

Cultural Conflicts and Politeness Strategies: Analysing 'FACE' in Desai's The Inheritance of Loss

Shripad Rajendra Medhe¹ Dr. Dnyanoba B. Mundhe²

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¹Research Scholar (Ph.D.),
School of Language Literature
and Culture Studies,
Swami Ramanand Tirth
Marathwada University,
Nanded (India)

²Research Supervisor and
Assistant Professor,
Department of English, Sharda
Mahavidyalaya, Parbhani
(India)
(Former Director, Students'
Development, SRTMU, Nanded)
Email:

shripadmedhe@gmail.com

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Address for correspondence:

Research Scholar (Ph.D.),
School of Language Literature and
Culture Studies,
Swami Ramanand Tirth
Marathwada University, Nanded
(India)

Email: shripadmedhe@gmail.com

Abstract:

This research paper explores the theory of Brown and Levinson's idea of 'FACE' to the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. The novel is set in postcolonial India and the Nepali insurgency, captures the struggles of characters caught between cultural identities, social hierarchies, and global influences. The study examines how the characters use politeness strategies to maintain their 'FACE'—the public self-image they want to protect—and how cultural conflicts affect these interactions.

The paper focuses on the two primary types of politeness: positive politeness, which aims to build relationships through inclusion and affirmation, and negative politeness, which seeks to maintain distance and avoid imposition. It analyzes how these strategies reflect the characters' social positions, cultural backgrounds, and emotional struggles. The study also highlights instances where threats to 'FACE,' such as insults, rejections, or misunderstandings, reveal deeper cultural tensions and inequalities.

By applying the concept of 'FACE' to *The Inheritance of Loss*, this research sheds light on how politeness strategies operate in a multicultural, postcolonial context. It shows that politeness is not just a linguistic tool but also a way to navigate power dynamics, assert identity, and cope with the effects of cultural displacement. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the novel's themes and offers insights into the broader relationship between language, culture, and identity in literature.

Keywords: Politeness, FACE, Identity Negotiation, Cultural Conflicts, Social Hierarchies

Introduction:

Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson develop the concept of 'FACE' as part of their politeness theory. This idea denotes to a person's image in society, which everyone wants to maintain during social interactions. According to theorists, people use politeness approaches to protect their own 'FACE' and the 'FACE' of others. These strategies help them avoid conflict, show respect, and maintain harmony in conversations. Brown and Levinson's theory is influential in understanding human communication and can be applied to various contexts, including literature.

Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* provides an excellent example for applying the concept of 'FACE.' The story explores themes of identity, cultural conflict, and social inequality. It focuses on characters who live between two worlds—their local traditions and the influences of Western culture. In this setting, the idea of 'FACE' becomes significant as the characters navigate their relationships and interactions. Each character tries to protect their self-image while dealing with issues like colonialism, globalization, and personal struggles.

One way to see Brown and Levinson's concept of 'FACE' in the novel is through the actions and dialogues of the characters. For example, the judge, one of the main characters, struggles with his identity. He spends much of his life trying to adopt Western ways, but he also feels alienated from his own culture. This internal conflict influences how he interacts with others. The judge often uses politeness strategies to assert his authority and protect his dignity, but at times, his actions harm the 'FACE' of others, especially his granddaughter Sai and his cook. His behavior shows how power dynamics and social expectations affect politeness and self-image.

Another example is Sai, the judge's granddaughter. Sai grows up in a modern and Westernized environment, but she also faces cultural challenges. She tries to balance her identity and maintain her 'FACE' in interactions with people from different backgrounds, including her tutor, Gyan. Gyan's perspective differs from Sai's, and their relationship highlights how cultural differences and personal insecurities shape their communication. Both Sai and Gyan use politeness strategies to navigate their conflicts, but misunderstandings often arise, showing the limits of these strategies in bridging cultural gaps.

The cook's character also reflects the importance of 'FACE.' As a servant, he constantly tries to protect his self-image while dealing with his low social status. He uses politeness strategies to maintain respect in his interactions with the judge and others, even when faced with harsh treatment. His actions reveal how 'FACE' plays a role in maintaining relationships within unequal social structures.

By applying Brown and Levinson's concept of 'FACE' to *The Inheritance of Loss*, readers understand a deeper knowledge about the characters and their struggles. The theory highlights how politeness, communication, and self-image are connected to larger social and cultural issues. It shows that 'FACE' is not just about individual interactions but also about how people navigate complex power dynamics and cultural identities. This perspective enriches the reading of Desai's novel and demonstrates the relevance of politeness theory in analyzing literature.

