



## The conflict of race in Kiran Desai's *'The Inheritance of Loss'*

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### Abstract

In the history it has become the major international issue in the post colonial world, particularly in relation to cultural study. The cultural history of the world proves that there has been a remarkable discrimination of the human race based on the skin, color, caste, haves and have-nots, etc. It is because of racial discrimination there has been a great civil war in south Africa, South America and Germany where the slavery and humiliation of the blacks and Jews as a minority dominated by the white and Christian community as the majority. As being the global novel *The Inheritance of Loss* faithfully represents this sensitive issues prevailing in post colonial India through its characters.

**Keywords:** race, discrimination, cultural study, humiliation etc.

### Introduction

#### The Conflict of race in *The Inheritance of Loss*

Race is a characteristic disposition of people who live specifically in one country and migrate to other countries in search of food, shelter and better opportunities and being treated as immigrants and often struggle hard to find their identity in their own country or the other nation where they are migrated. Recently it has become the global issue and many immigrants have lost their inheritance either in their own country or where they live for the betterment of life. The word 'race' is originated from the Middle English 'ras' became to light in the fourteenth century and later on it is defined sociologically in Germany during seventeenth century. Race is defined as

- A family, tribe, people or, nation belonging to the same stock.
- A class or kind of people unified by shared interests, habits, or characteristics.
- An actually or potentially interbreeding group within a species.
- A category of humankind that shares certain distinctive physical traits. (Merriam-webster.com)

Sociologists define race as a concept that is used to signify different types of human bodies, while there is no biological basis for racial classification. Sociologists recognize a long history of attempts to organize the groups of people based on similar skin, colour and physical appearance. The absence of any biological foundations makes Race often difficult to define and classify, and as such, sociologists view racial categories and the significance of race in society as unstable, ever shifting, and intimately connected to other social forces and structures.

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the skin, color, caste, haves and have-nots, etc. It is because of racial discrimination there has been a great civil war in south Africa, South America and Germany where the slavery and humiliation of the blacks and Jews as a minority dominated by the white and Christian community as the majority. As being the global novel *The Inheritance of Loss* faithfully represents this sensitive issues prevailing in post colonial India through its characters.

The term race difficult to define, according to Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, the professor of anthropology race is viewed as a social construction that is primarily recognized by physical appearance or phenotype. Race in near reality is very close to the expressions like ethnicity, nationality, culture, background, origin, language and identity. Sometimes such alternative terms can be helpful and make the message more precise in the course of discussion.

The concept of ethnicity is also more important for my discussion, as we see the considerable division between Sai and Gyan in *The Inheritance of Loss*. It is *more* ethnic than racial. In order to understand Sai and Gyan's different way of thinking, it will therefore be necessary to define this term. In contrast to biologically oriented approaches, the term ethnicity suggests that race is a *social* matter (Omi and Winant 15). In other words, ethnicity can be said to be the sociological expression of culture – it is derived from socially ascribed identity as well as self-identity (Fluehr-Lobban 17). Omi and Winant claim that there are three paradigmatic approaches to race and race relations: ethnicity, class and nation. Ethnicity has been the dominant paradigm of race for the last half-century, but has, since this theory emerged in the 1920's, also been challenged by the two other theories of class and nation. However, in the 1970's the ethnicity paradigm resurged, a paradigm that demands group rights and recognition. In this thesis the term of race and ethnicity will be closely linked to aspects of multiculturalism, migration, integration, discrimination and power. It will also be related to the

personal features of longing, possibilities, hopes and dreams for the future.

Discrimination and disparity due to race and ethnicity is quite visible in the different societies of the world. The most popular countries of the world like Africa, India, and America are not apart from it. However, there are types of race intolerance which are not that obvious or exposed. Examples of this can involve setting conditions or requirements which a smaller group of people cannot meet, that certain groups of people are not given the same possibilities, or the simple fact that minority groups do not feel included. These issues can be difficult to recognize, but still they are present and can make life difficult for the people in question. In my discussion, I will try to cover all aspects of this challenging issue. Through the main characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, in particular Jemubhai, Desai shows how discrimination due to race can influence and wound, and in some cases, even destroy the human mind. However, as I will argue, discrimination due to race and ethnicity can also be closely related to the question of individual personality, i.e. how the effect of racism influences the individual mind differently. Personality is regarded as a combination of genetics and influences from the environment both of which molded the personality of Jemubhai, the Cambridge return English Gentleman live in India a life of alienation, leaving his close associates apart with the sense of snobbishness and superiority over Indians and Indian mentality and failed to mix up with Indian life and culture.

