

Sai (in K. Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss*) Insightful

Character Sai is perhaps the most important character in this complex novel with several main characters. It is a *bildungsroman* (novel of 'formation' or 'development'), in which Sai slowly emerges from her protected shell and becomes her own person. The sixteen-year-old granddaughter of Judge Patel, she has been brought up in convent schools by English nuns, which has made her a 'foreigner' in her own country. When, after she is orphaned, she goes to stay in her grandfather's secluded mountain house, she feels in unfamiliar territory. The servants don't speak English and she doesn't speak Hindi or Bengali, but she is intelligent, inquisitive and sensitive. She falls in love with her Maths tutor, who opens up her mind to questions of cultural identity and nationality. Sai, however, is not a natural rebel and she does not run off and marry this man, who comes from a very different background to her. Rather, she is left to process her experiences, wondering if 'fulfilment could ever be felt as deeply as loss.'

Activities Sai is privately tutored and is driven to the home of two women, who teach her everything from science to Shakespeare. When she requires special training in maths, she is taught by a young man, with whom she falls in love. At home, she spends time reading magazines like National Geographic, making friends with the cook and playing with the dog.

Illustrative moments

Empathetic Although Sai is distanced from people who don't speak English, she has the humanity to be able to connect with them in non-verbal ways. This quality is illustrated in a poignant scene early on in the story. The police have come to investigate a burglary at the house (by armed insurgents), but it is the cook's hut that is searched. They leave his few belongings scattered on the floor and 'exposed his poverty, the fact that he was not looked after, that his dignity had no basis.' When Sai enters his hut, to summon him for her grandfather, she is embarrassed, 'something about their closeness being exposed as fake, that their friendship was shallow, carried on in a broken language. It never allowed them to go deep. Yet, she felt a pride that this difficult man always spoke to her with affection, calling her by endearments.' Sai cannot communicate in any depth with the cook but she feels his shame and has a kind of love for him, which crosses the caste and class divide.

Alienated Sai's upbringing and education have left her unconnected to the culture she lives in, especially when she moves into her grandfather's house. Her lack of familiarity with the world around her is illustrated in an early scene, when guests come to the house and Sai is told to prepare the tea. She goes into the kitchen, where the cook should be but isn't, so she is forced to prepare the tea. But she 'didn't know to do it the Indian way—with small pans, and strainers, lots of milk and sugar—she only knew the English way.' It is a small moment but an important one. Tea is important in both cultures, a simply ceremony that nevertheless facilitates social interaction. If she cannot serve tea in the 'Indian way', how will she ever make friends, let alone find a husband?

Insightful Sai is transformed during this sad story, going from adolescent naivete, through an intense yet failed love affair, to being caught up in an armed insurrection. She began the story trying to make sense of her own life, but toward the end she realises the complicated forces that shape her (and everyone else). During a rain storm, in the final pages of the book, she is staring out the window and has a series of revelations. 'Who was she? She with her self-importance, screaming to be heard...Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it.' In this moment, Sai stands in for the author, who has deftly illustrated the multi-factored reality of our lives.