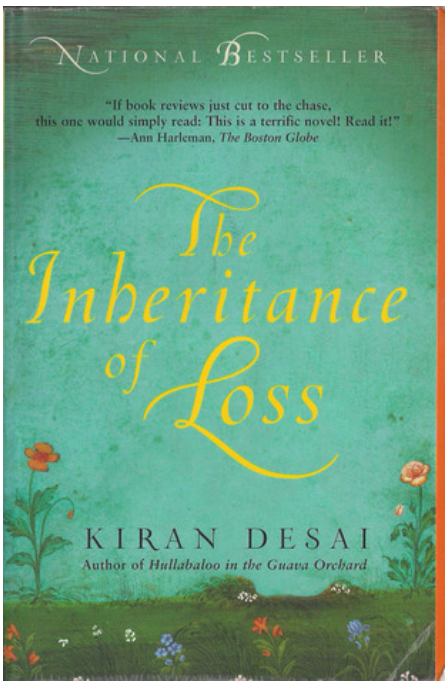

The Inheritance of Loss

Kiran Desai

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The Inheritance of Loss Kiran Desai
In a crumbling, isolated house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas lives an embittered judge who wants only to retire in peace, when his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, arrives on his doorstep. The judge’s cook watches over her distractedly, for his thoughts are often on his son, Biju, who is hopscotching from one gritty New York restaurant to another. Kiran Desai’s brilliant novel, published to huge acclaim, is a story of joy and despair. Her characters face numerous choices that majestically illuminate the consequences of colonialism as it collides with the modern world.

The Inheritance of Loss Details

Date	:	Published 2005 by Grove Press
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Author	:	Kiran Desai
Format	:	Paperback 357 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Cultural, India, Historical, Historical Fiction

From Reader Review The Inheritance of Loss for online ebook

Araz Goran says

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jess says

While the writing was lovely and the theme of the conflicting Indian identities in post-colonial India and in the United States was really interesting and supported with well-developed characters... but.
I just couldn't get into it and found it like pulling teeth to get through.

Roger Brunyate says

Living in the Past

Most of this brilliantly-titled book is set in a small Himalayan community at the foot of Kanchenjunga, where a retired and reclusive Indian judge lives with his orphan grand-daughter Sai, his cook, and his dog. The judge's house is a decaying relic of the British Raj, and virtually everybody in the story has been touched in some way by the dead hand of colonialism, in language, lifestyle, and loyalties. Rising in the background is the potential violence of the Ghorka nationalist movement, people in a land of mixed ethnicity and history trying to assert their own identity. And as a minor counterpoint, though somewhat less successful, there is the cook's son Biju, an illegal immigrant in New York, another displaced person trying to scrape out a living

and establish an identity. Desai writes beautifully in short chapters dissected into even shorter images, and her powers as a miniaturist are so beguiling that it is a long time before one becomes fully aware of the larger themes of the book. But they are there, validating a vision that is funny, moving, and sad all at the same time.

Zanna says

This is a one of those books that makes me want a sixth star, one that I had to put down constantly to take a moment to close my eyes, see the landscape, ride the emotion, work the thought through, one that dreamed me into a never land that, against the feebleness of my imagination, really exists in the indigo shadows of Kanchenjunga. It took my breath and squeezed my heart. Along with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, it is my favourite novel, ever, about migration. I hope I live to read it many times.

Desai seems to revel in ambiguity as her mist-shrouded setting attests. When Sai causes the cook to spill flour, it's hilariously unclear whether the weevils or the humans are laughing at each other. Synaesthesia smears like cloud - the judge 'recognises a weakness that was not only a feeling but also a taste, like fever.' The author's embrace of experience has a both/and orientation I associate with black African and diasporic writing traditions. Both Sai's story and Biju's. The judge's and the cook's. Fragments of time lived in heightened states are painted in the glory of their silence or music, and life is the melody: 'Rainy season beetles flew by in many colours. From each hole in the floor came a mouse tailored as if for size'. When she writes about Sai's love for Gyan, she captures the emotion perfectly and hilariously in a scene in which she repeatedly washes her feet. This is a novel in which everything is suggestive, every paragraph hangs in the air like a fragrance or the echo of a chord: flowers augur passion and also death.