Review of Literature

The concept of 'FACE' has been widely studied in various disciplines, including sociolinguistics, anthropology, and literature. Brown and Levinson's foundational work *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (1987) introduces the notion of positive and negative face. Positive face reflects a person's desire to be appreciated and approved, while negative face relates to an individual's wish to be free from imposition (Brown and Levinson 62). Their theory also outlines approaches to accomplish FTAs, such as directness, mitigation, and avoidance, making it a versatile tool for analyzing social interactions.

Critics have explored the relevance of 'FACE' across cultures, emphasizing that politeness strategies are shaped by cultural norms. Richard Watts, in *Politeness* (2003), argues that Brown and Levinson's model, though universal in intent, requires contextual adaptation to account for cultural diversity. Watts emphasizes that notions of politeness are dynamic and rooted in cultural practices (Watts 89). Similarly, Sachiko Ide's research highlights how non-Western cultures often prioritize collective harmony over individual autonomy, resulting in distinct politeness strategies (Ide 231). These perspectives underline the need to consider cultural contexts when applying the idea of 'FACE.'

In the field of literature, scholars have employed politeness theories to analyze characters and their interactions. Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain* (1985), suggests that narratives often illustrate how power dynamics are reinforced or disrupted through language and politeness strategies. Recent studies extend this focus to postcolonial literature, exploring how politeness reflects the negotiation of identity in contexts of cultural conflict. For instance, Claire Chambers' *British Muslim Fictions* (2011) examines how politeness strategies reveal tensions between modernity and tradition in diasporic communities. Similarly, Tabish Khair's essays on postcolonial literature discuss the role of politeness in mediating relationships shaped by colonial legacies.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* has attracted significant scholarly attention for its exploration of identity, migration, and cultural conflict. Critics like Priyamvada Gopal argue that the novel critiques global inequalities and the alienation experienced by marginalized communities (Gopal 145). Others, such as Suman Gupta, focus on the characters' struggles to reconcile their personal desires with societal expectations (Gupta 103). However, the application of 'FACE' theory to Desai's work remains underexplored, offering a fresh perspective to understand its rich character dynamics and cultural tensions.

Scope of the Study

This paper examines the cultural conflicts and politeness strategies in *The Inheritance of Loss* through the lens of Brown and Levinson's 'FACE.' It focuses on how characters manage their self-image while navigating power imbalances, cultural expectations, and interpersonal relationships. By analyzing key interactions, the study aims to reveal how Desai portrays the complexities of identity and communication in a postcolonial world.

Cultural Conflicts and Politeness Strategies in *The Inheritance of Loss*

Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) explores themes of identity, migration, and cultural conflicts in a globalized world. One way to understand the interpersonal dynamics in the novel is through Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's concept of 'FACE.' Brown and Levinson define 'FACE' as the public self-image that people want to maintain in social interactions. This theory provides a framework to analyze how characters in Desai's novel navigate politeness and conflict in a multicultural setting.

This paper examines how cultural conflicts in *The Inheritance of Loss* manifest using politeness strategies tied to the preservation or threat to 'FACE.' It also highlights how these interactions reflect broader themes of identity and social hierarchies in a postcolonial context.

Understanding 'FACE' and Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson's concept of 'FACE' includes two main aspects: 'Positive Face' and 'Negative Face.' Positive face refers to a person's desire to be liked, appreciated, and included in social groups. Negative face refers to a person's desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Politeness strategies are actions taken to protect these aspects of face during interactions. Brown and Levinson outline four main types of strategies:

- a) **Bald-on-record:** Direct communication without concern for face.
- b) **Positive politeness:** Attempts to appeal to someone's PF through greetings or cohesion.
- c) **Negative politeness:** Actions taken to avoid imposing on someone's negative face.
- d) **ORIS:** Indirect communication gives scope for explanation.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, characters often use or reject these strategies, revealing the cultural tensions they experience. The settings of Kalimpong, India, and the United States create contrasting social environments that influence these interactions.

Cultural Conflicts in the Novel

Desai's novel is rich with depictions of cultural conflicts. The characters—ranging from Sai, the young orphaned granddaughter of the judge, to Biju, the son of the cook working in America—experience tension between tradition and modernity, colonial legacies and independence, and local identities and global influences. These conflicts often surface in their use of language and politeness strategies.

a) **The Judge's Relationship with British Culture:**

The retired judge, Jemubhai Patel, embodies the internalized colonial mindset. He has spent years studying in England, where he faces racism and alienation. His experiences abroad damage his self-esteem and lead him to reject his Indian identity. His preference for English customs and disdain for Indian traditions create a cultural disconnect with those around him.