The character of Jemubhai gives much space to discuss the theme of race as a universal aspect. As a parallel to his personal experiences, the reader recognizes a pattern of white, imperial superiority and power and how people from colonized countries are not accepted or welcomed into the western "world". In the same way as Jemubhai is discriminated in London against due to his dark skin and third world origins.

The white Europeans continually prove their superiority in a universal perspective. The whites have gained power and dominance, and they demanded to be treated with respect and dignity at a universal level; this leads to poverty, humiliation and discrimination of people from colonized countries. Many creative writers and critics shed a light on this dominance and suppression of the white on the third world countries. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is pioneer in this regard. In his introductory remark Edward Said claims: "My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage and even produce the orient politically, sociologically, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-enlightenment period" (Said "Orientalism" P.3).

Several critics have made an effort to define the term 'Orient' geographically, but found this difficult. This is exactly in accordance with the thoughts of Said, who preferred to think of the Orient as something different from the West. The West can be described as "a historical rather than a geographical construct. It means developed, industrialized, urbanized capitalist secular and modern" (Lazarus P. 129). Based on this, the understanding of the term "Orient" will represent what is "not Europe" but rather the "Other": "The Orient is ... also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest

colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other" (Said "Orientalism" P.1). That is why when discussing the terms like race and ethnicity, the term "the West" will be linked to Europe and America where as "the East" will be associated with "the Orient" or what is "not European or American" in the Colonial world many educated Indians would act like the Europeans in the attribution of their manner, in the use of their language and often looked down upon the Indians, act as if they are superior and snobbish comparatively with the illiterate Indians. Thus, Kiran Desai weaves the weight of colonial history with its slow burn of humiliation and creates a rich as well as abroad. This has been faithfully represented in the character of Jemubhai, the retired judge (Sai's grandfather), who casts the colonial times, carries a "back story" of alienation and loneliness of London and back home (India). Once he returned home, he does not seem to fit into the middle class milieu of his family. He thrusts pain on his young wife by hating her docility. She lived a desultory life, unloved, uncared and hatred.

Jemubhai was born into a middle class Patel family. He felt lost and contempt for his skin, colour and smell in London. He became Stanger to himself in England, found his own skin odd coloured and his own accent peculiar. He rarely lifted his lips for smile. He felt offended himself for fear of peeping out his clothes by anybody. He filled with humiliation and suffering that made him suspicious towards his life, he would prefer to shadow to light, faded days to sunny.

When Jemubhai's had been to London for higher education life in 1939, there is a turning point in his career. It is during this period, he learns what hate and racism are. At first, Jemubhai's hate is directed towards all other human beings, but, later on, the feeling of hate also includes himself and his own personality. The dominant feeling of hate transforms Jemubhai into a cruel man. The farewell with his father before he leaves India gives the reader the bitter taste of what will come: "Never again would he know love for a human being that wasn't adulterated by another, contradictory emotion" (Desai P.37).

It is Jemubhai's intelligence and cleverness at school, together with the dowry from the family of his new wife, which makes it possible for him to study law in England. Naturally, England is a cultural shock to him. In the same way, the English find it difficult to accept a dark skinned young man with an alien cultural background and a peculiar accent. In 1939 India was still dominated by the British Empire, and in the same way Jemubhai's fellow students from England feel superior to him on the individual level. Jemubhai arrives in England before the stream of immigration from earlier colonized countries in the fifties and sixties, when foreigners were still rare (Herrmann P. 468). Feeling rejected, he soon withdraws from all social activities: "He retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow" (Desai P.39). After a while, he also becomes a stranger to himself: he finds his own skin colour odd, his accent unpleasant and he is terrified by the thought of being different: "Eventually he felt barely human at all" (Desai P.40).

Through this passage Desai illustrates how the process of

internalization, the incorporation into the self of the attitudes and standards of others can work on the human mind. Through learning and accepting the norms and attitudes of the English, Jemubhai gradually understands how these issues can be valuable to him, and finally he regards them as his own viewpoints. In this way Jemubhai becomes a victim of internalized oppression; he starts to believe that the discrimination against him is justified. Through the process, Jemubhai soon learns how to use the methods of his oppressors towards himself. Being ignored, he therefore loses his self-esteem and starts to hate his own body and personality. His loneliness and self-hatred soon develop into mental instability, and his mind is troubled and hurt. The fear of being different and humiliated becomes so strong that he starts to powder his skin in a white/pinkish colour to hide his own.

