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A Psychoanalytical Study of Colonial Trauma and Identity Crisis in the Character of Jemubhai Patel in Kiran Desai's Novel *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

This research explores the psychoanalytic dimensions of Jemubhai Patel, a central character in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. By applying psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freud's concepts of repression and identity crisis, this study investigates how Jemubhai's experiences of colonial trauma shape his emotional and psychological state. The paper argues that Jemubhai's repression of his Indian heritage and his attempts to assimilate into British culture contribute to an ongoing identity crisis. This identity conflict and the psychological scars of colonialism lead to his emotional isolation, self-loathing, and fractured relationships. Through this study, the paper highlights how colonialism's impact transcends history, affecting the post-colonial psyche and relationships.

Research Questions

1. How does Jemubhai's colonial experience lead to emotional isolation?
2. How does Jemubhai's identity crisis reflect colonialism's psychological effects?
3. How does Freud's theory explain Jemubhai's self-loathing and strained family bonds?

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the psychological impact of Jemubhai's colonial experience using psychoanalytic theory.
2. To explore how Jemubhai's repression of his identity causes emotional and social alienation.
3. To examine how colonial trauma affects Jemubhai's relationships, especially with his family.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of *The Inheritance of Loss*, focusing on the psychological consequences of colonial trauma. While many literary analyses of the novel focus on themes of migration, identity, and globalization, this research delves into the emotional and psychological scars left by colonialism, which is often overlooked in traditional readings. Secondly, by applying psychoanalytic theory, the paper contributes to understanding how colonialism impacts individuals' sense of self and their relationships. It highlights the role of repression and identity conflict in shaping the lives of post-colonial subjects. This research may encourage further studies on the psychological effects of colonialism in post-colonial literature.

Research Methodology

This research paper adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on an in-depth psychoanalytic reading of *The Inheritance of Loss* and its central character, Jemubhai Patel. Freudian psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on repression, the superego, and the unconscious, forms the core of the analytical framework. The research employs a textual analysis methodology, systematically examining key moments in the novel where Jemubhai's psychological state is revealed through his actions, thoughts, and interactions with other characters. Close reading: a thorough, detailed reading of *The Inheritance of Loss* to identify and extract significant passages that highlight Jemubhai's psychological and emotional

struggles. This includes his relationships with other characters, his recollections of his time in England, and his internal monologues that reveal his emotional isolation and identity crisis. Application of psychoanalytic concepts: the study applies Freudian concepts such as repression, the superego, and the Oedipal complex to Jemubhai's character. The focus is on understanding how Jemubhai's identity is shaped by colonial trauma and how his emotional repression prevents him from forming meaningful relationships.

Literature Review

The psychological effects of colonialism have been extensively explored by theorists like Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* articulates the deep psychological scars inflicted on colonized individuals. He explains how colonial oppression creates a sense of inferiority, which manifests in psychological disorders like identity fragmentation and repression. Fanon's concept of the "colonized mind" aligns with Jemubhai's experiences in England, where the trauma of being an inferior subject is deeply internalized.

Homi K. Bhabha explores the complexities of post-colonial identity in his work on mimicry and hybridity. Bhabha's idea of the "third space" provides a theoretical lens for understanding Jemubhai's internal conflict. Caught between two conflicting cultures—British and Indian—Jemubhai is unable to fully assimilate into either, resulting in a fragmented sense of self.

The psychoanalytic framework used in this study draws upon Sigmund Freud's theories of repression, where painful memories are pushed into the unconscious mind, and the superego, which internalizes societal and cultural norms. These concepts help to explain Jemubhai's psychological repression and his emotional coldness toward his family and his heritage.

Analysis/Discussion

In this section, a comprehensive psychoanalytic exploration of Jemubhai Patel's character has been conducted by applying Freudian psychoanalysis to understand

the underlying psychological dynamics that shape his behavior and relationships. The analysis has focused on key Freudian concepts such as repression, the superego, identity crisis, and self-loathing as mechanisms through which Jemubhai deals with his colonial trauma.

Jemubhai's Colonial Trauma and Repression

The trauma that Jemubhai experiences as a young man in colonial England forms the foundation for his lifelong psychological struggles. Freud's theory of repression suggests that when individuals experience unbearable pain or conflict, they push these painful thoughts and memories into the unconscious to protect themselves from the overwhelming emotions associated with these experiences. In Jemubhai's case, his traumatic time in England, characterized by racial discrimination, isolation, and feelings of inferiority, is repressed, yet it continues to affect him at a deep emotional level.

