“Solid Knowledge” and Contradictions in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*

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ABSTRACT: This essay argues that Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* shows us a radical postcolonial subjectivity in which flexibility, assimilation, and multiculturalism are preferable to maintaining difference. The characters who cling to “solid knowledge” come to bad ends, while those more comfortable with cultural contradictions tend to fare better.

Keywords: Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, postcolonial fiction, immigrant, identity

Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) has achieved much critical success. It won the Man Booker Prize in 2006 and the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award in 2007. Reviewers mostly praised the novel and Desai’s technique. Ann Harleman writes that Desai’s “rich and often wry descriptions [. . .] have the depth and resonance of Dickens laced with rueful postmodern ambivalence.” Marjorie Kehe characterizes 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 argued that “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.” These reviews only hint, though, at the postcolonial issues that the novel addresses. Carmen Wickramagamage
has recently argued that “most people envision relocation as a painful choice between assimilation (betrayal) and nativism (loyalty)” (194). The importance of this book becomes apparent in light of this distinction, which divides much postcolonial literary criticism. Some critics view assimilation positively, while others insist that the differences between cultures should be maintained and preserved. I shall argue that 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 but on how several people make sense of themselves, view the world around them, and deal with the difficulties that they have with contradictions. “Contradiction” is a term not much used in postcolonial theory, which tends to be dominated by poststructuralism and hybridity theory. I offer this term because Desai uses it frequently in the novel, and it helps us understand how she presents the conflicts of identity the characters face. By “contradiction” I mean simply an opposition between two ways of thinking. Many of the characters do not deal with contradictions particularly well and prefer (usually unwisely) to avoid challenges to the things they believe to be true. This could be said of almost anyone, but the problem is magnified and exacerbated for postcolonial peoples, whose 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.” Poststructuralists might object to these terms on the grounds that identities are fluid and hybrid, a point with which I do not disagree. I use the terms throughout this essay, however, the way the characters do in order to indicate their understanding of themselves and others. Some of them do not think of identities as very fluid at all. Instead, they struggle to establish “solid knowledge”—a term which Desai uses throughout the novel, not to indicate truth but what the characters believe to be true. Those who pursue solid knowledge do so because it provides a sense of mastery and understanding, a refuge from contradictions. Despite their encounters with people whose attitude or behavior contradicts their solid knowledge, some characters cling to it anyway.

No two characters’ responses to contradiction are identical, but they do generally fall into one of two types—suppression and ambivalence. In the first section of this essay, I discuss characteristics and examples of suppression, followed by ones of ambivalence. After showing how the characters handle contradictions, I attempt to identify Desai’s opinion of the approaches she offers. She does not state explicitly which one she advocates, so we are left to judge which is preferable based on whether the characters’ methods lead them to good or bad outcomes. I present the characters as exemplars of certain types of response to contradictions for the purpose of illustrating those responses. To
avoid oversimplifying or distorting how the characters behave, however, I include instances in which they act differently from what we might expect. The point is not to label these characters as ambivalent or suppressive but to understand the various ways in which they handle contradictions and whether their approaches result in positive or negative outcomes.

Suppressing Contradictions

The characters who most desire solid knowledge establish and defend its solidity by means of suppression, deliberately pushing a thought out of their consciousness (Rycroft 161). The characteristics of suppression can be seen through examples from its two most frequent users, the judge (Sai’s grandfather) and Biju (the cook’s son). The section begins with the judge’s experience as an immigrant in England and his life and marriage in India upon his return, followed by Biju, his experience in America and a comparison between him and his friend Saeed Saeed.

The judge’s story comes to us in flashbacks, usually brought on by his interactions with his granddaughter, Sai, and her math tutor and love interest Gyan. When Gyan stays for dinner one evening, the judge tries to humiliate him by asking him to recite a poem. Gyan recites one that “[e]very schoolchild in India knew,” and the judge laughs at him “in a cheerless and horrible manner” (109). Embarrassing Gyan, however, gives him no satisfaction. The narrator comments: “His strength, that mental steel, was weakening. His memory seemed triggered by the tiniest thing—Gyan’s unease, his reciting that absurd poem. . . . Soon all the judge had worked so hard to separate would soften and envelop him in its nightmare, and the barrier between this life and eternity would in the end, no doubt, be just another such failing construct” (113). In truth, Gyan reminds the judge of himself as a young man and of the shame he felt when asked to deliver a poem from memory during his examination at the Institute for Constitutional Studies (ICS) at Cambridge. He feels compelled to belittle Gyan in order to create distance between the two of them and thus between himself and his past. He succeeds only in doing the opposite, recalling the very awkwardness he is keen to forget. He takes medication to help suppress these memories, but he finds that “even the pill could not chase the unpleasant thoughts unleashed at dinner back into their holes” (117).