The habit becomes an obsession for him for the rest of his life. He tries to become English gentleman to regain the position of superiority at his home land. As Desai says, "He was a foreigner- a foreigner- every bit of him screamed. Only his dissented and told him he was home; squatting painfully in that cramped outhouse, his gentleman's knees creaking, swearing "Bloody hell", he felt his digestion work as super efficient as -as Western transportation" (Desai P.167). when some took his powder he cried out loudly for it. He struck in a ridiculous situation when he strongly demanded for powder puff.

"What is missing?"

"My puff"

"What is that?"

He tried to explain

"But what on earth is it for, baba?"

"Pink and white what? That you put on your skin? Why?"

"Pink?"

Then his mother began to worry, "Is anything wrong with your skin?", she asked concerned. But, "Ha, ha," laughed a sister who was listening carefully "we sent you to abroad to become a gentleman, and instead you have become a lady!".(Desai P.167)

Jemubhai starts to hide his original identity and takes on a new one. Further, it symbolizes that he puts on a masque, the masque of whiteness. This indicates that he starts to adopt the features of the white man, who he admires. The fact that Jemubhai is reproducing the cruelty of those people who have been cruel to him, emphasizes the power and dominance of the white people. Thus, the race discrimination that Jemubhai is exposed to during his years in Cambridge hurts him for life, as he turns it all inward. His emotional feelings will never recover.

He is unable to suppress his negative feelings and experiences, he wants to see the same feelings in someone else. He transfers his misery to his nineteen-year-old wife Nimi, in order to ease his own troubled mind. Their marriage becomes a challenge for both of them. His frustrations, his temperament and his hate destroy Nimi's life. It is upon his return from England that Jemubhai's perverse and sadistic mistreatment of Nimi begins, as he also decides to "teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself" (Desai P.170). He also mentally abuses her, he gives her an English name in an attempt to change her identity, and he forces her to

learn English and behave in a western manner even though she does not want to cooperate.

He makes a severe remark on her appearance and dress "why do you have to dress in such a gaudy manner? Yellow and pink? Are you mad? He threw the hair oil bottles away and her long hairs escaped no matter how tidily she made her bun" (Desai P.172). Thus he rejects every aspect of her Indian being and a village being. He wants to see her in foreign attire. Sometimes, forces her to act privately according to his wish, her refusal to do as he pleases maddens him, and gradually he breaks her down. In the end he humiliates her,

"One day he found footprints on the toilet seat- she was squatting on it, she was squatting on it!- he could barely contain his outrage, took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl" (Desai P.173) that brought Nimi, utter misery, grew dull, began to fall asleep in heliographic sunshine and wake in the middle of the night, then she never saw anyone and never looked into the mirror. He became alienated from his own family and hers by "sending her back", and she spends her last days together with a sister and a brother-in-law until she dies in "an accident" (Desai P.307). Thus again, Desai stresses the terrible consequences of race discrimination and the problems which are related to colonialism, in particular the question of identity.

Thus, just like India has suffered under the British Regime in a global perspective, Jemubhai suffers as an individual, unable to improve his own situation. In more general terms, this situation can be seen as a parallel to the traditional view that the white, powerful and rich west feels superior to the submissive and poor Third World countries. These are the main reasons why Jemubhai is filled with hate. He is confused regarding his own identity, and does not feel at home in either England or in India. This is a common consequence when a nation interferes and takes the power in another country. At a national level situations like this can lead to confusion regarding national loyalty.

Finally, the experiences of Jemubhai illustrate the destructive consequences of racism, seen as a continuous process where the oppressed suffer so badly that his or her only knowledge of dealing with life is to discriminate others in the same way. Thus, the process of discrimination, internalization and projection seems to be a continuous process where each factor is closely linked to the others. It can be compared to a circle which proves almost impossible to break for those who suffer. Further, Jemubhai's discrimination of Nimi is based on gender as well as his spite for her race. In this case he behaves like the physical strong "white" man who uses his male dominance to punish Nimi who is weak, passive and submissive. Nimi is obedient in this situation, and follows him "as wives in those days followed their husbands" (Desai P.166). As a parallel to this, the reader can recognize the traditional pattern of the powerful West and the oppressed East in terms of both race and gender.