When she teaches Desai is so brilliant I wanted to leap off my seat on the tube and applaud, I laughed aloud many times. A hotelier shows Sai and her friends a postcard written by a white tourist who they say 'are so scared they'll get taken advantage of because of their wealth they try to bargain down on the cheapest room... And yet, just see "Had a great dinner for $4.50. We can't believe how cheap this country is!!! We're having a great time, but we'll be glad to get home where, let's be honest (sorry, we've never been the PC types!) there is widespread availability of deodorant"'

This blindness of whiteness, the inability to see the colonial other as a thinking being who knows the language you forced them to learn and can read your inane asinine racist postcards, comes into focus, now I revisit that page and look a few paragraphs behind, where Sai and Noni and Desai reflect on justice and law, and the violence of that blindness and all the destruction wrought by it jolts into mind.

Desai works her themes through character and the story has two centres around which they storm and bear their lightning and thunder: Biju, who has migrated to New York city, and Sai, an orphaned middle class teenager living with her grandfather 'the judge' in Kalimpong, a town high in the Sikkim area of the Himalayas where the Nepali Gorkhas are engaged in nationalist struggle against the Indian state. The judge employs Biju's father as a cook (and housekeeper), and so the two families are intimately connected.

Biju's narrative is relatively conventional, and Desai uses it to deal with commonplaces; the familiar tale of migrant naivity and sad disillusionment. Non-fiction versions of this narrative are available in millions; I have heard them first hand, second hand, third hand, by hearsay, on the radio, I have read them in memoirs, in poems, on blogs. But fiction in hands like Desai's, in passionate conviction and sparkling sea salt sharpness, has a different power, a power like music, precisely composed to fling open doors of emotion and empathy. Biju's story, doubly, triply outlined in love, gentleness, care, simmers like boiling oil, blazes like hellfire, and throws up dancing sparks that throw keen illumination.

On the cave wall we see the binding injustices of colonisation: Biju feels angry that his father has sent him to America, where he is suffering, but he knows that he would feel angry if his father had not sent him.

On the cave wall: Biju's attempts to reason through racism, working the strange logics of emotion as he tries to reconcile his affection and admiring respect for a black Muslim man from Zanzibar with his socialised disdain for black Africans and hatred of Muslims.

Biju hears from his all-nations workmates (it seems the kitchens of New York are staffed with undocumented people of all countries working for leftover food and minuscule wages) that Indian people are in every country everywhere despised, and thinks 'surely Indians would be preferred' to Pakistanis, against whom he himself is prejudiced.

not a spoiler but a personal digression:(view spoiler)

The cook in India, in his native place, really seems at the wellspring of life while his son is in the grave of 'civilization', that's how it feels to me, whiteness, hegemony, a grave, a junk heap of chewed up trash, with a little tinkling English bell to put on the coffin of the whole beautiful glorious world of difference.

Sai lives for a while in a sheltered wing of that world of difference: wearing a red kimono in monsoon season, she is the brightest-shining sign of the theme (picked up in every segment, like a thread running all through a tapestry) of cultural cross-pollination. Like Samarasan's in *Evening is the Whole Day* , her characters sing the song 'my shoes are Japanese...' thus both authors unwrite the colonial narrative of the Orient(al) as stagnant and static, and cut off at the root the essentialising tropes that produce the orientalist's Orient, in which the brown Other is forced to define herself only against the white Self - going beyond the dialectical step of inversion into more rarefied histories in which brown and black and yellow and red admix and converse unmediated and unsupervised by the white gaze.

If Biju is the victim of the soulless USian behemoth, at least he is able to retain some selfhood, some humanity through the ordeal, whereas the judge, an earlier victim of the subtle white supremacy of middle England, is more severely damaged. The discussion of ideas of justice among Sai's milieu reflects on his character, so that I wondered whether he is meant to have an allegorical relationship to a particular philosophical position or text. His cold, cruel, insular behaviour masks a childish vulnerability. It's horribly ironic that 'justice' can be administered by someone so selfish, heartless and immature, even murderously misanthropic. It hints at the atrocities of the British Raj. Yet, the man adores his non-human companion, the bitch Mutt, sole outlet for his strangled capacity for affection.

