

INHERITANCE OF LOSS

Kiran Desai

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.

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.'

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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

BIJU (Disappointed)

Character Biju is the 'aspirational' character in this story of global flows and cultural loss. He is the son of a drunken cook, who works for Judge Patel in Kalimpong in India, but takes advantage of an opportunity to go to New York. His experiences there, working in fast-food restaurants, convince him that he has made a mistake and he returns to India. Biju is a sensitive young man, raw and naïve, when he arrives in New York, where he learns that poverty and squalor exist outside India. He is devoted to his father, for whom he made the journey to the US and to whom he writes letters that mention his 'good pay', his 'uniform', his 'nice apartment' but never his sadness and fear.

Activities While in New York, Biju flips hamburgers, dispenses soft drinks and makes friends with other immigrants, including Saed, a Muslim man from north Africa. He watches a lot of television, writes letters to his father (who is the cook in Judge Patel's house in Kalimpong) and daydreams about India.

Illustrative moments

Timid Biju is a timid person, unassertive and fearful, especially after he overstays his visa and can be deported at any time. He learns to cook hot dogs with the best of his colleagues, but he cannot join in their extracurricular activity of visiting prostitutes. When they encourage him to come along, 'He covered his timidity with manufactured disgust. "How can you? Those, those women are dirty," he said primly...the other men laughed. They were men; he was a baby.' Biju, who had come to America, to make his fortune, finds that he is 'out of his depth.' Throughout his several years working in New York, he flits from job to job, escaping abusive bosses and the authorities.

Disappointed Slowly the life of an immigrant wears him down and he begins to question his decision, which was also his father's wish, to go abroad to make money. One evening, after work, he walks to the East River, where 'the homeless men slept in a dense chamber of green that seemed to grow not so much from soil as from a fertile city crud. A homeless chicken also lived there...Biju saw it scratching in a homey manner in the dirt and felt a pang for village life...Biju couldn't help but feel a

flash of anger at his father for sending him alone to this country...' this is the beginning of Biju's turn-around that eventually leads to his decision to return to Kalimpong and be with his father.

Humbled Biju's return to Kalimpong is a humbling experience. Instead of arriving with a suitcase full of American dollars, he staggers back home 'with far less than he'd ever had.' On the final leg of his journey, he is held captive by the insurgents and stripped of everything he had, all his money and all his clothes, save his underwear. When he is released, he finds a nightdress with 'large, faded pink flowers and yellow, puffy sleeves, ruffles at the neck and hem.' Penniless and humiliated, the son, who his father had boasted to friends would make them all rich, stumbles into his father's arms and the novel is over.

SAI (Unsettled)

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. Rather, she is left to process her experiences, wondering if 'fulfilment could ever be felt as deeply as loss.'

Sai is an orphan who comes to live with her grandfather, a retired judge, in his house in the mountains. Educated in missionary schools run by English nuns, she has been moulded in the English way of life and thinking. She speaks only English, she eats English food and she celebrates Christian festivals. Her grandfather, it turns out, is also found of the British, having trained in London for the law. She, however, is still a teenager and ready for change, which comes to her in the form of a tutor, Gyan, who belongs to an ethnic minority (the Gurkhas in India) who are fighting an insurgency to gain political control of their community. Their tender, budding love affair is doomed because he comes from a lower-status background, and it ends when he joins the militants. Both of those cold facts force Sai to rethink her life and values. When she invites him to a Christmas party, Gyan shouts, 'I'm not interested in Christmas. You're a Hindu. Why don't you celebrate a Hindu festival?' And again, when they meet at the end, after Gyan has joined the insurgency, he says, 'You are like slaves, that's what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself. It's because of people like you we never get anywhere.' Although these events cause confusion in the young girl's mind, she does reach a kind of mature awareness at the end.

Activities After Sai moves to her grandfather's isolated mountain house, she goes to study at a local college and is also tutored at home. She spends a lot of time reading, wandering around the land near the house and talking with the cook. When she falls in love with Gyan, her maths tutor, she spends hours thinking about him. When the armed insurgency shuts down some local roads, Sai finds ways to circumvent roadblocks and make her way to the library and to buy provisions for the house.

Illustrative moments

Anglophile Sai is the product of a colonial education that lingers on in the isolated mountains of India long after Independence in 1947. Her cultural indoctrination leaves her as a stranger in her own country, unable to speak any Indian language. The author highlights her extreme Anglophilia in an early chapter when Sai is leaving her convent school to move to her grandfather's house. Reflecting on her education, she says to herself that 'it excelled at defining the flavour of sin...and of unearthing the forces of guilt and desire.' This was 'the foundation and on top of it was a flat creed: cake was better than laddoos [Indian sweet], fork spoon and knife were better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ and consuming a wafer of his body was more civilized than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds. English was better than Hindi.' This cultural code is what has moulded Sai at a young age, and it becomes an influence that she cannot shake off despite the experiences she has in the novel. It is an inheritance of loss because it denies her any contact with her native culture.