There are also some racial issues in the character of Sai and Gyan. Sai's surroundings are characterized by aspects of migration, cross-cultural aspects and the heritage from a colonial India. Her parents are Indian, but early in Sai's childhood they move to Moscow where her father has been picked out as a possible candidate for the Intercosmos Program (Desai P.25). Sai is left behind to be raised and

educated at a convent, where she learns that “cake was better than *laddoos*, fork spoon knife better than hands” and that “English was better than Hindi” (Desai P.30).

When she is suddenly orphaned as a young girl, the retired judge decides to take care of her at Cho Oyuas the only heir to the family genetically. The judge had bought Cho Oyu when he wanted to retire, and in accordance with his taste for the West, a Scotsman designed and built it (Desai P.28). The isolation of the property also suits the judge. Once it was majestic, but now it is crumbling. Just like the British Empire, Cho Oyu “had its past if not its future” (Desai P.257).

After her arrival, Sai’s western-oriented upbringing is further strengthened, as two elderly Anglophile Indian sisters, Noni and Lola, develop a close friendship with her. Noni and Lola live nearby at Mon Ami, and Noni is employed by the judge to be Sai’s private tutor (Desai P.34). The nearest neighbour of Cho Oyu is Uncle Potty who is from England, and his friend Father Booty from Switzerland. Hence, Sai’s little world consists of people with a multicultural background, influenced by features from the West. The exception is the cook at Cho Oyu who is Indian like herself. The cook and Sai grow very close, and he teaches her about India and Indian ways of life. However, despite their closeness at the surface, they are both able to sense the difference between them deeper down:

Sai felt embarrassed. She was rarely in the cook’s hut, and when she did come searching for him and enter, he was ill at ease and so was she, something about their closeness being exposed in the end as fake, their friendship composed of shallow things conducted in a broken language, for she was an English-speaker and he was a Hindi-speaker. (Desai P.19)

Thus it shows the identity problems in postcolonial India. It also confirms the difference in class between the privileged Indians who are influenced by the West and “the others”.

Naturally, Sai’s background and surroundings influence her life and personality. For where does this girl belong who is Indian by birth and who looks Indian but who is brought up in accordance with English customs in a multicultural, westernized society?

Gradually, and in particular through her romance with Gyan, she learns about this difficult question. When Sai is sixteen, she meets a young student of accounting, a descendent of a Nepali Gorkha merchant. Gyan is employed by her grandfather to teach her science and math. They soon fall in love and an intense relationship develops. However, as a parallel to their romance, the GNLF, the Gorkha National Liberation Front, develops. The main aim of the GNLF is to create a separate Gorkha state in the Nepali-speaking area. Gyan joins this group, and the dramatic turning point in their relationship is when Gyan betrays Sai, the judge and the cook in order to get hold of the weapons he knows are kept in the house. Thus, Sai’s search for identity becomes important to her when she tries to understand Gyan’s betrayal. Thus, the betrayal makes Sai aware of their ethnic differences: “‘You hate me’, said Sai, as if she’d read his thoughts, ‘for big reasons, that have nothing to do with me. You aren’t being fair?’” (Desai P.260).

When we put a question why Gyan rejects Sai and joins the Militants? It is clear that Gyan is frustrated because of unemployment and constant oppression of Nepalese of India. He had the similar experience from his family members,

particularly father and mother who does not want his identity as an unemployed. Hence, his cultural background, the poverty of his family and the bad prospects of his own future, make Gyan embarrassed by his romance with Sai and what she represents: “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-“(Desai P.161).

He feels he has to reject her westernized and bourgeois lifestyle. Through his betrayal, he risks the life of his lover, her grandfather and the cook. Thus, in the same way Gyan feels that the Indian people with Nepalese background have been discriminated against due to ethnicity, he now uses discrimination as a weapon himself.

