



Inescapable Past

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Abstract: “Inescapable Past” is a literary analysis of Kiran Desai’s, *The Inheritance of Loss*. Desai’s complex novel revolves around ideas of race, ethnicity, and cultural identity; focusing mainly on Indian culture and how it has both integrated with and influenced Western culture. So often the collision of any different societies is violent and filled with fear and resentment. In the novel, we see that it is rare that two separate cultures can always coincide peacefully, without one ever trying to dominate the other. The novel is filled with examples of racism and hatred that tears at your heartstrings. It is clearly shown through each of Desai’s characters that individuals are usually a carbon copy of their environment, history, and family, even though this is often unconscious. The past that people carry with them is one of the main reasons old prejudices are so resilient. Desai investigates these truths in her novel by looking into the lives of these few interconnected characters. When each of the characters in the novel encounters a foreign culture, their experiences vary, but are mainly negative, which is sadly quite realistic. Every experience shows again that the past or cultural identity an individual carries with them will always influence their view of others. However, the novel also shows by the end, that it is possible to change or bend an identity into one with respect and appreciation for all people. As the world continues to integrate and the boundaries of countries and cultures disappear through globalization, it is becoming more and more unacceptable and politically incorrect to separate people based on race, wealth, origin, religion, gender, language or any other distinguishing human trait. This is not to say that cultures should blend so completely that different languages and traditions become obsolete or wrong, but cultures should simply recognize that different does not automatically mean unequal. Desai’s novel holds a mirror up to the world today; looking at a few specific cultural collisions to show that racism is unfortunately alive and well, but that it is also not a death sentence.

Kiran Desai’s novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, illustrates what happens when cultures clash. The world is full of prejudices and people are continually separated and treated differently based on culture, race, and class. The novel jumps between two main settings: Kalimpong, India, and New York City. Although the novel is set mainly

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during the 1980s, it frequently weaves in and out of a variety of time frames as far back as the 1940s.

During an unstable political period in the mountainous region of Kalimpong, in a crumbling old Scottish mansion named Cho Oyu lives Sai, a seventeen-year-old girl, with her grandfather, a retired Judge. Completing the household are the Judge's beloved dog, Mutt, and his faithful cook. In New York, Biju, the cook's son, desperately tries to survive as an immigrant with no green card, which unfortunately requires working less than desirable jobs for no pay. As Desai suggests, people are very much a product of their environment; how they were brought up and the cultural identity they were trained to know is constantly carried with them. Globalization today brings cultures together, encouraging ideas and traditions from one culture to meld and blend with others. Although there are many aspects of this mixing that are positive, it can also stir up old hatreds, causing new troubles and resentments. Most of the characters in Desai's novel, including the Judge, Sai, Gyan (Sai's boyfriend), Noni and Lola (Sai's tutors) and Biju, all have experiences where their identity comes in contact with a foreign culture. Unfortunately, each of these experiences results in a strong negative reaction, illuminating the division between cultures that still exists today.

In the very beginning of the novel, as the main characters of Kalimpong are introduced, Desai's overall theme of cultural differences is symbolically represented by the geography and atmosphere of the region. The main setting of the novel, Kalimpong, is part of the border country of northern India below the Himalayas. Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Assam, and Bangladesh are just a few of the other countries that meet in this diverse environment. Kalimpong is a rural section of India that is plagued by almost constant rain and fog. Desai describes how the mist slowly invades Kalimpong, and "replaced everything with itself, solid objects with

shadow, and nothing remained that did not seem molded from or inspired by it" (2). The mist fills the air and intertwines everything it touches, but at the same time it obscures objects and people, separating everything as well. People, in the same way, are always connected by being human, by simply having the same desires and needs all people share. However, people are constantly separated by the differences among them such as culture, race, ethnic identity, and class. In today's advanced society, with rapid travel and technology like television and the Internet, different cultures are continually confronted with each other. When separate cultures meet sometimes they simply bounce off each other, but often they begin to integrate even though this may be unconsciously done. There are no longer many examples of truly pure cultures that have not adopted at least some foreign ideas and traditions. Sai and the Judge, for example, immediately think of American films and actors instead of popular Bollywood movies. The cook has a fetish for modern western appliances. Sai speaks English as her first language instead of a more indigenous Indian language. The mist, therefore, also represents this idea of globalization and integration among different people all over the world that has blurred the division between cultures.