In the judge's often pathetic need for the cook, Desai demonstrates devastatingly that those with power are utterly dependent on those over whom they wield it, and persistently centres the stories of the latter: the relationships of poor people like the cook and his son bind the narrative and the social fabric together, while Sai's friends Lola and Noni and their fellow members of Kalimpong's small educated and rather Anglophile (though this is a gross simplification, they have some (and develop more) critical postcolonial self-awareness, but they are readers of British literature, buyers of M&S knickers) middle class float rootless. Their keen appreciation for the land (and even the reciprocal relationship with it that Swiss national Father Booty has) does not cancel out colonisation or heal its wounds (as brilliantly underscored by Sai's penchant for perusing old copies of National Geographic), and the nationalism that erupts, spilling the deadly lava of racial hatred from the pressure cooker of poverty and disenfranchisement, while it allows some suppressed stories and emotions to be aired, ultimately does no better and inaugurates a new cycle of suffering, like another loop of incarnation.

Sai reflects on a range of decolonial viewpoints around the issue of Tenzing and Hilary, noting that the Sherpas scale the peaks 'without glory, without claiming ownership' and that some believe 'the sacred should not be sullied', and asking 'should we aim to conquer the mountain or be possessed by it?' Political themes

are also worked through the character of Sai's tutor and lover, Gyan, a poor but educated local Nepali who is rather haplessly becomes caught up in a nationalist protest and feels the wheels of history turning around him, as him. He is at 'the angle of nostalgia, the position of the revolutionary' but 'pulled out' of the feeling by the everyday, by the familiar hills, that bring him to the recognition of the frustration and idealism that has been yoked into nationalism in these young people. Intelligent, he is briefly cynical. A submerged, sudden awareness of Hindu nationalism and colonial legacies stoke a fresh, violent nationalism in him and he rejects Sai with flaring, comically ridiculous hatred, yet Desai contrasts and justifies his position, implying that poorly expressed and half-felt truths have validity and meaning, by paralelling the most hideous part of the judge's narrative, revealing the extent to which the internalisation of white supremacy has dehumanised him.

This point is hammered, even crunched home again by the devastating scene of Biju's experience in the US embassy, the vivid portrait of the pushing crowd, the man at the front affecting to be 'civilized, ready for America' whose eyes 'so alive to the foreigners, looked back at his countrymen and women, and immediately glazed over, and went dead'. There was also something sharp in Biju's scam trip to Kathmandu, arriving at a butcher's shop instead of the promised and paid for training camp, but there is a lesson for him nonetheless in seeing the butcher swear at a nanny goat before slitting her throat, working himself into the furious hatred required to kill.

The relationship between Biju and his father ('the cook', just as Sai's grandfather is always 'the judge', though both are humanly realised to the highest degree, the cook tenderly and the judge horrifically) epitomises the total love, the unconditional bond of a parent and child. The cook reflects: 'money wasn't everything. There was that simple happiness of looking after someone and having someone look after you.' A wise reader will pocket this, and take it out occasionally to hold and look at it, like a very beautiful shell or pebble. Desai makes virtuoso use of it: in one phone call between the two, she can strike the passion for home and familiy into the heart so deep you know it will stay in you and taint your blood and you will taste it in your tears for the rest of your life. Desai makes the cook and Biju so appealing my love for them hurts. Desai's feminism is evident in the fact that she celebrates two vulnerable, kind, nuturing, subjugated males; they are never, ever degraded by authorial mockery. (Uncle Ballroom in *Evening is the Whole Day* seems to me to be a similar figure; a caring, vulnerable, generous man whom the narrative affirms and celebrates)

In contrast to their tender relationship, Sai has only a single, tenuous family tie to a man who seems to have lost the capacity to love other people, and a large part of her emotional experience is a vicarious concern for Biju through her warm relationship with the cook. As a protagonist she is oddly peripheral to much of what might be called the temporal action, the political scene, which sweeps up Gyan and impacts on Lola and Noni. Sai has grown up alienated from her Indian-ness but she is not *foreign* in the diminishing sense that Biju is in the US - here is where Desai's diamond teeth bite - everyone is racist. Sai is also outside what I myself felt to be the book's emotional centre: it was Biju I felt for, his ending I waited for white-knuckled with terror, and Sai had to learn that she was not the centre and that the story did not belong to her, just as Lola and Noni had to admit their pioneer pretences were cowardly and colonial. Kanchenjunga has the last laugh, finally possessing them all.

Philip says

The Inheritance Of Loss by Kiran Desai is a magnificent, impressive novel that ultimately is disappointing. As a process, the book is almost stunningly good. As a product, it falls short.

