



Kiran Desai



## Interview

- 
- Ira Pande
- Nilanjana S. Ro
- Kiran Desai



- Ira Pande: Can I ask you about 'The Inheritance of Loss?' Did the title suggest the book, or did the book suggest the title?



- KD: The title came right at the end. I'm still not sure it completely fits. A lot of people didn't like it - I've been told it sounds like a self-help manual, someone said, you should just call it '**The Loss of Inheritance**', and that would make much more sense. ...



- ... I was struggling to come up with something because it's a book of so many different parts. I thought of all the typical ones: 'The Judge of **Kalimpong**' - sounds vaguely like colonial literature, 'The House of Cho Oyu ...' and then this came up



- Nilanjana S. Ro : It struck me how much **loneliness and isolation** there is in the book.
- **Biju**, the cook's son in America; **Sai**, cut off from a normal childhood; the **judge** alone in England, where you almost feel sorry for him, despite his harshness later... Was that taken from family history?



- KD: Not quite that close, but the judge's story was certainly taken from hearing about the experiences of people going to England. There is often an attempt to cover up what actually happens when you go abroad. For all immigrants, the story that you create at the end is the story you can live with and that you like to tell.



- It's not what actually happened. **Immigration is like the act of translation**, the possibilities of dishonesty are so big, so immense. It's a place where you can embroider any kind of story, and I think most people do.





- You also want to go there saying that you haven't come struggling like other immigrants might have, you've come from a position of dignity; it is also **an attempt to create your past**, I think, in a different way. You have to make up a story about that as well.



- The **loneliness is immense**. You are plucked from everything your entire community, you're telling lies to everybody, **immigrants are telling lies to other immigrants**. I think people find themselves in really lonely places.



- When I think of myself, I grew up speaking English and being brought up, in a way, to leave successfully. That's what my father said, sadly, to one of his friends: 'What we did in our generation, we made good immigrants.' He was also brought up to be a good immigrant and he chose not to be one.



- IP: The fact that several of our generation went to Catholic convents also opened up for us the possibility of looking at another identity for ourselves. I remember leading two completely dissimilar lives as a schoolgirl. I came from a very traditional family, puja was part of my day, but I also went and did Angelus and Benediction and all the rest. I think I became a better Hindu after I was exposed to Catholicism. I began to understand and respect what we had much more. What was your convent experience like



- KD:I think of **dislocation**. We went first to Kalimpong, briefly, went back to Loreto, briefly, went to England for a year, and went to the States, and at a really bad time - it was 13 or 14, that age for me. But when I look back at that convent education, I hope they are not bringing up children in that same way, because every bit of art is stamped out. Wanting to write, or paint, that side of things



- ND Are you uncomfortable with labels such as 'diaspora writer', or 'immigrant writer'?
- KD: You know, you go down those roads and inevitably end up in a place that's senseless after a bit. I always hope that I'll hear some writer talking about these issues in a really clever way so that I can copy what they say, but nobody has. I haven't heard anyone really manage to undo these knots. You stop talking about literature all together, and you start talking about class and immigration, and end up with a debate that's about much bigger arguments. **You can't escape labels as a writer...**



- NR: 'Inheritance' would have been a lot less rich if you hadn't had that split perspective, **the New York immigrant underworld on one hand, the crumbling houses of privilege in Kalimpong** on the other...
- KD: It's a completely half-and-half book.
- NR: How did you start process of looking at the immigrant population in New York



- KD: It wasn't hard to find those stories. **Those stories are as easily available as they are here.** It's the **same people on both sides of the world:** the woman who cleans your house in India, those stories come into your house every single day. It's the same in New York.