In the course of his flashbacks, we learn that in 1939, at the age of fifteen, he was sent to England to study law at Cambridge University. After passing his ICS exam, he returned to India as a judge. His experience of being an immigrant was similar to Biju’s. He was shy and barely ventured out into the new, unfamiliar territory. He almost never spoke during his years in England and eventually stopped speaking as “I,” beginning sentences instead with “one,” as if his subject position were that of anyone. As the narrator says, “[h]e had
learned to take refuge in the third person and to keep everyone at bay, to keep even himself away from himself” (111).

Upon returning from England, the judge began using his new social position to hide from his past poverty and lack of confidence. The narrator tells us that he “found he began to be mistaken for something he wasn’t—a man of dignity,” that “[t]his accidental poise became more important than any other thing. He envied the English. He loathed Indians” (119). The judge’s anglophilia marks him as a particular kind of postcolonial subject: a self-hating Indian, a would-be Englishman, a foreigner to everyone including himself. He supports assimilation fully and believes in the superiority of the English. To suppress his “Indian” past and elevate himself above others in his community, the judge holds fast to what he has learned of performing English identity.

We see this process of distancing most clearly in the judge’s treatment of his wife, Nimi. He projects onto her that which he rejects in himself. He is not English, but distinguishing himself from his Indian wife makes him feel less Indian. Unfortunately, his marriage to her is a constant reminder that he is not in fact English. Everything about her seems Indian to him. He despises “her typically Indian bum—lazy, wide as a buffalo,” the “pungency of her red hair oil” (172). Her presence is “disruptive” because she reminds him of the contradictions that he tries to suppress. He hates having sex with her, for example, but finds himself doing it “again and again. Even in tedium, on and on, a habit he could not stand in himself. This distaste and his persistence made him angrier than ever and any cruelty to her became irresistible. He would teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself” (170). Nimi arouses in the judge ambivalent feelings, in the strictly psychoanalytic sense of the word. He simultaneously desires and rejects his wife, and these feelings are interdependent. His response to this contradiction, as with others, is to suppress it by removing Nimi from his life entirely and forgetting her.

The judge’s attempts at distancing himself from Nimi generally involve emotional neglect and physical abuse. The narrator describes a particularly graphic instance of the judge’s behavior towards his wife: “One day he found footprints on the toilet seat—she was squatting on it, she was squatting on it!—he could barely contain his outrage, took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl, and after a point, Nimi, made invalid by her misery, grew very dull [. . . .] She peered out at the world but could not focus on it, never went to the mirror, because she couldn’t see herself in it” (173). In response to his cruelty, Nimi becomes (like the judge) a crushed shadow, unable to see herself. He does to her what his experience in England did to him. She becomes his suppressed Indian self, though her presence constantly reminds the judge of his failure to suppress her fully. He sends her away, telling her that otherwise he will kill her, and refuses to accept her back. Ultimately, he has her murdered and gets away with it by bribing the police. To avoid feeling guilty for her death, he convinces himself that it was an accident.
At the end of the novel, the judge seems headed toward some kind of redemption. A series of events begins when his dog, a red setter named Mutt, is stolen. Apart from being a status symbol, Mutt was the judge’s closest companion, and she ate far better than anyone else in the house. Upon finding her missing, the judge searches frantically all over Kalimpong, asking people to help him look for her. He had long avoided most of these people at all costs. His elitism is less important to him than finding Mutt, however, so he exposes himself to harsh ridicule. In an ultimate act of desperation, he prays for her return, “undoing his education, retreating to the superstitious man making bargains, offering sacrifices” (301). His loss causes him to reconsider whether he made the right choices in life. He remembers how he rejected his father and wife. Memories resurface and confront him in rapid succession. Finally he wonders “if he had killed his wife for the sake of false ideals. Stolen her dignity, shamed his family, shamed hers, turned her into the embodiment of their humiliation” (308). He then recalls a time he had suppressed, when they were young, and he had liked her.

