be bought as mercenaries; they served for British Empire for money. Without knowing the exact historical facts about Gurkha soldier recruitment politics, she says:

"Cock and bull," she said crudely. "These people aren't good people. Gurkhas are mercenaries; that's what they are. Pay them and they are loyal to whatever. There's no principle involved, Noni. And what is this with the Gurkha? It was always Gurkha. And then there aren't even many Gurkhas here- some of course, and some newly retired ones coming in from Hong Kong, but otherwise they are only Sherpas, coolies." (Desai 271)

She has such a low view of Nepali people. However, very ironically, she has taken a Nepali watchman, Budhoo, who is '...a retired soldier who had been in action against guerilla factions in Assam and had a big gun and an equally fierce mustache' (Desai 51). She is skeptical about him because he is a Nepali. However, she is also confident about him so that she can sleep fearlessly in her house because he fought bravely against Pakistani soldiers and terrorists.

Political Domination

The political issue of Nepalis in the novel is not directly discussed, but it can be found in slogans painted on the side of government offices and shops. "We are stateless," they read. "It is better to die than live as slaves," "We are constitutionally tortured. Return our land from Bengal" (Desai 139). A leader's speech addressing the rally has spelled more precise exposure of their despair. He blames the British for not granting freedom to Nepalis, though the Communist Party of India strongly demanded that. He says:

In 1947, brothers and sisters, the British left granting India her freedom, granting the Muslim Pakistan, granting special provisions for scheduled castes and tribes, leaving everything taken care of . . . Except us. EXCEPT US. The Nepalis of India. At that time, in April of 1947, the Communist Party of India demanded a

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Gorkhastan, but the request was ignored...We are laborers on the tea plantations, coolies dragging heavy loads, soldiers.... (174)

He further details Nepalis' contribution to both India and the British as brave soldiers who saved their national sovereignty. But they remained merciless to Nepalis' issues. He digs into two hundred years of history of Gorkha soldiers who fought bravely with complete loyalty for the British Empire in both world wars in Africa, Egypt, the Persian Gulf, Europe, Syria, Persia, Malaya, and Burma.

He goes emotional when he speaks about how Gorkhas had to fight against his own friend in the war against Pakistan. Even after such contribution to the nation, Nepalis are not given any reward, compensation, or respect from the government.

In the wars with Pakistan, we fought our former comrades on the other side of the border. How our spirit cried. But we are Gorkhas. We are soldiers. Our character has never been in doubt. And have we been rewarded?? Have we been given compensation?? Are we given respect?? (174)

Noni (Nonita), a Non-Nepali character in the novel, also lays bare the linguistic and political issues of Nepalis. Most of the non-Nepali characters are pessimistic about the issues of Nepalis, but she is the only character who stands up for them. She utters her moral support for the political issues of Nepalis time and again, which brings her into an argument with her sister, Lola, who has the most negative attitude toward Nepalis. She argues, "They have a point . . . maybe not their whole point, but I'd say half to three-quarters of their point" (141). She even tries to distort the historical facts. She says, "When did Darjeeling and Kalimpong belong to Nepal? Darjeeling, in fact, was annexed from Sikkim and Kalimpong from Bhutan" (143), which is the biggest evidence of her foolishness, not only ignorance.

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Domination based on Nationality

Nepalis there are not only dominated by other excuses, but their nationality is also highly suspected. Nonita suspects the nationality of the army man Budhhu; his name is given Buddha (foolish), who has fought for her nation. Moreover, she suspects he may rob her house and skip into Nepal.

Budhoo? But he's Nepali. Who can trust him now? It's always the watchman in a case of robbery. They pass on the information and share the spoils. . . . Remember Mrs. Thondup? She used to have that Nepali fellow who returned from Calcutta one year to find the house wiped clean . . . Quick across the border, and he'd disappeared back into Nepal. (50)

Ironically, she is hugely dependent on servants who are Nepalis. She has a shallow view of Budhoo, but she has "...trusted Budhoo for no reason whatsoever. He might murder them in their nighties" (Desai 51), but she can sleep at night because of Budhoo. Moreover, the name 'Budhoo' itself is a derogatory word to name someone who means 'not having common sense or wisdom.' Another minor character, Mr. Iyre, also remarks the same in the novel. He thinks, "Nepalis making trouble ...very troublesome people" (Desai 250). He says, "They should kick the bastards back to Nepal" (Desai 250). This shows the average perception of the non-Nepali Indians in the region toward the Nepali people. On the other side, non-Nepalis also lived in a worried mentality after the Gorkhaland movement reached its height. They are so concerned about the possible consequences of the movement. Lolita, who is always negative about the people and their movement, has her own speculation about the possible outcome of the movement: "Those Neps will be after all outsiders now, but especially us Bongs. They have been plotting this for a long while. Dream come true. All kinds of atrocities will go on- then they can skip merrily over the border to hide in Nepal. Very convenient" (Desai 141). Nepali people who fought for the country in the past and they are safeguarding India are always regarded as

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outsiders and badly dominated and called Neps as the Japanese people were dominated by being called Japs in America just after World War II.

The writer makes us travel from India to America through Europe to show that there is cultural unrest in India because of Nepali ethnic people, which is not in other European or American countries. She has put all her effort into showing that Nepali people are the ones who cannot stand stability. In this respect, Wilhelmus has maintained: “Moving swiftly between New York, Europe, and India during the Indian-Nepali insurgency of twenty years ago, the novel is alive and luminous, compelling, and gorgeously written despite the ideological shrillness of our times” (Desai 345) that is the struggle for their identity is taken as insurgency.

Nepali people have no permission to enter the big bungalow of the retired judge, who has made it a matter of curiosity for them. When a gun robbery occurs, police search the bungalow, and Nepalis have an opportunity to have a glance at it, which was always restricted for other times.

Conclusion

Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* offers a profound exploration of how minority groups dominate majority populations, whether through colonial legacies, economic inequalities, ethnic divisions, or the forces of globalization. Through the lives of her characters, Desai reveals the complexities of power and domination, illustrating how historical injustices continue to shape social and political relationships in the postcolonial world. The negative perception of non-Nepali people has created ethnic and cultural antagonism on either side. Nepali characters (people) are skeptical about them as they have been living for such a long time under their hatred and cultural dominance. The study of the attitudes of all these characters exemplifies how Nepalis have been culturally prejudiced and forced to live with low social status and low self-esteem, even though it is their land and they are in the comfortable majority. It is also a cause

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behind the Gorkhaland movement because they want to be as equal as other ethnic groups and want to enjoy political authority, economic sovereignty, and social status.

The novel highlights the tension between these two groups, with Nepalis often experiencing marginalization and subjugation by Indians. This is evident in the political unrest in the novel, where Nepalis fight for recognition and rights, revealing the profoundly ingrained issues of ethnic and national identity. Desai explores how historical power dynamics perpetuate inequality, leaving Nepalis striving for autonomy and respect in a region dominated by Indian influence over the Nepali-speaking people in northeast India.

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