- The characters are made up of people I know, in bits and pieces ... People who worked in a little bakery near where I used to live; all the stories of the rats are really based on what happened. There's always a mixture, journalists always ask you how much is fact and how much fiction, but it's always a mixture



- Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006)
- achieved much critical success
- won the Man Booker Prize in 2006
- National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award in 2007
- Reviewers mostly praised the novel
- and Desai's technique



- Kiran Desai – daughter of well-known novelist Anita Desai
- The Artist of Disappearance (2011)
- The Zigzag Way (2004)
- Diamond Dust and Other Stories (2000)
- Fasting, Feasting (1999)
- Journey to Ithaca (1995)
- Baumgartner's Bombay (1988)
- In Custody (1984)



- Kiran Desai – daughter of well-known novelist Anita Desai
- The Village by the Sea (1982)
- Clear Light of Day (1980)
- Games at Twilight (1978)
- Fire on the Mountain (1977)
- Cat on a Houseboat (1976)
- Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975)
- The Peacock Garden (1974)
- Bye-bye Blackbird (1971)
- Voices in the City (1965)
- Cry, The Peacock (1963)



- Kiran Desai – daughter of well-known novelist Anita Desai
- first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, won - great deal of praise
- second novel- *The Inheritance of Loss*



- Ann Harleman –
- Desai’s “rich and often wry descriptions [ : : : ] have the depth and resonance (tone) of Dickens laced with rueful postmodern ambivalence.”



- Marjorie Kehe
- The book as “a work full of color and comedy, even as it challenges all to face the same heart-wrenching questions that haunt the immigrant:  
**Who am I? Where do I belong?”**



- Pankaj Mishra
- “Desai takes a skeptical view of the West’s consumer-driven multiculturalism” and that the novel reveals an “invisible emotional reality” felt by “people fated to experience modern life as a continuous affront to their notions of order, dignity and justice.”





- novel follows **the New York City** adventures of Biju, an immigrant worker from northern India
- As well as Desai knows Biju's home territory even better: **the district of Kalimpong**
- (p3 – Biju changed jobs so often....)

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- Biju's father works as a cook for a retired **British-educated Indian magistrate** and the **judge's inquisitive granddaughter**, Sai
- (p11- he was a powerless man...)



- The judge is a bit of a prissy old fellow, immersed in his love for his pet dog.
- Granddaughter Sai is a glorious teenager, in love with the world around her and in love with reading, reading faster and faster until, as Desai tells us, "she was inside the narrative and the narrative inside her, the pages going by so fast, her heart in her chest, she couldn't stop."



- While Sai immerses herself in her books

what happens to the world around her?

- indigenous Nepalese exiles
- the cheap labor of the region
- rise up to call for an independent state within a state.



- One of these young rebels is a handsome fellow named **Gyan**, who happens to be the science tutor of young Sai - and the first great love of her life –
- **he abandons her** rather rudely for the growing political movement



- Desai is wildly in love with the vital landscape and all the characters who inhabit it.
- Even when Biju calls home from New York City, we can smell the humid air over the telephone line, we can picture the green-black lushness ...



- This is a story of exiles at home and abroad
- Of families broken and fixed
- of love both bitter and bittersweet



- The novel documents the **collapse** of one kind of **civility based** nostalgically on **English life** (p6-8)
- and the **emergence** of another-rash, **uncivil,** **chaotic, and violent-**at large in India today (9)





- The novel moves swiftly between
- New York, Europe and India
- during the Indian Nepali insurgency of twenty years ago (p9)



- Desai's small community of Anglophiles is in the **process of being swept away**, the rest of the world is busy proclaiming "Gorkhaland for Gorkhas." (p7)
- *God of small things*



- similar ideas occurs in **Salman Rushdie's** new novel *Shalimar the Clown* which eerily resembles Desai's analysis.



- Set in northern India - in the troubled "vale" of Kashmir –
- Rushdie also looks backwards to uprisings of the 1980s as a way to investigate the causes and outcomes of **religious and ethnic conflict** and the effects of globalization today.