Throughout most of the novel, the judge is a despicable, unsympathetic character. He is selfish, abusive, and winds up bitter and alone with only his cook to keep him company, but he is at his most sympathetic when he opens himself up to contradictions. At the end of the novel, he recognizes how unjustly he treated his father, his wife, their families, and his daughter (born after Nimi was sent away). Sai, he hopes, might be “something in the past that had survived, returned, that might, without his paying too much attention, redeem him [. . . . ] He felt, in the backwaters of his unconscious, an imbalance in his deeds balancing itself out” (210). He feels a unique kinship with Sai, she having been “westernized” by the nuns who raised her. Unlike the judge, though, Sai does not reject Indian culture or want to elevate herself above others by advertising her background. If anything, she is embarrassed by it, as we see when she eats with Gyan, he using his hands and she silverware. Part of the redemption that Sai symbolizes for the judge, then, involves embracing his Indian heritage and giving up his insistence on the superiority of Englishness.

Whereas the judge eschews what he has learned in India when he leaves and constructs solid knowledge from firsthand experiences abroad, Biju rejects firsthand experience and clings to his established beliefs. Most of Biju’s story concerns his emigration to New York City. Biju’s father, hoping that his nineteen year-old son will become rich, sends him to America, where he works as a cook. He does not find French and American people cooking French and American food. Instead, he finds that these operations are “perfectly first-world on top, perfectly third-world twenty-two steps below” (23). In the kitchens of these restaurants, Biju meets people from all over the world, often places he has never heard of. Most of Biju’s knowledge about the world comes from things he learned in Kalimpong. When he meets types of people about whom he knows nothing, he has to make sense of them using his own firsthand experience.
Being forced to do so makes him feel anxious. Ironically, he finds comfort when a Pakistani man is hired to work with him. In the midst of a new cultural context, Biju is relieved to know what to think of this person, to invoke old prejudices without having to form his own opinions. The Pakistani man reacts similarly. He and Biju exchange cultural slurs and thus confirm and reinforce each other’s prejudices. No contradiction here. Biju’s knowledge about Pakistanis is as solid as ever.

When Biju meets Saeed Saeed, a Muslim immigrant from Zanzibar, he becomes painfully aware of contradictions. Biju has inherited prejudices against both black and Muslim people, but he comes to admire Saeed’s success in America. He struggles to reconcile the contradiction between his predisposition against Muslims and his great admiration for Saeed. He thinks to himself, “Saeed was kind and he was not Paki. Therefore he was OK? [...] Therefore he liked Muslims and hated only Pakis? Therefore he liked Saeed, but hated the general lot of Muslims? Therefore he liked Muslims and Pakis and India should see it was all wrong and hand over Kashmir? No, no, how could that be” (76). Following Biju’s line of thinking, we see that Saeed’s kindness contradicts the unkindness Biju associates with Pakistanis and Muslims in general. So, he thinks, maybe unkindness is not a necessary condition of being Muslim. Maybe Pakistanis could be nice, too. Biju goes so far as to suggest momentarily that India should give up the land conflict with Pakistan but cannot accept this proposition. Ultimately he poses a number of questions, finds no answers, and forces the matter out of his mind.

He then considers the contradiction between his prejudices against black people and his admiration for Saeed. Although Saeed tells Biju that his grandmother is Indian (53), Biju sees Saeed as purely “black,” not ethnically hybrid. He questions “what they said about black people at home,” that “in their own country they live like monkeys in trees” (76). Because he admires the way Saeed conducts himself in America, Biju asks himself, “Therefore he hated all black people but liked Saeed? Therefore there was nothing wrong with black people and Saeed? Or Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese, or anyone else [...]???” (76). Biju recognizes that if what he has heard about black people proves false, then other such identifications may also prove false. This realization produces no change in how he thinks about people. Biju settles himself by forgetting these questions, suppressing the contradiction, and sticking to what he has always known to be true. He trusts his inherited prejudices over firsthand experience.

Desai frequently compares Biju to Saeed throughout Biju’s experience in America. Saeed, an otherwise minor character, provides an excellent foil for Biju. He does not react to Biju with suspicion or hate, like the Pakistani that Biju had worked with. Biju notices that “[p]resumably Saeed had been warned of Indians, but he didn’t seem wracked by contradictions; a generosity buoyed him and dangled him above such dilemmas” (77). Saeed does not strive after solid knowledge the way that Biju does, nor does he resist change. His success
derives primarily from his ability to adapt to the cultural context in which he finds himself. The flexibility Biju finds in Saeed makes Biju question his own rigidity, his comfort with falling back into prejudices. The narrator observes that “[t]his habit of hate had accompanied Biju, and he found that he possessed an awe of white people, who arguably had done India great harm, and a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India” (77). Significantly, Biju does not find anything particularly wrong with the “habit of hate”—just with directing it at the wrong targets.