The judge's interactions often threaten others' positive face. For example, he speaks rudely to the cook, using bald-on-record strategies that disregard the cook's feelings. He uses English to assert superiority and distance himself from the local culture. This rejection of positive politeness reflects his internal conflict and inability to reconcile his colonial education with his heritage.

b) Sai's Cross-Cultural Identity:

Sai, the judge's granddaughter, grows up in Kalimpong but receives an education influenced by Western values. Her interactions with others reveal her struggle to balance these influences. For example, her romantic relationship with Gyan, her Nepali tutor, reflects a clash between their cultural backgrounds.

Gyan's growing involvement in the Gorkhaland movement creates tension in their relationship. Sai's attempts to engage Gyan using positive politeness—such as expressing admiration for his knowledge—fail as Gyan's political awakening leads him to see her as a symbol of privilege and colonial influence. He rejects her positive face, accusing her of being out of touch with the struggles of the local community. This conflict highlights the broader cultural divide between Westernized elites and marginalized groups.

c) Biju's Experiences in America:

Biju, the cook's son, represents the challenges of migration and cultural dislocation. In the United States, Biju works in various low-paying jobs and faces exploitation and discrimination. His interactions with his employers and coworkers often involve negative politeness strategies. For example, he speaks hesitantly and avoids direct confrontation to maintain his job and avoid drawing attention to himself.

Despite his efforts to adapt, Biju struggles with the loss of his cultural identity. He feels disconnected from both the American lifestyle and his Indian roots. His eventual decision to return to India reflects his longing for belonging and a sense of positive face that he cannot achieve abroad.

d) Politeness Strategies and Social Hierarchies:

In Desai's novel, politeness strategies also reflect the rigid social hierarchies inherited from colonial rule. The judge's treatment of the cook and Sai's relationship with Gyan illustrate how power dynamics shape interactions.

e) The Judge and the Cook:

The judge's use of bald-on-record strategies with the cook demonstrates his assertion of authority. He expects unquestioning obedience and rarely acknowledges the cook's positive or negative face. For example, he reprimands the cook harshly for minor mistakes, showing no concern for his dignity. This behavior reflects the colonial mindset that values hierarchy and dominance over mutual respect.

The cook, in contrast, uses negative politeness strategies to avoid conflict. He addresses the judge formally and minimizes his own needs. These dynamic underscores the power imbalance and the lingering effects of colonialism on interpersonal relationships.

f) Sai and Gyan:

Sai and Gyan's interactions illustrate the intersection of cultural identity and social class. Sai's Western education and privileged background contrast with Gyan's more traditional upbringing. Initially, Sai's positive politeness strategies create a sense of intimacy. However, as Gyan becomes more involved in the Gorkhaland movement, he begins to reject these strategies and asserts his own identity.

Gyan's use of bald-on-record criticism of Sai's privilege shows his attempt to reclaim power in their relationship. This shift reflects the larger cultural conflict between Westernized elites and marginalized communities seeking recognition and autonomy.

g) The Broader Implications of 'FACE' in the Novel:

The concept of 'FACE' provides a lens to understand the interpersonal and cultural dynamics in *The Inheritance of Loss*. Politeness strategies reveal not only individual relationships but also the broader societal tensions in postcolonial India.

h) Identity and Belonging:

The characters' struggles with 'FACE' highlight their search for identity and belonging. The judge's rejection of his Indian heritage, Sai's cross-cultural identity, and Biju's dislocation as an immigrant all reflect the challenges of navigating multiple cultural influences. Their interactions with others show how politeness strategies are shaped by these struggles.

i) Power and Resistance:

Politeness strategies also reveal the power dynamics in the novel. The judge's dominance over the cook, Sai's privilege in her relationship with Gyan, and Biju's subordination in America all illustrate how social hierarchies influence interactions. However, these dynamics are not static. Characters like Gyan challenge these hierarchies, using direct communication to assert their agency and resist oppression.

Likely Conclusion:

The Inheritance of Loss offers a rich examination of cultural conflicts and individuality in a globalized world. By the idea of 'FACE,' we see how characters navigate politeness strategies to maintain or challenge social relationships. The novel's depiction of cultural tensions reflects broader themes of belonging, power, and resistance in postcolonial societies. By analyzing these dynamics, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of human interaction in a multicultural world.

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