- His story also focuses on village life in a corner of India once idyllic now being destroyed by insurrection, fear, and violence.
- Like Gyan, Rushdie's Shalimar is a study in the creation of a terrorist.
- Rushdie uses an American city (Los Angeles) to symbolize the heartless anomie of the new globalized culture



- The greatest difference between the two novels is - their styles.
- While what Desai writes is open, attractive, and replete with local color and fascinating details
- she clearly lacks Rushdie's taste for exaggerated mythmaking



- Could **fulfillment** ever be felt as deeply as **loss**?" asks Kiran Desai, as she **explores the multifaceted aspects of loss**

(p2)



- Shifting back and forth between Kalimpong, in the north eastern Himalayas -
- and **the desperate world of the illegal, nonwhite immigrants in the grubby basement kitchens** of New York's restaurants
- Desai points to the **complexities of race** and **ethnicity** in both places, with their undercurrents of **antagonism** and **incomprehension**





- **Class**, too, intrudes, as educated, richer Indians try hard to differentiate themselves from the poor and the underclass



- In Kalimpong, the narrative focuses on the household of **Jemubhai Patel**, a retired judge from the prestigious Indian Civil Service, the British Empire's old "steel frame":
- a few hundred white civil servants who had administered the subcontinent with the help of a handful of Indians, recruited starting in 1879



- Patel, now in his sixties, has bought a cottage, Cho Oyu, from the Scot -
- The place must have been beautiful once [12]
- But Cho Oyu is now extremely run down and badly in need of restoration



- Desai does not explain the judge's poverty,
- why his granddaughter, Sai, who comes to live with him when she is orphaned at nine,  
  
she even sleeps under a tablecloth
- why the cook is kept on such meager wages and is made to live in a broken-down hut



- **The curious juxtaposition of**
- **high status and genteel poverty (p12, 34)**



- The judge is a embittered, angry old man with a terrifying past of destroyed relationships.
- He treated his wife with unusual cruelty and violence
- abandoned his daughter to a convent boarding school
- eventually cutting her off completely when she married a Parsi.



- Even earlier –
- he had broken his ties with his parents
- extended family
- the community of Patels –
- who had seen him off on his voyage to  
Cambridge University with great fanfare and  
hopes of general betterment



- In 1939 he was twenty, and most of the Indian students at Cambridge were nationalist and rooting for independence, but
- Patel had come to see **Indian relationships, culture, and dark skin as inferior:**





- "Jemubhai's mind had begun to warp, he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar." (40)



- An alienated man
- 167



he shows affection only to his dog Mutt-although he is **beginning to recognize** that he has something in **common with his granddaughter**, now sixteen,

- "an estranged Indian living in India."



- The opportunity to emulate a British lifestyle is what has drawn many westernized Indians to hill stations like Kalimpong-
- the temperate climate means that one is not part of tropical, mainstream India



- The British built cottages there - mark of their gardening genius
- They encouraged a colonial lifestyle
- bakeries that produced the cakes, breads, and biscuits so necessary for a decent tea – p6- Sai had no idea... p46- colonial neurosis-



- The two elderly women who take up Sai-
- Lola, a widow, and her sister Noni, who tutors Sai-live such a life
- Their little rose-covered cottage is called Mon Ami - its extensive land houses perhaps the country's first broccoli patch



- At night, they **listen to the BBC** on the radio, drinking smuggled cherry brandy.
- They are **conscious of their class**; their superiority to Mrs. Sen, their Anglophile neighbor, who is not quite as genteel as they are
- their **fellowship with Father Booty of the Swiss dairy**, which makes real cheese, not the processed version that most Indians eat
- their relationship to Uncle Potty, a wealthy old Indian who is living off his inheritance.



- The sisters read nineteenth-century British novels
- avoid anything by the relatively new group of Indian novelists who write in English.
- P-43
- 213





- Neither do they read the newer and younger British authors
- because they need their vision of Britain to remain relatively static



- *Lola travels to England every two years or so and stocks up on Knorr packet soups, Oxo stock cubes, and underwear from Marks and Spencer. p44*
- She encouraged her daughter Pixie to emigrate to England
- when Pixie marries an Englishman – Lola is overjoyed



- Sai has never learned any Indian language
- As a pupil at St. Augustine's Convent (which boasts a Latin-sounding motto-concocted by Desai-that isn't Latin at all)
- Sai learned that "cake was better than ladoo"
- "English was better than Hindi." 30
- She reads *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Cider with Rosie*, *Life with Father*, and National Geographic.