Although there are main characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, the novel is very much focused on a central theme, instead of a central character. To illustrate the novel's interest in cultural division, the story progresses by presenting glimpses into the lives of each character. One of the first characters to be further described is Jemubnai Patel, most often referred to as the Judge. The Judge was born in India but received a college education in England. His stay in England during the early 1940s was one of extreme loneliness and humiliation where "he retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it

crushed him into a shadow" (45). The Judge had no family in England, no real friends, no one to talk to, no one to help him or support him; he was utterly and miserably alone. Just like the giant squid that Sai read about in the beginning of the novel, "[his] was a solitude so profound [that he] might never encounter another of [his] tribe" (3). He was hated and made fun of by the English who said, "Phew, he stinks of curry" (45) and he became so introverted that he despised himself, his skin, and anything that made him Indian. He washed obsessively and powdered his face to lighten his complexion. The Judge even "envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both" (131). The Judge's education in England caused him so much pain and suffering that he desperately tried to become as English as possible, and hated anything Indian.

When the Judge returned home, it became clear how terribly his encounter with the English had warped and permanently altered his cultural identity. Nimi, his young wife whom he barely knew, became the embodiment of everything Indian that he despised. The Judge was extremely abusive towards his wife, and "any cruelty to her became irresistible" (186) for him. He violently rapes her after she steals his precious powder puff to "teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself" (186). Eventually, the Judge sent Nimi back to her family where she gives birth to a daughter before she commits suicide. The Judge's encounter with the English culture is so humiliating and filled with such strong feelings of resentment and anger that he becomes doubly displaced when he returns home. He is neither European nor Indian, and becomes an immigrant within himself. The Judge's experience with the English is one of the harshest in the novel, showing how extremely destructive the clash between cultures can be.

The Judge's granddaughter, Sai, also becomes a westernized Indian growing up in the bicultural household the Judge creates. Sai was sent to live with the Judge after her parents died when she was only seven years old. Before that time, Sai lived in a westernized convent. Sai's experiences with her tutor, Gyan, represent the sweet and sour aspect of mixing people. Sai and Gyan are both Indian, but are from separate castes and are culturally very different. By birth Sai is part of the upper class or at least upper-middle class. She speaks English, celebrates western holidays like Christmas, eats English food, and lives in Cho Oyu, which is a fairly nice home with some modern conveniences, even though it is basically coming apart at the seams. Gyan, however, is not part of the same class as Sai; he speaks a different primary language, and eats more indigenous food. He is Nepali, which is a minority group in India, but a majority group in Kalimpong. When England controlled much of India, they brought in Nepalese people to work on the tea plantations, and although colonialism is officially gone, the descendants of these people still live in the border region, but do not have equal rights. During the mid-1980s in the border region of India, including Kalimpong, there were numerous processions, demonstrations, and some violent riots by minority groups who wanted fair treatment. It is this movement that separates Sai and Gyan. At the beginning of their relationship they did not seem to care or even notice that they were different, and the "political trouble continued to remain in the background for them" (156). However, soon Gyan literally gets caught up in the movement, swept along by the crowd in the Kalimpong market, and their relationship falls apart.

Just as Nimi was the representation of an idea larger than herself for the Judge, Sai also becomes the embodiment of colonialism and racism for Gyan. However, the Judge saw Nimi as part of the "thieving, ignorant" (184) Indian class, while Gyan sees

Sai as part of the upper westernized Indian class that is responsible for the mistreatment of the Nepalese. Sai and Gyan fight and shout unspeakably cruel and stereotypical remarks at each other. Referring to the oppressive upper class, Gyan shouts at Sai "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" (179). Sai later retaliates declaring, "there is exactly one reason why you will get nowhere—*because you don't deserve to*" (286). After he calls her a fool and a copycat of the west, she yells "you hate me...for big reasons, that have nothing to do with me" (285). Gyan and Sai's relationship and eventual falling out shows what often happens between cultures. Instead of looking at the individual, people are lumped together in groups and individuals are blamed for things that they themselves are not directly involved with. Neither Sai nor Gyan needed much provocation to unleash these cruel insults. Each of them knew exactly which words would sting the most and had no reservations against using them. At first, Gyan and Sai seem to or may have even consciously tried to overlook their cultural differences, but even these young people cannot escape their history and identity.