The book’s language, scenarios and juxtapositions are funny, threatening, vivid and tender all at the same time. The comic element, always riven through with irony, is most often to the fore, as characters grapple

with a world much bigger than themselves, a world that only ever seems to admit them partially, and rarely on their own terms. The one criticism I have of the style is Kiran Desai's propensity to offer up lists as comic devices, a technique that works a couple of times, but later has the reader scanning forward to the next substance.

An aged judge lives in the highlands of north India. As political and ethnic tensions stretch through the mountain air, he reconsiders his origins, his education, his career, his opportunities, both taken and missed. He has a granddaughter, orphaned in most unlikely circumstances, as her parents trained for a Russian space programme. But what circumstances that create orphans are ever likely? She is growing up, accompanied by most of what that entails.

The cook in the rickety mansion is the person that really runs the household, his rule-of-thumb methods predating the appliances he has to use and the services he has to provide. He manages, imaginatively. He has a son, Biju, who eventually forms the centrepiece of the book's complex, somewhat rambling story. Biju has emigrated to New York, where he has made it big, at least as far as the folks back home think. On site, he slaves away in the dungeon kitchens of fast food outlets, restaurants, both up and downmarket, and a few plain eateries. Kiran Desai provides the reader with a superb image of globalisation when she describes the customer-receiving areas of an upmarket restaurant flying an advertised, authentic French flag, while in the kitchen the flags are Indian, Honduran, anything but French. Now there is true authenticity for you, offered up in its manufactured, globalised form.

Biju, of course, dreams of home, but the comparatively large number of US dollars he earns – at least as far as the folks back home see it – barely covers essentials in someone else's reality.

The narrative of The Inheritance Of Loss flits between New York, northern India and elsewhere, and also between the here and now, yesteryear and the judge's childhood. And perhaps it flits too much, because the scenes are often cut short before the reader feels they have made a point.

And ultimately this reader found that the book lacked focus. While the process was enjoyable, the product was not worth the journey. The Inheritance Of Loss seemed to promise to take us somewhere in this globalised confusion of identity, motive, routine, unrealised dreams and intangible desires, but eventually it seemed to have nothing to add to a sense of "well that's how it is", which is precisely where we started. There was an opportunity for more, but it was ducked.

The book was thus a thoroughly enjoyable read that threatened to achieve greatness through statement, but unfortunately missed the mark, and by a long way.

Paul Bryant says

I'm not going to say that this novel is bad

(Chorus of GR friends : *Say it, go on, you know you want to...*)

but it was pretty ghastly for me. It was strangled to death by a style you could describe as *inane wittering*, a crew of characters all of which are *loveably eccentric* and a plot that Ms Desai believes will take care of itself as the inane wittering puthers all over the loveable eccentrics.

So, to sum up

BAH

Amira Mahmoud says

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Marlon James says

When I finally met Salman Rushdie (!!!!) within seconds we got to talking about this book. Like Moshin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Inheritance tackles radical territory, more radical than you might think. Both novels break from the traditional immigrant novel by having the main character break from the country of adoption and return to the country of origin. Sure the act is nothing new, but the post 9/11

instability is. This is a lot more striking than you might think— the basic concept of the immigrant novel, from Amy Tan to Rushdie was co-existence, a belief in the ultimate greatness of mongrel culture; the character finding some way to come to terms and perhaps even thrive in the country of adoption. In Inheritance, two generations of immigrant return and both experience the fundamental instability that comes from divorcing where you're from, but never fitting in with where you're at.

K.D. Absolutely says

So far, this is the Man Booker Prize winner that is most relevant to me as an Asian. Most countries in Asia were once colonies of European or American countries and their influences will forever stay no matter how many centuries have passed. Also, this is one of the most readable. Although the verses are oftentimes playful, the storytelling is concise. Almost all the characters seem to be alive and the imageries that the scenes create seem like imprints that will stay in your mind for a long time.

It may not be as comprehensive as Salman Rusdie's *Midnight's Children* although it is also about India that used to be under the British empire. However, it is more exact with its urgent message: the *loss* of the nation's true identity due to western influences. The true Indian identity that was an amalgam of the nation's own culture and tradition spawning several centuries when they were still free of foreign influences. After all, India has one of the oldest civilizations in the world.