- She can converse with the cook, who cared for her as a child, only in broken Hindi.
- Sai's world begins to shift when Gyan, a Nepalese college student, is hired as her math and science tutor



- Since the **class divide** is also an **ethnic divide**, Gyan's family, like other Nepalese, are poor and uneducated.
- Sai and Gyan, never having met anyone like one another, are mutually attracted, and for the first time Sai becomes aware of another world



- **Lack of faith in India is something the majority of the poor share with their "betters."**
- Patel's -cook struggles to send his son, Biju, to America
- After Biju is duped, along with many others, by an agency supposedly recruiting waiters, cooks, and cleaners for a cruise ship, he manages to get a tourist visa on the basis of an application that is entirely fabricated.
- The local doctor, whose son, like Biju, is going to America (the cook's shared experience with a member of the elite fills him with pride), creates a fake record of Biju's inoculations.



- Once in New York, Biju becomes a low-level kitchen worker, moving from restaurant to restaurant as jobs fold up or the police invade to check social security cards
- Desai captures the desperation of the illegal immigrants from Latin America, Africa, and Asia-all suspicious of one other



- The **wealthy Indians** who dine at the restaurants that employ Biju **recognize him as a compatriot** but are careful to maintain their distance.
- Biju is shocked to see Hindu Indians ordering beef: "He took on a sneering look. But they could afford not to notice."





- Biju eventually goes to work for an Indian restaurant owner: Harish-Harry, who, with his brothers Gaurish-Gary and Dhansukh-Danny, runs a trio of Gandhi cafes in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.



- His wife “allows” the staff to live in the basement for free
- in return, the brothers –
- "cut the pay to a quarter of the minimum wage, reclaim the tips, keep an eye on the workers and drive them to work fifteen- sixteen-, seventeen-hour donkey days”



- No positive changes for Biju and others in America - because as "illegals" they have no political rights -
- 49 “Biju has started...”



- In India, democratic politics have empowered hitherto quiescent groups.
- In Kalimpong, the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) agitates for rights and justice for the majority Nepalese
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- The young unemployed men love the **mobilization**: "Money and guns in their pockets, they were living the movies ... the new films would be based on them."



- Briefed by Gyan, GNLFF guerrillas raid Patel's house
- They take his guns, ransack the property, and stock up on food supplies
- Intimidating strikes last for days; electricity and water are cut off; road blocks prevent food from coming into the area.



- Lola and Noni are forced to shelter the GNLFF's followers, who immediately eat up their carefully accumulated store of cold meat and sausages.
- When daylight comes, the strikers see the large garden, available for "sharing," and their supporters start building bamboo huts on its edges.



- When Lola goes to their leader, Pradhan, to protest, he looks to her "like a bandit teddy bear, with a great beard and a bandana around his head, gold earrings."
- He tells her calmly, although with an underlying, implacable menace, that she has to accommodate his men.
- Lola tries to camouflage her fluent English, but it is actually Nepali that she has never bothered to learn.





- Mocking her, Pradhan says that as "the raja of Kalimpong," he could have many wives: "Would you, dear Aunty, be the fifth?"



- Humiliates her saying –
- he would need a substantial dowry for her, as she is "nothing much to look at, nothing up"-he pats the front of his khaki shirt-"nothing down"-he pats his behind-"in fact, I have more of both!"



- After this humiliation, she returns home traumatized, wondering what the future holds for her and Noni.
- She realizes a truth



- All of a sudden, all that they had claimed innocent, fun, funny, not really to matter was proven wrong. It did matter, buying tinned ham roll in a rice and *dal* country; it did matter to live in a big house and sit beside a heater in the evening, even one that sparked and shocked; it did matter to fly to London and to return with chocolates filled with kirsch;



- it did matter that others could not... **The wealth that seemed to protect them like a blanket was the very thing that left them exposed.** They, amid extreme poverty, were baldly richer, and the statistics of difference were being broadcast ...they would pay the debt that should be shared with others over many generations



