

The Inheritance of Loss (2006)

Story *The Inheritance of Loss*, the second novel written by Kiran Desai, won the Booker Prize in 2006. It tells the story of four main characters, each caught up in the cross-currents of colonialism and current Indian society. The story opens with Sai, a well-educated, sixteen-year-old girl who lives with her grandfather, a retired judge, in Kalimpong, a town near Darjeeling, in the Himalayas. Judge Patel is happy to take care of Sai as a means to assuage his guilt for abandoning and later arranging for the murder of his wife and for mistreating his own father. In fact, he is delighted to have her because he is completely enamoured of British values and culture, and she has been brought up in the western manner in missionary schools. Sai is also happy, having fallen in love with Gyan, her Maths tutor, although his social class makes him an unlikely candidate for her husband. The cook in the judge's house has a son, Biju, living as an illegal immigrant in the US because he overstayed his visa. After suffering squalid living conditions and abuse from a boss (also an Indian), Biju decides to move back to Kalimpong. In the background of these characters' lives, an army insurgency is fighting for a separate state, with Darjeeling as its capital, for ethnic Nepalese living in this mountainous region of northeast India. The insurgents target people like the wealthy, anglophile Judge, and one day they attack his house and steal food and weapons. Eventually, when Gyan discovers that his background is Nepalese, he joins the insurgency. Now any relationship with Sai is doomed, which breaks her heart. Biju's return to Kalimpong is thwarted when he is kidnapped and robbed by the insurgents. In the end, the judge begs God for forgiveness for his crimes, Biju is reunited with his father in Kalimpong, and Gyan and Sai survive as friends, but they are all changed forever. Each character has loss in their past, and each negotiates that inheritance in a different manner.

Characters

Biju Biju, the son of judge Patel's alcoholic cook, moved to New York in order to better himself. Although he suffers poverty and squalor in his new country, he soon forgets about those same conditions back in India. As the story develops and he faces one too many abusive insults from his boss (also an Indian), he gives up his 'privileged' position and goes back to Kalimpong in order to be with his father. He is a character who criss-crosses national boundaries.

Sai Sai is the teenage granddaughter of Judge Patel. When she is orphaned, she goes to live with the judge. She was educated in private, Christian missionary schools run by British nuns and represents a denatured Indian who has never left the country. Through the course of the novel, living with her anglophile grandfather, finding and losing a lover, she gains new knowledge about the traditional India she never knew.

Jemubhai Patel Jemubhai Patel is a retired judge, who lived through the colonial era, studied at Cambridge and absorbed British values and attitudes. He lives in self-imposed exile, feeling guilty for driving away and killing his wife. His only companion is his dog, Mutt, until his granddaughter, Sai, arrives. By caring for her, he attempts to assuage his guilt. Like most of the other characters, he is caught between India and Britain, wishing to avoid the worst of Indian tradition but not able to become fully English either.

Gyan Gyan is a self-made man. Born in a poor farming family, which he only later discovers has Nepalese origins, he graduates from college and is hired by the judge to tutor Sai. He feels intimidated by the Englishness of the judge's house and life, but he is Indian enough for Sai to fall in love with. He rejects Sai's privileged position and joins an armed insurrection.

Themes

Loss As announced in the title, the novel is a meditation on loss, the loss of spouses, identity and culture. The most afflicted, and the most guilty, is the judge, who arranges for his wife to die in a fire (disguised as an accident) and has lost all contact with his native Indian culture. Biju severs himself from India physically when he emigrates to America, but he soon experiences a sense of longing and lack of belonging. Sai, the teenager, has lost both her parents and most of her cultural background as a convent-educated girl. Gyan, the revolutionary, only discovers that his heritage has been lost when it is too late to recover it, except by resorting to armed resistance. Even the Mughals are said to have wept for the loss of the iris flower, which wilted in the heat of the subcontinent and which they carved

in marble on the façade of their great monuments. But it is not so much the experience of loss that preoccupies the characters as the inheritance of loss, the recollection and adjustment to absences that they cannot fill.

Identity Amid the loss, there is confusion about one's identity. Colonialism shaped the life of Judge Patel, leaving him a 'wog' (white oriental gentleman) in the late 20th century, when his species is almost extinct. Sai, too, is caught in a conflict of identity when she falls in love with Gyan, who comes from a very different class and ethnic background. Gyan himself undergoes a change of self-definition when he discovers his true ethnic identity. And Biju, who seeks a new life in America, is forced by unhappiness there to return to his father's house to rediscover his roots. The global movement of people seems to be in the author's mind when she declares that globalisation offers no hope when 'one side travels to be a servant, and the other side travels to be treated like a King.'