Saeed adapts easily because he defines the terms in which he lives loosely. His patriotism in America makes an excellent example. He recognizes that some of the things he wants are unavailable to him, but (unlike Biju) he finds a way to pursue those things—legal or otherwise. Describing how Saeed operates in New York City, the narrator tells us, “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” (79). Saeed seems to have no problem with the apparent contradictions in which he finds himself, cheating a system toward which he feels great loyalty: “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 […] would pledge emotional allegiance to the flag with tears in his eyes and conviction in his voice” (79). Though Saeed’s behavior is contradictory, he is not, to use Biju’s phrase, “wracked by contradictions”—largely because he does not worry about absolutes. Whereas Biju cannot change what he thinks of people, even when he sees for himself that what he has been told and has believed is false, Saeed does not pursue solid knowledge and never tries to reconcile contradictions. In fact, he does not see his behavior as contradictory and therefore does not demonstrate any particular kind of response to contradictions—suppression, ambivalence, or anything else.

Saeed’s attitude towards his religion further illustrates how he manages to avoid the kinds of internal conflict that paralyze Biju. When explaining why he does not eat pork, Saeed tells Biju, “First I am Muslim, then I am Zanzibari, then I will BE American” (136). Although we might want to see Saeed as advocating assimilation at all costs, actually he establishes a hierarchy of loyalties towards his various identities, putting American at the bottom. How does he demonstrate loyalty toward any of them? What do they require of him? We see almost no evidence of his religiosity. He marries a woman just to get a green card. He then tells Biju that he has met another woman, visiting from Zanzibar, whom he intends to marry. About his current marriage he says, “in four years I get my green card and . . . fshht … out of there…. I get divorced and I marry for real” (318). Saeed can marry for a green card because he does not consider that marriage “real.” Similarly, we cannot say with confidence what he thinks being Zanzibari entails, other than simply having emigrated from Zanzibar. He hides from his fellow countrymen when they come to America seeking help. Saeed’s fraudulent passport gives his name as “Rasheed Zulfickar.” At one point, he
works at Banana Republic, which the narrator describes as “a shop whose name was synonymous with colonial exploitation and the rapacious ruin of the third world” (102). Saeed does whatever is necessary to get what he wants without worrying much about whether his actions contradict his various loyalties. His version of assimilation involves strategy and a series of conscious decisions. He acts with the same kind of intentionality that he demonstrated back in Zanzibar, where he dated several women without getting roped into marrying any of them by their fathers. He plays a very active role in his engagement with America and mostly exploits its systems, rather than being exploited by them. Trying to pass on his approach to Biju, Saeed, currently reading two self-help books in English, tells him, “Now you are here, you are not back home. Anything you want, you try and you can do” (190). Saeed should know. In the course of the novel, he gets just about anything he wants.

Biju finds this advice impossible to take because of his desire for absolutes and solid knowledge. His prejudices block him in various ways and prevent him from adapting to change. Though Saeed encourages him on several occasions to pursue what he wants, Biju mostly paralyzes himself trying to understand New York City culture. After being fired for throwing cabbages at the Pakistani, Biju finds a job at the Gandhi Café, which he likes because the owner, Harish-Harry, does not cook pork and seems to have a “clarity of principle which Biju was seeking” (147). Unfortunately, he soon realizes that he is mistaken about Harish-Harry, who is also struggling to make sense of himself abroad, as evidenced by his attempt to bridge the gap between his American and Indian identities with his double name. The Gandhi Café offers Biju no refuge from hardship. While working there, he slips in the kitchen, seriously injuring his knee. Harish-Harry refuses to take him to the hospital because then Biju’s illegal immigrant status would be revealed, and Harish-Harry’s business would be jeopardized. Biju is forced to lie in bed for two weeks to recover, after which he walks with a cane for two weeks more.

During his recovery period, the pressure to get a green card causes Biju so much stress that he vomits and cannot sleep (190). His father continues to send him letters telling him to help others who are on their way from Kalimpong. Biju cries when the letters arrive. The mounting stress causes him to grind his teeth in his sleep, and eventually he cracks a tooth. Saeed also faces the problem of family members giving his information to immigrants and thereby making them at least partially his responsibility. He chooses to hide from these people and sees doing so as a survival strategy. We may not agree with his decision, but at least he makes one. Biju’s inaction does no one any good, himself included.