Unsettled As a 16-year-old girl, Sai is on the cusp of womanhood and will soon fall in love. The unease and yet promise of that transition is gently evoked in a description of her in an early chapter. She has just finished a lesson with Gyan, her tutor. 'That night Sai sat and stared into the mirror. Sitting across from Gyan, she had felt so acutely aware of herself, she was certain it was because of his gaze on her, but every time she glanced up, he was looking in another direction. She sometimes thought herself pretty, but as she began to make a proper investigation, she found it was a

changeable thing, beauty. No sooner did she locate it than it slipped from her grasp. When she brushed her teeth, she noticed her breasts jiggle like two jellies being rushed to the table...This plumpness jiggliness firmness softness...must surely give her a certain amount of bartering power? But if she continued forever in the company of two bandy-legged men, in this house in the middle of nowhere, this beauty would fade and expire, unsung, unrescued, and unrescuable...She'd have to propel herself into the future by whatever means possible or she'd be trapped forever in a place whose time had already passed.' She does propel herself but she does not escape her past.

Aware In the end, Sai has not (yet) achieved any specific goal, but she has acquired a certain awareness. The orphaned teenager, the girl moulded by a convent education, the young woman living in an isolated house with her grandfather, has fallen in love and then found that love was impossible to keep. In the final pages, she tries to make sense of all that has happened as 'her heart lay in pieces.' She is 'ashamed at her tantrums, at her tears, her self-importance.' She thought she was concerned with others, but she realises that everything had only been for herself. Then comes a flash of insight: 'Life wasn't single in its purpose... or even in its direction... The simplicity of what she'd been taught wouldn't hold. Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it.' She may not be able to entirely escape from her past, but she has found a way to understand it.

JEMUBHAI PATEL (Guilt-ridden)

Character Jemubhai Patel (Jemu) is a retired judge living a secluded life in the picturesque mountain town of Kalimpong. He hides away there with his dog, Mutt, pondering his past and staring at his chessboard. Ironically, for a judge, he is ridden with guilt. He is trying to make sense of a terrible act he committed decades ago when he arranged for the killing of his young wife. He is also looking to atone for his cruel treatment of his father, and the chance comes when his granddaughter (now orphaned) comes to stay. Jemu has a lot to process. He studied at Cambridge and came back to India as a 'brown Englishman' who hated everything Indian, including his wife. He is a man of tremendous inner conflict. Not only has he cut himself off from his horrible past, but he feels like a foreigner in his own country. Through flashbacks, though, we gain insight into this troubled man. The racism he faced as an Indian student in England turned him against himself and forced him to adopt the manners of the host culture. He prides himself on being a man of 'civilised behaviour', but his violent anger can get the better of him.

Activities Jemubhai keeps to himself, in a ramshackle and gated villa on the outskirts of town. He is disagreeable to his servants, loves his pet dog, Mutt, and plays chess with imaginary opponents. Sometimes he takes out English books from his mouldy bookshelves and looks at them, before falling asleep.

Illustrative moments

Brave Somehow, although the judge is guilty of terrible crimes, especially of murdering his wife, he is not altogether unlikeable. In his younger years, we are told of how he managed to stomach the prejudice he faced in Cambridge as an Indian student in the 1930s. When he first arrives, he is shocked by the 'greyness'. 'He hadn't realised that here, too, people could be poor and live unaesthetic lives.' He knocks on doors advertising for tenants, but each time he is turned away, until Mrs Rice agrees to let to him—she was desperate for money. The judge finds a tray of bread, butter and milk outside his door every evening. One night, though, 'he worked up the courage to ask for a proper evening meal. "We don't eat much of a supper ourselves, James [she calls him 'James']," said Mrs Rice. But the next day he found on his plate steaming baked beans on toast....Later, he marvelled at this act of courage, since he was soon to lose it all.'

Self-loathing When Jemubhai gets married to a village girl, wholly unsuited to him, he learns to hate her. She represents everything he dislikes about India: villages, illiteracy and bodies. He has a loathing for bodies, sex and anything physical. Now he is forced, or at least he is expected, to make love to his wife, a person he doesn't even know. He performs the act and is disgusted with himself. '...the grotesqueness of it all shocked him: the meeting of reaching, suckering organs in an awful attack...the smell of sex, the squelch, the marine squirt, that uncontrollable run—it turned his civilised

stomach.' His intense disgust is later displaced from him to his wife and leads to his abandonment and later killing of her. His self-loathing destroys not only his wife but his own life, too.

Violent The incident that leads to his violent behaviour is illustrative of his complicated history, especially the tension in him between India and Britain. One day, his wife is taken to a political rally where Gandhi speaks; she doesn't want to go but is dragged there by an enthusiastic wife of a local Indian lawyer. When Jemubhai hears of this—that his wife went to cheer the words of a man who advocates disobedience to the King of England—he is furious and beats her badly. 'The anger, once released like a genie from a bottle, could never be contained. The quieter she was, the louder he shouted...His hatred was its own creature; it rose and burned out. It appeared of its own accord.' Now, having crossed this threshold, he realised 'how simple it would be for him...to commit the final violent act.'