It may not be as tear-jerking and bewildering as Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* although it is also about Indian families trying to survive the Third-World realities of life. However, it is more realistic with the characters finding themselves in the situations that were not imposed to them but mostly of their *own* choices. I think this is what made me appreciate Desai's over Roy's: that her characters have choices, despite the fact that those options are limited because of the harsh environment that they happened to live in.

It may not be as current as Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* although it is also about the changing landscape of a small Indian town. However, Desai's storytelling is more engaging as she has this rare ability to take you in a roller-coaster ride: you'll be in enthralled by her playful verses, in deep thoughts by her heartfelt message, in gratitude by being in a better state in life than her characters, in aversion to any form of racial discrimination by following the sad fate of Biju hopping from one job to another as an illegal alien in the USA and yet, in the end, you will feel cheering for her characters as you are able to identify yourself with them. That no matter what we go through in life, there is still hope that awaits us at the end of each tumultuous journey.

One of my GR friends once commented that he has veered away from novels with India as a setting because they are always about being destitute and poor. There may be some truth on this. However, novels are supposed to be about reality and that's how most of the people live in India. I have been to Mumbai thrice. In my 27 years in the corporate world, I have been fortunate to work under 4 Indian nationals and each of them has been telling me about too much politicking that hinders the development and progress in their country. They are all good bosses: with good education, very smart, knowledgeable, conscientious, culture-sensitive and appreciative. They and the other Indian people I had a chance to meet make me wonder: how come that despite many good people in India, they seem to have difficulty in putting their acts together to propel their country to a higher ground?

Then I thought, I might as well be talking about the Filipinos and the Philippines.

Aubrey says

> *It was an awful thing, the downing of a proud man. He might kill the witness.*

I was in the midst of my pre-reviewing laze that consists of gathering up thoughts and quotes and semi-but-not-really-pigeonholing-various-things when without warning the word 'satire' reared its head. It's not a word I get along with, what with its all too frequent usage as a blockade, a safety blanket, a "but it's a satire so I can say anything I want?!?!" that guarantees neither quality nor even simple entertainment, but if there's one example that I'll accept with nary a quibble, it's Swift's A Modest Proposal. It's a piece that makes you laugh while questioning while you're laughing because you are also crying but not nearly as much as you should be while also recognizing the logic that is only the extension of a present day condition that seems practical and common sensical until it isn't because now you're (view spoiler). Don't get me wrong, the slippery slope analogy is a fallacy alright, but more fucked up things than government sanctioned (view spoiler) has happened on a more official scale.

> *One day the Indian girls hoped to be gentry, but right now, despite being unwelcome in the neighborhood, they were in the student stage of vehemently siding with the poor people who wished them gone.*

So it's a satire of immigration and all its ways of the Dream, an entity so bloated by desperate whispers and Hollywood explosions and in the case of India postcolonialism/racism/previous cash cow (oh the double entendre) of the ultimate White Man's Burden Spiel that anyone expecting something along the lines of narrative flow is going to have issues. In cowboy tropes you'd call it "gritty", but despite the shit and boogers and homeless mental illness and abject poverty without a single shred of sentiment and socially encouraged rape there's no time for macho solipsism when there's lampooning of every single privilege to be done. Granted, there is *some* but how you feel about it by the end will tell you more about yourself than you are comfortable with imagining.

> *Saeed, he relished the whole game, the way the country flexed his wits and rewarded him; he charmed it, cajoled it, cheated it, felt great tenderness and loyalty toward it. When it came time, he who had jigged open every back door, he who had, with photocopier, Wite-Out, and paper cutter, spectacularly sabotaged the system (one skilled person at the photocopy machine, he assured Biju, could bring America to its knees), he would pledge emotional allegiance to the flag with tears in his eyes and conviction in his voice. The country recognized something in Saeed, he in it, and it was a mutual love affair. Ups and downs, sometimes more sour than sweet, maybe, but nonetheless, beyond anything the INS could imagine, it was an old-fashioned romance.*

On the scale of The Namesake to The God of Small Things this matches quite nicely within the rating disparities (four stars in the range from two to five) because of its embrace of both horror and happiness. It's also hilarious, which goes a long way in touching on Big Issues that really do need to be considered without being sucked in. As Shaw/Chaplin/Wilde/some dead white guy (the assumption of course but maybe it's wrong) reputedly said, make them laugh, else they'll kill you. It seems to have worked out well in the case of the Booker, but as for the ratings...eh. I'll settle for poking them with a stick.