Jemubhai's emotional and psychological responses to colonial oppression are not explicitly acknowledged in the narrative, indicating that they are submerged in his unconscious. In particular, the humiliation he faced in England, where he was treated as inferior despite his British education, becomes an unspeakable trauma. Freud suggests that repression is a form of defense, but it does not erase the memory or the emotional charge associated with the traumatic event. Instead, repression distorts the individual's sense of self and leads to unconscious conflicts.

For Jemubhai, this repression takes the form of a denial of his Indian roots. His internalized belief that his Indian identity is inferior manifests in his efforts to sever ties with his culture, and he projects his own shame onto others. His rejection of his Indian heritage is not only a means of avoiding the painful memories of colonial oppression but also an attempt to forge an identity that aligns with his British education and colonial aspirations. However, this repression is inherently unstable—Jemubhai's efforts to suppress his true identity lead to

psychological fragmentation, as his unconscious attachment to his Indian roots continues to exert pressure on his psyche.

The psychic cost of repression is evident in Jemubhai's life. He is emotionally distant, withdrawn, and unable to form meaningful connections with others, especially his wife and granddaughter. His repression causes an emotional numbing that affects his ability to love and engage with those closest to him, signaling the depth of his unresolved inner conflict.

The Superego: Internalizing Colonial Ideals

Freud's concept of the superego is pivotal in understanding Jemubhai's self-loathing and emotional detachment. The superego is the part of the psyche that internalizes societal norms, values, and expectations. It functions as an internalized moral authority, judging and censoring the individual's actions and desires. Jemubhai's superego is significantly shaped by colonial values—values that position British culture as superior to Indian culture.

As an educated man who spent many years in colonial England, Jemubhai internalized these colonial ideologies, which taught him to view his Indian heritage as inferior and shameful. This internalization of colonial beliefs leads to a harsh, judgmental superego that constantly condemns his own identity as insufficient and undesirable. Freud explains that when an individual's superego becomes overly critical and demanding, it can lead to feelings of guilt, anxiety, and self-loathing. In Jemubhai's case, his superego, which has absorbed the prejudices of the colonial system, condemns his Indian heritage, perpetuating feelings of shame and self-hatred.

This self-loathing is most apparent in Jemubhai's treatment of others, particularly his wife, whom he marries out of obligation rather than affection. His lack of love for his wife can be interpreted as a projection of his own self-rejection—he cannot love her because he is incapable of loving himself. Freud's concept of projection—the unconscious defense mechanism through which an

individual attributes their own undesirable feelings onto others—offers insight into Jemubhai's emotional coldness. He projects his disdain for his Indian self onto his wife, distancing himself emotionally from her.

Moreover, Jemubhai's harsh self-judgment and emotional withdrawal manifest in his relationships with his granddaughter, Sai. He is unable to express affection for Sai or show any warmth, reflecting his inability to connect emotionally due to his internalized colonial shame. His emotional coldness serves as a defense against the deep-seated guilt and shame that he feels for being unable to fully conform to the colonial ideals of British superiority.

Identity Crisis: The Conflict between British and Indian Identities

Jemubhai's life is marked by a profound identity crisis, a conflict between his British education and his Indian heritage. Freud's ideas on the formation of the ego and identity offer a valuable framework for understanding this crisis. According to Freud, the ego is the part of the psyche that mediates between the id, which represents instinctual desires, and the superego, which represents moral and societal standards. A healthy ego develops when an individual is able to integrate different aspects of their identity, creating a sense of coherence and wholeness.

For Jemubhai, however, the ego is fractured. His time in England created a split between his Indian self and his British self, leaving him unable to reconcile these two identities. His education in England and his aspiration to fit into the British colonial system demand that he rejects his Indian roots, leading to a fragmented sense of self. This internal conflict between two conflicting identities creates an ongoing identity crisis, where Jemubhai's sense of self is not stable, and he is unable to fully belong to either the Indian or British worlds.

The unresolved conflict between these two identities leads to psychological distress and emotional instability. Jemubhai's attempt to assimilate into British culture is unsuccessful because, as an Indian man, he can never fully escape the

legacy of colonialism. His unconscious longing for his Indian identity is at odds with his conscious desire to reject it. This tension between his Indian roots and British values is a significant factor contributing to his emotional alienation and depression.

Freud's theory of cognitive dissonance, which explains the discomfort individuals experience when they hold two conflicting beliefs, provides further insight into Jemubhai's psychological state. Jemubhai's internal conflict between his British education and his Indian heritage creates a state of cognitive dissonance, which he attempts to resolve by repressing one of the conflicting beliefs (his Indian identity). However, the repression is not fully effective, and the emotional turmoil persists, leading to a chronic sense of dislocation.