Before she meets Gyan, Sai's first tutor was Noni, the spinster who lives with her widowed sister, Lola. Both Noni and Lola are well known in Kalimpong for belonging to the same westernized Indian class as Sai. These two somewhat comical, wealthy older ladies live in a spacious cottage with many modern conveniences, and keep multiple servants including a maid, sweeper, gardener, and watchman. The sisters greatly admire the British and adopt as many English customs as possible. They grow western vegetables like broccoli in their garden, they only wear Marks and Spencer underwear that "surely the queen" herself must also wear (53), they drink English tea, eat English jam and pastries, love manor house novels, and have the complete works of Jane

Austen. Part of their obsession with the British is due to Lola's daughter, Pixie, who lives in England and works for the BBC. Lola beams with pride when her daughter's voice comes over the radio. Lola and a neighbor, Mrs. Sen, who's daughter Mun lives in the United States and works for CNN, participate in intense battles over which country, America or England, is superior. Of course, Mrs. Sen's class "inferiority was clear to [Noni and Lola] long before her daughter settled in a country where the jam said Smuckers instead of 'By appointment to Her Majesty the queen'" (145), but Mrs. Sen's defense of American culture exacerbates the situation, making Mrs. Sen even lower in Lola's eyes. Instead of identifying with their Indian culture, these women take on western identities so completely that they battle against their fellow Indians in favor of western cultures they can never truly join. They are oblivious to the fact that Americans and the British rarely reciprocate the feelings Lola and Mrs. Sen express. The west would probably never know or care that "two spirited widows of Kalimpong," India, were engaging in a "fight to the death" on their behalf (146).

Not only is Mrs. Sen's love of American culture undesirable, but she is also part of the middle class, which the sisters find to be very "distasteful" (213). Noni and Lola never wave to Mrs. Sen, but always vivaciously salute the Afgan princesses and the aristocrat, Mrs. Thondup, who live in Kalimpong. Although, the sisters' rosy cottage is named Mon Ami (my friend), they have very strict class requirements for a person to be considered their friend. Noni and Lola believe it is "important to draw the lines properly between classes or it harmed everyone on both sides of the great divide" (75). They "constantly [have] to discourage their maid, Kesang, from divulging personal information...[and entering] into areas of the heart that should be referred to only between social equals" (75). Since Sai was almost exclusively taken care of by the

cook, Noni also felt it was her duty to mentor Sai, because “if it wasn’t for Lola and herself...Sai would have long ago fallen to the level of the servant class” (75). The sisters would probably never consider themselves to be racist or prejudiced against different people, yet their actions and words often speak quite differently. Even though their own watchman is Nepali, it does not stop Noni from saying, “I tell you, these Neps can’t be trusted. And they don’t just rob. They think absolutely nothing of murdering, as well” (51). Noni and Lola continue to make similar comments throughout the novel. They have absolutely no reservations about acting superior and treating people differently based on class and ethnicity.

However, the political turmoil of the 1980s that arises in Kalimpong eventually penetrates the comfortable world of Mon Ami. As instability increases, fewer and fewer visitors and tourists come to the region of Kalimpong, and economic hardships for the native people begin. Soon there is no electricity, no water, no gas, no kerosene, and little food; all the sisters’ small luxuries become useless. As the Nepalese take control of Kalimpong, they find Mon Ami to be a very convenient camp and transform it into a base for their operations. When the rebel tents and flags first appear in their yard, Noni and Lola resist, but there is no police to help them and they have no way to defend themselves. Unfortunately, “the wealth that seemed to protect them like a blanket was the very thing that [now] left them exposed. They, amid extreme poverty, were baldly richer...they, *they*, Lola and Noni, were the unlucky ones who wouldn’t slip through, who would pay the debt that should be shared with others over many generations” (266). Earlier in the novel, Noni and Lola had encountered all people that they believed to be part of the lower class with the same contempt and superiority. Not until their world is disrupted and their comforts are ripped away do they realize that their wealth actually makes them

more vulnerable. They finally realize their higher-educated and westernized class does not automatically make them superior to everyone else; it cannot save them from mistreatment. In this situation their class and wealth actually did quite the opposite; it made them a target.