> *Just ordinary humans in ordinary opaque boiled-egg light, without grace, without revelation, composite of contradictions, easy principles, arguing about what they half believed in or even what they didn't believe in at all, desiring comfort as much as raw austerity, authenticity as much as playacting, desiring coziness of family as much as to abandon it forever.*

Yes, there's life affirmation and critical theories and a multifarious web of Srs Bzns, but it made me laugh,

and it didn't even need a single (view spoiler) to do it.

Joey says

I am very interested in reading books on India since I read Yann Martel’s Life of Pi. This novel gave me an idea about life of Indians (although I already studied it in our high school History.) I became more interested when I read A White Tiger by Aravind Adiga from which I learned the real face of social system in India, that people in the lower class get through miserable and sordid life. This fact opened my mind then. Probably, the novel that has had a significant impact upon me so far is Rohinton Mistry’s A Fine Balance, a wonderful book I will definitely recommend to someone asking for what book they should read. Thereby, I always look for the other novels which have something to do with India since there are some included on 1001 Best Novels of All Time.

All the above-mentioned books have complete resemblance – their themes are all about poverty. So when I saw this novel in a book store, I grabbed it because I have now the conception that Indian novels have something to do with India . On the other hand, Kiran Desai’ s has the same hallmark but not as heart-breaking and compelling as Rohinton Mistry’s . The way she wrote it is completely different from the other contemporary writers’ .

This novel won the Man Booker Prize in 2006 and National Circle Award in the same year. As a reader, do not underestimate why this is deserving of the said awards. In fact , the novel is not much of a good read beyond my taste ; however, objectively speaking, I agree with another famous Indian writer, Salman Rusdie, that Keran Desia is a terrific writer.

First: Desai’s writing style reminds me of Black-American writers’ novels; for example, the Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison. When you read the novel, you can assimilate the story into two interpretive ways either literally or figuratively. In other words, The Inheritance of Loss is steeped in latent implications, some kind of esoteric reading. Every sentence appears to be so deceiving that I don’t think you cannot get at what Desai wants to imply figuratively. As a cliché puts, “ Read between the lines.” So, could you have this knack of writing skill? Dear me! you might beat your head against the wall thinking about the best and most beautiful fragments you could fabricate as long as 7 years as Desai took time to finsih it.

Second: The novel is what the social world must know . Its themes deal with the social issues nowadays even since before, not only applicable to India and Nepal but also to every nation in the world which must have the same conditions specifically such as :

(a) American dream also exists in India. The western culture influences the psyches of Indians . Consequently, due to the extreme poverty probably brought about by big population, corruption, and ridiculous so-called Caste System, most Indians are so hapless that they dream of venturing out to the USA. In reality, their life turns out to be more miserable than what they expect to be.

(b) The effects of Imperialism and colonial-mentality upon the social system raise awareness among chauvinists and jingoists. In fact, in the novel, Sai’s retired judge grandpa shows an air of aristocracy and I-am- better-than-you attitude upon his arrival in India after long studies and services under the British government. Such social situation also exists in the Philippines.

(c) Secessionism. A political situation that loses the real identity of a nation.

The novel also deals with feeling of emptiness, the atmospheric feeling I felt from the beginning to the end.

“Could fulfillment ever be felt as deeply as loss? Romantically she decided that love must surely reside in the gap between desire and fulfillment, in the lack, not the contentment. Love was the ache, the anticipation, the retreat, everything around it but the emotion itself.”

All the rage in the story is the miscegenation between Sai Mistry and Gyan . I found their mutual understanding ridiculous, but their relationship could be symbolic , for Sai is Indian and Gyan; Nepalese.

On the other hand, the only thing that impedes my interest is the Indian words and dialogues with which I am not familiar and beyond my understanding. But I believe this is the essence of writing such book; it only reflects the nationalistic observation of Kiran Desia.

