

## Book Review

# The Inheritance of Loss

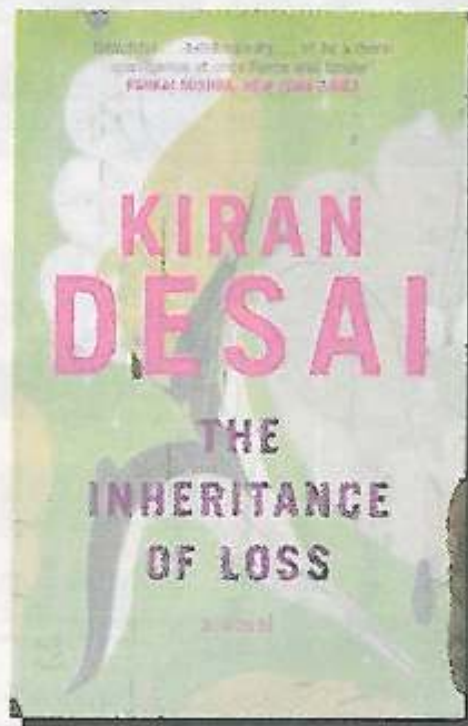
By Kiran Desai  
(Hamish Hamilton)

MORE OFTEN than not, the different aspects of our lives overlap, etching an indelible mark on our souls. It's a notion that's reinforced by Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss*.

The book centres on life in present day India as left by the colonialist, and influenced by the multi-faceted impact of migration, with the conflicting desires, clash of traditions and unplanned transformations played out in the lives of the characters.

JP Patel, sent to England many years before by his family to study law, returned to resent all that made him Indian. Now a retired judge, he wants to savour his retirement in peace – in a crumbling mansion on the posh side of Kalimpong – but is forced to confront his past when he takes in his orphaned granddaughter Sai.

Meanwhile, JP's personal cook lives for the day his son Biju, on whom he spent his last savings to send to America, will come back



to rescue him from the strangling clutches of poverty, not imagining that Biju has his own troubles, experiencing the burden of the migrant.

Then there are the judge's neighbours, Lola and Noni, two sisters who live high above their city from where they sneer down on their country and people. They have the privilege of travelling to the west on holidays and make a point of displaying the acquired values, customs and characteristics that they believe define them as 'cultured'.

Desai also investigates the

treatment of the Nepalese when Sai's love interest Gyan, a Nepali-Indian, abandons her for the Nepali cause. Their activities in their adopted country, which culminate in insurgency, serve to underpin the seeds of discord sown by colonialism.

This is a story where every character seems to be in pursuit of something at the expense of losing something else. And it's in this desire to acquire at any expense that causes their grief, pain and loss.

The question Desai asks is, could the fulfilment of their grasping desires ever be felt as keenly as their loss?

*The Inheritance of Loss* is a well-written page-turner, but Desai's detached and sometimes condescending language prevented me from being fully engaged with the story, despite the palpable emotions of the characters. Certainly I'm not the only one who feels that way: Nepali-Indians threatened to burn the book in objection to their treatment in it.



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