All other characters in the novel such as Noni, Lola, Uncle Potty and Father Booty faithfully represent the challenges of a postcolonial and multicultural society and gives space for finding the racial discrimination and ethnicity at each level of the narration. Through the characters of the two Indian born Anglophile sisters, Noni and Lola, Kiran Desai exemplifies the complexity of this situation, Lola and Noni represent the few Indians who have been able to benefit from the British influence. Before she is widowed Lola was married to Joydeep and, as the name of her husband suggests, they were able to enjoy life fully without worries about the future. Together they planned their retirement at the rose-covered cottage Mon Ami in Kalimpong surrounded by beautiful scenery and a nice view of the Himalayas. When Joydeep dies, Lola’s unmarried sister Noni moves in with her, and they live on the pension of Lola’s husband (Desai P.41-42) and maintain their western life style. They move to city library and prefer British authors, they watch programs and news from the BBC and they celebrate English Christmas. In short, their focus is directed towards England and they are able to enjoy the materialism of the West. Naturally, this extravagant way of life also influences their thoughts about their home country. Lola sees India “as a sinking ship” (Desai P.47), and advises her daughter Pixie to leave the country when there still is a chance: “...*the doors won’t stay open forever...*” (Desai P.47). Thus, in a postcolonial setting where the differences between rich and poor, the English and the Indians, the whites and the non-whites are distinctive, the sisters are privileged. Later on they become the victims of Ghurkha Movement. When the GNLF takes power in Kalimpong, this situation changes. Usually, when guerrilla groups take control, everyone suffers - regardless of origin and class. The tourists stop coming and businesses have to close down. The water supplies, the electricity and gas for cooking are cut off (Desai P.237). People in the hillside of Kalimpong can not leave their homes, and innocent people are arrested and tortured on flimsy excuse to state examples (Desai P.281). The people like Lola and Noni are discriminated against, humiliated and ridiculed in the same way as everyone else. They have to lose their property to the GNLF movement, who see their estate as “free land” (Desai P.240). When Lola visits the head of the organization for the Kalimpong to discuss her situation, she is humiliated and discriminated against because of her ethnicity, and racial background.

She comprehends that she and Noni no longer will be among

those with wealth and privileges, and that they are an attractive target for the GNLF who needs shelter and food for their guerrilla troops. Thus the writer represents the unfortunate consequences of imperialism. The British influence in India developed a society where the differences between the colonizer and the colonized were distinctive in respect of power and wealth. Like other colonized countries that experience a difficult situation for the poor and oppressed, political riots and guerrilla troops trying to take control are not uncommon. In such cases everyone becomes victims of the rioters, regardless of rank and position. Lola realizes that the anger of the Nepalese “had solidified into slogans and guns, and it turned out that they, *they*, Lola and Noni, were the unlucky ones who wouldn’t slip through, who would pay the debt that should be shared with others over many generations” (Desai P.242). Here the debt suggests that there is a debt to be paid for the injustice the Nepalese have suffered. In this respect the Nepalese feel a double oppression, both from England and India. Lola now understands that their loyalty to the English will harm them, and that the rioters particularly will enjoy degrading those who have lived a privileged life. The Nepalese feel they can use their gained power to revenge some of the suffering they have been exposed to themselves. Lola realizes that it will take generations to pay for what they as rich and advantageous people owe the poor and oppressed. There are two more characters in *The Inheritance of Loss* who are important when discussing race and discrimination in postcolonial India. The characters of Uncle Potty and Father Booty represent the privileged people from the West living in India. Even though their economy is fading, they are still able to maintain their status and position as wealthy compared to the poor Indian born people in Kalimpong. Uncle Potty’s background is from the English upper class: he is from a famous English family, he has studied languages at Oxford, his parents bought two racehorses for themselves as wedding presents (Desai P.197) and his mother made a trip to Japan only to see the cherry blossoms (Desai P.107). However, defeated by bad luck and changing times his parents decide to retire to India in order to keep their dignity - here they will be able to live a respectful life maintaining their position and status. Compared to the masses of poor Indians they are still rich and powerful. Having bought his land from the judge years ago, Uncle Potty now spends the rest of his family fortune on liquor (Desai P.198). On one hand the declining prosperity of Uncle Potty and his family can symbolize the fading colonial power of the English in India. On the other hand, the character of Uncle Potty stresses the status and power of white Europeans in India. This further emphasizes the distinctive differences regarding wealth and power between the West and Third World colonized countries. Father Booty is from Switzerland and keeps a dairy (Desai P.41). He and Uncle Potty are best friends and spend their evenings drinking together. The reader is not informed about Father Booty’s background, but it is clear that he is also among the privileged Europeans in Kalimpong. Like everyone else, Father Booty suffers when the GNLF takes control. Having lived in India for forty-five years, he is suddenly found to lack a valid residence permit, and suddenly he is categorized as an illegal immigrant (Desai P.221). At this stage it is interesting to compare Father Booty’s situation with