Besides, I cannot brush the idea that this novel was as though each story in each chapter had just been patched together as Desai’s successful breakthrough after seven years of writing it. Still, it is a tour de force. Congratulations Ms. Kiran Desai! I envy your febrile imagination. ^^

Prior to this , Desai was already popular among literary critics for her Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard , which I will read as soon as I buy it. ^^

Rating : 5 / 5 stars

Paul says

There is a tendency to assume that anything that has won the Booker prize must be problematic, however I found this winner to actually pretty good. The novel moves points of view and location regularly. It shifts between the foothills of the Himalayas near Kalimpong (set in 1986 with the Gorkhaland movement as a backdrop) and New York and periodically goes back to the pre-war colonial period. The main characters centre on the household of Jemubhai a retired judge, Sai (his granddaughter), the cook, Mutt the dog and Gyan (Sai’s tutor who visits periodically). In New York is Biju, the cook’s son who is scraping a living working illegally in New York restaurants. There is also a cast of eccentric characters in the household’s social circle. The novel also moves back to the judge’s past and his time in England studying law, his marriage and his gradual disillusionment.
Colonialism and post-colonialism feature as themes as does identity and its loss (and this inheritance moving through generations). The novel is split into short chapters and each chapter into brief fragments which move the narrative along quickly, often between comedy and tragedy. This is a funny book and there are some hilarious moments, often juxtaposed with moments of real pathos and tragedy. There is also a sense of decay and regret and an illumination of human cupidity and delusion; delineated with care and concern. An elderly character, Lola, pontificates about Naipaul’s A Bend in the River;
“I think he's strange. Stuck in the past ... He has not progressed. Colonial neurosis, he's never freed himself from it”
It is an ironic and telling comment.
Desai says that her novel “tries to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant” and goes on to say that it also explores at a deeper level, “what happens when a Western element is introduced into a country that is not of the West”. Desai also asks “What happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one. How does the imbalance between these two worlds change a person's thinking and feeling? How do these changes manifest themselves in a personal sphere, a political sphere, over time?”
Desai’s genius is to explore all these themes within the context of a very human and poignant story. The novel tells a compact family tale in broad scope raising issues and difficulties facing the inheritors of colonial domination. Sai’s feelings give a sense of the inheritance; “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.”
Easy to read and deceptively deep; this is a good novel with much to recommend it.

JoAnne says

i have only read half of this book, so perhaps i shouldn't rate it. but i want to warn other people away from it!

the author is obviously an intelligent writer, and she has a real mastery of language. much of the writing is somberly poetic. but perhaps she pays too much attention to detail..... the story is slow.....

i read up to the part where the judge returns from england and rapes his wife after she steals his powder puff, and i threw the book down in disgust.

it's not just what happens, but how the author writes. the rape scene really made my skin crawl. her description was vulgar. i'm crossing my legs and curling up into a ball just thinking about it.

most of the characters are selfish and cynical, if not downright mean. the ones who aren't get treated badly. the environment is moldy and decaying. i felt like taking a shower after reading passages from this book.

other reviewers said that the glorious and brilliant thing about this book is the mood the author creates. if you want to read a book with mood, then go for it. she is a genius at creating the most depressing mood you can imagine.

Sawsan says

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snackywombat (v.m.) says

With so much incredible praise riding on this book, I really expected more of it. So basically, I'm deducting points because I was disappointed by the build-up--I mean, the NBCC and Man Booker Prize? I guess that's not entirely fair though. Standing on its own, The Inheritance of Loss gives exactly what it promises. It describes the barren lives of characters that have been robbed of love or dignity or some necessary emotion in life, all juxtaposed against the twin backgrounds of an incredibly lush region of the Himalayas and the snarled jungle of New York City.

The novel focuses on Sai, an isolated teenager who was orphaned when her parents died while she was at boarding school. Sent to live with her curmudgeonly grandfather in a dilapidated yet fairytale house, she

walks on eggshells around him, too afraid to beg for his love, and ends up being raised by the cook. He, in turn, projects all of his affection on Sai since his own son, Biju, is in New York, struggling and ultimately failing to make a life there.

Threaded throughout, there's a lot of interesting commentary about class warfare (literally), ethnicity, and racism. Both Sai and Biju's experiences bring into question the idea of national identity and what it means to be "Indian" or "American." The topics are certainly explored in a new way but ultimately remain unresolved, which made the novel seem over-ambitious.

With such a wide nest cast over all these characters, their stories and tribulations, we never fully get to understand any of them. And the lack is most apparent in the end, which counts as one of the most unsatisfying endings ever. Not because it is sad--and shockingly it is heartbreaking without even one death--but it just seems like the drama piles on for effect. When you ring a wet rag out, you expect water, and that was not the ending here. My final diagnosis: the book is so lush, it becomes overripe. Pruning needed to happen.