The Role of Colonial Trauma in Shaping Relationships

Jemubhai's inability to reconcile his identity is mirrored in his relationships with his family, especially his wife and granddaughter. His coldness and emotional detachment are significant indicators of how colonial trauma has affected his ability to form meaningful bonds. Freud's concept of object relations theory, which focuses on the way early relationships with caregivers influence an individual's capacity for later emotional connections, can be applied to Jemubhai's relationships.

Jemubhai's emotional detachment from his wife, whom he views as a symbolic reminder of his unfulfilled life in India, is a direct result of his repressed memories of colonial subjugation and shame. His marriage is devoid of passion, as he cannot love her in any meaningful way. Instead, he sees her as a reflection of his own shame and self-rejection. Freud's theory of sexual repression is relevant here, as Jemubhai's inability to engage emotionally with his wife can be seen as a manifestation of his repressed desires and his fear of intimacy.

Similarly, Jemubhai's relationship with his granddaughter, Sai, is characterized by emotional distance and coldness. His inability to connect with her underscores the

extent to which colonial trauma has eroded his capacity for love and emotional connection. Despite her youth and innocence, Sai is unable to break through Jemubhai's emotional defenses. This distance is indicative of the psychic walls Jemubhai has constructed in response to his unresolved identity crisis. Freud's theory of defense mechanisms, particularly regression and reaction formation, can help explain Jemubhai's emotional withdrawal as a means of avoiding the pain of confronting his repressed emotions.

The lack of emotional warmth in Jemubhai's relationships is not merely a personal failing but a symptom of broader colonial trauma. His experience of colonial oppression has deeply shaped his emotional landscape, making it difficult for him to experience intimacy or trust. His emotional isolation mirrors the psychological isolation felt by many individuals who have internalized colonial ideologies, creating a disjunction between their inner lives and their external realities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jemubhai Patel's psychological and emotional struggles are a direct result of colonial trauma, repression, and an ongoing identity crisis. Through Freudian concepts of repression, the superego, identity conflict, and self-loathing, we gain deeper insight into how Jemubhai's internal conflicts shape his relationships and his sense of self. The colonial trauma he experienced as a young man in England has left lasting scars, which manifest as a fragmented sense of identity and emotional isolation. His inability to reconcile his British education with his Indian heritage leads to profound alienation and self-rejection.

This analysis underscores the long-lasting psychological effects of colonialism, not just in terms of external historical events, but in the emotional and psychological lives of individuals. The emotional detachment, repression, and identity crisis that Jemubhai experiences are symptomatic of the larger psychological consequences of colonial domination.

Findings

Based on the analysis of Jemubhai Patel's character and the application of Freudian psychoanalysis, the following key findings are drawn:

- **Repression of Indian identity:** Jemubhai's painful experiences in England, like racism and humiliation, lead him to hide his Indian identity. He tries to fit into British society to escape the pain of being colonized. This repression affects his behavior and emotions for the rest of his life.
- **Identity crisis:** Jemubhai struggles with a split identity, unable to combine his Indian and British sides. This causes inner conflict and emotional confusion, as his mind can't reconcile the two cultures.
- **Internalized colonial ideals:** Jemubhai sees his Indian heritage as inferior because he has absorbed colonial values. This makes him hate his Indian identity and project those feelings onto others, especially his wife and granddaughter, causing emotional distance.
- **Emotional isolation:** His rejection of his Indian roots and inability to merge his two identities causes him to feel emotionally isolated and disconnected from others, including his wife and granddaughter.
- **Effects on relationships:** the trauma Jemubhai faced makes it hard for him to form deep emotional connections. His early experiences shape his inability to connect with his wife and granddaughter.
- **Long-term consequences of repression:** repression distorts Jemubhai's mind, leading to feelings of depression, anxiety, and alienation. His inability to address his trauma makes him emotionally numb and detached.
- **Post-colonial trauma:** Jemubhai's alienation represents the larger societal impact of colonialism. His difficulty connecting with his granddaughter shows how colonial trauma is passed down through generations.

- Psychological distress: Jemubhai's failure to fully adapt to British society or embrace his Indian roots causes emotional pain. His struggle with identity creates psychological turmoil.
- Intergenerational trauma: the psychological effects of colonialism last beyond Jemubhai's life and affect future generations. His emotional numbness and identity confusion are examples of how colonial trauma affects not only individuals but entire societies.

In short, Jemubhai's emotional struggles are deeply linked to his colonial past, and these effects continue to shape his identity, relationships, and mental health.

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