that of Biju, who also lives in a foreign country on illegal terms. Their immigrant experiences are strikingly different. Whereas Father Booty has been able to live a privileged life in India participating in society, Biju has lived a “secret” life in poverty and humiliation. Through this contrast Desai emphasizes the privileges of the white man, who due to race, gender, class and authority often are able to settle in a foreign culture without being suppressed or degraded. Biju, on the other hand, represents the poor disadvantaged people from the Third World, who has to face oppression when approaching the West. As a white, rich man in India Father Booty has never even considered the possibility of being excluded. Due to his race and position, he never felt it necessary to renew his permit. Now, however, this situation is altered. He loses his property and dairy, and he has to leave the country. Thus, in the case of Father Booty, we see a rare example of how a white person living in a Third World country is rejected due to formalities. In most cases, the situation is the opposite, where white powerful people reject people from earlier colonized countries. Consequently, Father Booty also loses his dignity in the end.

The issue of race is vividly described even in the case of Biju. Biju is the son of the cook at Cho Oyu, and as a young man he leaves for New York in order to secure the future for himself and his father. His efforts to get a tourist visa for the United States have been both challenging and humiliating for him, and he is well aware that his only possibility is to stay and work illegally.

Biju restlessly moves from one illegal ill-paid job to another. He always fears being caught and sent back home by the authorities. The humiliation of continually losing a job is always present: “‘Nothing I can do’, the manager said, pink from having to dole out humiliation to these men...’ Just disappear quietly is my advice....’ So they disappeared” (Desai P.16). This shows how the system of illegal immigrants works and how they are being treated. The pink skin colour of the manager suggests the dominance of white people in positions like this, while the workers in the kitchens are mostly dark skinned and of Third World origin. Further, the quote emphasizes how it is a necessity for the undocumented immigrants to be invisible at the surface, and how they become the shadow class of society. In practical terms, this means that they have no rights in the American society, and that they have to accept the jobs, the pay and the poor lodgings and facilities which are offered. In order to keep their jobs, they must never complain or disagree. Financially, the undocumented workers mean a lot to the owners and managers, as especially workers from the Third World are low-cost labour. However, as for example at Pinocchio’s Restaurant, where Biju works for a period, the owner’s wife prefers illegal workers from the poorer parts of Europe rather than workers from other continents. With European workers she feels she has something in common, like religion and skin-colour. The only problem is that “they weren’t coming in numbers great enough or they weren’t coming desperate enough” (Desai P.48). Thus, the theme of race discrimination is present among illegal workers in New York.

The main question of being an immigrant in New York is whether to be legal or not. A legal immigrant can be visible in public life and thereby claim certain rights. The legality also

makes it possible to develop both profession and education and to be part of the American social security system. In short, it means to be able to lead a respectable life, to keep one's dignity and to be able to improve and influence one's own situation. The key to this status is to obtain a "United States Permanent Resident card", the so-called Green Card, which is an individual's proof of lawful permanent resident status. Naturally, the desire to get a Green Card is intense for Biju and his fellow workers, and in many cases it becomes an obsession: "Oh, the green card, the green card, the- Biju was so restless sometimes, he could barely stand to stay in his skin" (Desai P.81). However, at the same time, Biju knows that he cannot apply, because of his race: "...Indians were not able to apply" and further "The line would be stopped up for years; the quota was full, overfull, and spilling over" (Desai P.81). This shows that people from India wanting permanent resident status in America are being discriminated against due to their race and nationality.

Through the character of Biju and his fellow workers, people from a large number of nationalities and races are presented. In this world of illegal immigrants, there exists an invisible but still well-known hierarchy for races and nationalities. Thus, the concept of race is very much present among the illegal immigrants, and Biju suffers in a system like this. He is aware of the fact that he, as an Indian, is not allowed to apply for the immigration lottery every year, as "Indians were not allowed to apply...on and on the list went, but no, no Indians" (Desai P.81). From other kitchens he also learns that Indians are not a well liked group (Desai P.77). Biju feels both depressed and angry by his situation. He feels there is no future for him in America in spite of his hard work, his poor living conditions and the humiliation to which he is exposed. However, in spite of the injustice he feels himself good, it is interesting to see that Biju also has prejudice for people of other races and nationalities. In particular this is relevant for people from Pakistan, whom he has been brought up to hate. Biju's father is therefore very upset when he learns that Biju is working together with Pakistanis: "Beware. Beware. Keep away. Distrust" (Desai P.22). Again, an example of how ethnic discrimination can work is given.

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