

Character Deeti might be seen as the moral heart of this story of cruelty and kindness. She bears her immense suffering without self-pity or recrimination of others. She, however, is not a saint or a fool. She is practical, determined to get the best for her daughter and responds to any intention of cruelty with an 'eye for an eye.' Deeti is something of an 'everywoman,' a mythic character, who is a devout Hindu, as well as a sacrificing wife and a loving mother. She is the wife of a crippled man who works in an opium factory in north India and then dies an early death. She then prepares to immolate herself on his funeral pyre but is rescued at the last minute, which provides the turning point in her life. As the novel develops, notably after the symbolic 'rebirth' of the funeral pyre, she gains a new identity and new confidence, becoming a source of strength for the oppressed people on the ship, and especially for the women. Even the men aboard the ship nickname her 'the rebel.' By the end, we appreciate that this poor peasant woman possesses imagination and vision. In this way, the novel traces the transformation of a meek wife into an independent (and remarried) woman.

Activities Deeti cares for her crippled, addicted husband, rubbing his back with oil, massaging his feet and sometimes carrying him on her back. She does housework when he is at work. Later, on board the ship, she performs much the same tasks for the indentured labourers travelling with her. She tends to the sick, cooks for everyone and wins special privileges (extra food and sleep) for those who need help.

Illustrative Moments

Imagination The book opens with a calm but revealing vision. It is Deeti's vision. The impoverished wife of an opium addict, she is standing on the bank of the Ganges, holding her daughter's hand, while pouring water in a ritual to a goddess. In the distance, one can see the roof of the opium factory with a fluttering British flag. Suddenly she sees something in her mind's eye: 'The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny, for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream.' Deeti is convinced 'that the ship existed somewhere and was heading in her direction.'

Resourceful Whether as an impoverished wife of a drug addict or (later) as the beloved wife of a compassionate man, Deeti has her wits about her. She may be pious, but she is not passive or weak and meets 'fire with fire.' A good example of this quality occurs early on when Deeti discovers that her mother-in-law had drugged her with opium on her wedding night so that her brother-in-law could rape her (since her husband is crippled). 'What should she do?...It was no use to weep and bemoan the influence of the planets.' She finds her husband's store of opium, breaks off a little piece and mixes it in with her mother-in-law's tea. Day after day, very slowly, so that the 'bitch' wouldn't notice, she turns her relative into an addict.

Clever Deeti is clever enough to seize the opportunity given when she is rescued from the funeral pyre and invent a new identity for herself. First, she marries her rescuer, who is an Untouchable but a very fine man. A more telling scene occurs later when she boards the ship as an indentured labour bound for Mauritius. The officer in charge writes down all the biographical details of each passenger, beginning with their name. When she is asked, she hesitates: 'It was on her lips to identify herself as Kabutri-ki-ma [mother of Kabutri, her daughter's name], the name she had been known by ever since her daughter's birth. Then her proper first name came to mind, since it was who she was. "Aditi [long form of 'Deeti']," she said softly. "I am Aditi." The significance of a married woman using her own name was not lost on the others.'