Biju, the cook’s son, is precisely the type of person Noni and Lola would look down upon, not only because of his servant class status, but also for his aspirations to rise out of poverty. For most of the novel Biju lives in New York City, sent there by his father to try and make a better life and become “a fine-suited-and-booted-success” (90). Just to get into the United States is a struggle for immigrants, but somehow Biju gets through the humiliating and demeaning interview process to get a tourist visa. Biju as “the luckiest boy in the whole world” (205) immigrates to the U.S. but cannot get a green card. He suffers through years working as an illegal cook at one shabby restaurant after another, while spending his nights sleeping on rat and cockroach-infested floors. Biju, like the Judge, is met with hostility and discrimination from other higher-class cultures. One of his white bosses complains that he smells and even gives him soap, toothpaste, shampoo, and deodorant to subtly tell him this. At one point Biju delivers food to a group of high-class Indian girls who have “a self-righteousness common to many Indian women of the English-speaking upper-educated” class (56). These Indian college students adopt many American customs, including clothing, food, and behavior. However, they clearly keep their Indian idea of castes and know that they are high class and Biju is not. Halfway around the world, thousands of miles from India, both these girls and Biju still carry their Indian identity with them.

During his time in the U.S., Biju is not always met with discrimination and he actually begins to question the racist ideas he had grown up with in India. In New York Biju becomes part of the “shadow class” of

illegal immigrants from all over the world (112). No matter what their original race, the people of the shadow class are known more for being immigrants than anything else. By being constantly confronted by this variety of ethnicities on a more equal playing field, Biju's beliefs about different races begin to change. He becomes good friends with an African man named Saeed Saeed, even though in India Africans are often thought of as uncivilized "monkeys" who "come to India [to] become men" (85). The need for friendship and the camaraderie between immigrants suffering the same fate can sometimes overcome racial differences. However, in other instances prejudices are so deeply ingrained that they can never be expelled without conscious and deliberate effort. The ancient grudge between Indians and Pakistanis is displayed in the novel when Biju works in the same kitchen as a Pakistani. Even in the culturally diverse city of New York, Biju still believes Pakistanis are "pigs pigs, sons of pigs" (25) because of the fierce hatred he had been instructed to feel for Pakistanis. Both Biju and the Pakistani worker are eventually fired for constantly fighting and throwing cabbage at each other.

Although Biju cannot let go of this almost instinctive bigotry, he does question some of his other prejudices and wonders whether there is really anything "wrong with black people...or Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese, or anyone else..." (86). Biju also begins to wonder why "he possessed an awe of white people, who arguably had done India great harm, and [felt] a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India" (86). Like almost all people, Biju inherited prejudices and beliefs about certain types of people from his parents and the area he grew up in. However, racist beliefs have become more and more unacceptable, and having a general respect for people of every race and ethnicity is something people should strive for. Biju is one of the only characters in the novel that questions the

ideas he was taught and at least begins to let go of some of his prejudices. Biju's encounter with foreign cultures is more positive than most of the other characters' encounters in the novel. Fortunately, after years of struggling in New York City while desperately missing India and his father, Biju finally returns home to India all his savings and belongings stolen along the way.

The Inheritance of Loss, is filled with examples of how different types of people interact, mix, and blend. Unfortunately, the line between cultures is not always easily blurred. Some customs and traditions transcend separate cultures especially in today's globalized world, but prejudices and hatred based on race and class are often hard to eliminate. Almost the entire novel is dark in its description of colliding cultures, but the last pages show a new side to the theme when Biju returns home penniless and broken. As Sai sees Biju and his Pitaji (father) "leaping at each other," overjoyed by their reunion in Kalimpong, the mountain of Kanchenjunga "appear[s] above the parting clouds" (357).

The reality is that the world is full of racism, segregation, and cultural divisions, but it does not mean that hope does not also exist. Change can happen if people initiate it. People will always be stuck in the same place, in the same mind set, until they decide to change, to move, to escape. Happiness is possible; the world is not always submerged in fog and rain. In the end "the five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it" (357). In the mist of chaos and cultural division, home, family, identity, and history are what hold people together and allow them to survive the day.

WORKS CITED

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