- Similarly, Gyan and Sai, estranged from each other, have a showdown.
- He yells, "What's fair? Do you have any idea of the world? Do you bother to look? Do you have any understanding of how justice operates or, rather, does NOT operate?"
- Both realize they are the **Other - 176**



- Biju, convinced that his father needs him, returns to Kalimpong when he hears of the political disturbances.
- He returns not as a hero but as someone who has been robbed of all he had, down to the clothes on his back, but who feels whole and restored:



- "He had shed the unbearable arrogance and shame of the immigrant... For the first time in God knows how long, his vision unblurred and he found he could see clearly."
- The gap between loss and fulfillment is closed.





- novel deals with the **very basis of existence**
- the **quest** for a decent life
- for **justice**



- Desai is not afraid of harsh truths:
- There was **no system to soothe** the unfairness of things;
- **justice was without scope;**




- it might snag the stealer of chickens, but great evasive crimes would have to be dismissed
- because, if identified and netted, they would bring down the entire structure of so-called civilization.



- showing how no one can free herself from the dilemmas of existence
- **and**
- how hard it is to lead a decent life amidst injustice



- postcolonial issues - the novel addresses
- Carmen Wickramagamage has recently argued that “most people **envision relocation** as a painful choice between assimilation (betrayal) and nativism (loyalty)” (194).
- Wickramagamage, Carmen. “Relocation as Positive Act: The Immigrant Experience in Bharati Mukherjee’s Novels.” *Diaspora* 2.2 (1992): 171–200. 

- Some critics view assimilation positively
- While others insist that the differences between cultures should be maintained and
- preserved.
- whether the characters should embrace cultural **adaptability** is of crucial importance to the novel.



- Desai explores both sides of the issue and ultimately challenges the desirability of assimilation and the wisdom of maintaining difference, inhabiting the margins, and avoiding “full and unapologetic participation in the New World” (Wickramagamage 195).



- The Inheritance of Loss focuses not on an individual's story
- how several people make sense of themselves
- view the world around them
- deal with the difficulties that they have with **contradictions.**





- Desai uses it frequently in the novel
- it helps us understand how she presents
- the conflicts of identity the characters face.
- By “contradiction”
- Simply an opposition between two ways of thinking.



- Many of the characters do not deal with contradictions particularly well and prefer avoid challenges to the things they believe to be true.
- This could be said of almost anyone



- The problem of contradiction is magnified and exacerbated for postcolonial peoples –
- lives are affected by a history of colonialism and the neo-colonialism resulting from globalization, economic disparity between nations, and consumer driven multiculturalism.



- The characters tend to define people in broad terms, as “English,” “Indian,” or “black.”
- No two characters’ responses to contradiction are identical, but they do generally
- fall into one of two types—**suppression** and **ambivalence** (mixed feelings)



- Walking to the sea I carry A village, a city, the country For the moment On my back. —Gieve Patel, "Nargol"



- **THE PREOCCUPATION WITH THE NATION**  
**THAT MARKS MUCH** postcolonial writing,



- Midnight's Children and its successor novels ostentatiously bore the burden of nation.



- All are capably aware of their centrality to the nation, as intellectual leaders, prophets of modernity and pedagogues of the people.
- The nation-novel is written from a recognizably ruling class perspective, with all that the description implies in its effects as ideology, politics, style, and affect.





- The generation of *midnight's children* among –
- Writers- and readers- inherited the Nehruvian mantle -polity



- The rise of new regional and caste elites
- and the political dominance of Hindu religious fundamentalist groups
- made a dent in the traditional secular



- The consequences of electoral vote-bank collectivization
- lower-caste mobilization
- competition for scarce resources
- urban migration
- women changing roles
- and the privatization



- The **old center no longer holds**, weakening the inheritors' political and social claims on the nation
- Gandhi – Missing great leaders
- Vacuum in leadership
- *Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;*
- William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)      THE SECOND COMING



- And it is these **generational changes** that Kiran Desai conveys through the elegiac phrase "the inheritance of loss," in the title of her Booker prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss*