Having had enough, Biju decides to return home to India, which he feels is familiar and makes sense to him. Biju is unique among the immigrant characters because, unlike Saeed and the judge, both of whom see going abroad as a way to better themselves, Biju resists the new culture in which he finds himself and romanticizes India, based mostly on his positive experiences growing up
there. He reminisces about India without remembering any of the problems that prompted his emigration to America in the first place. His romanticized notions of his homeland leave him woefully vulnerable to the reality he finds upon his return, during which revolutionaries rob him of his belongings, strip him down to his underwear, force him to put on a woman’s nightgown, and send dogs to chase him. His story ends with his arrival at the judge’s house, penniless, limping because of his injured knee, and humiliated.

Desai implicitly compares Biju and Saeed to demonstrate how they handle contradictions. The outcomes to which their approaches lead them suggest that Saeed’s way is preferable to Biju’s. Neither character is perfect. Biju’s longing for “clarity of principle,” or solid knowledge, paralyzes him. Saeed pursues his desires without much regard for how doing this contradicts his loyalty to Islam, Zanzibar, or America. While one might want a middle road between these extremes, Saeed obviously comes off better than Biju. As with her presentation of the judge, Desai seems to be saying that not demanding solid knowledge and not being overwhelmed by contradictions produces the best results. In the next section, we will see two characters who desire contradictory things typically without using suppression.

Ambivalence Towards Contradictions

In a strictly psychoanalytic sense, “ambivalence” indicates simultaneously held feelings (typically unconscious) of attraction and repulsion that “derive from a common source and are interdependent” (Rycroft 6). Certainly Desai shows us ambivalence in this sense of the word. Gyan, for example, feels simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by Sai at several points in the novel. Desai also gives us ambivalence in the everyday sense related to “mixed feelings.” In this section, “ambivalence” encompasses both meanings and indicates wanting contradictory things simultaneously without attempting to reconcile the contradiction. Sai and Gyan provide striking examples of wanting to look a certain way and to profess certain beliefs—without disallowing a contradictory position. Characters who maintain rather than suppress contradictions hold worldviews that are necessarily much more difficult to identify confidently than (a) those produced by a rigid system of belief and suppression, such as the judge’s, or (b) a reliance on what one has always believed to be true, as in Biju’s case. Ambivalent worldviews involve more of a bouncing back and forth between beliefs than rigid commitment to either.

Sai provides fairly straightforward examples of ambivalence. The reader will recall that Sai’s parents had traveled to Moscow so that her father might work for the Russian space program. She lived in a convent while they were away. After they were struck and killed by a bus in Russia, Sai goes to live with her grandfather, the judge. While at the convent, Sai was “westernized.” She learned
what the judge’s immigrant experience had taught him: English things are desirable, while Indian things are not. Sai, however, responds to this westernizing very differently from the way that her grandfather had. She does not become an anglophile, despising Indian things and attempting to elevate herself by fashioning an exclusively western identity. She adopts an ambivalent mindset towards her potentially contradictory desires. She wants English but also Indian things. As a result, “[a]ny sense that Sai was taught had fallen between the contradictions, and the contradictions themselves had been absorbed” (30). She became used to a life of seemingly incongruous things, “economics and moral science, highland fling in tartan and Punjabi harvest dance in dhotis, national anthem in Bengali and an impenetrable Latin motto emblazoned on banderoles across” her school uniform’s blazer pocket (30).

Gyan differs from Sai in that he very much wants stability. Much to his frustration, he tends also to notice contradictions very easily. The narrator describes him as “a quiet student of accounting who had thought the act of ordering numbers would soothe him; however, it hadn’t turned out quite like that, and in fact, the more sums he did, the more columns of statistics he transcribed—well, it seemed simply to multiply the number of places at which solid knowledge took off and vanished to the moon” (71).

Gyan’s postcolonial status makes him perhaps the most complicated of the characters and helps us understand why he finds solid knowledge so attractive. He is of Nepalese descent, living in India, and his ancestors fought in the Indian military for the British. His desire for solid knowledge results largely because of his being part of a group oppressed by Bengalis who in turn had been dominated by the English. His heritage, in other words, produces a complex set of sometimes conflicting identities. His desire to escape this complexity and to understand himself more simply greatly contributes to his enthusiasm for and involvement in the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). He joins others with Nepalese backgrounds and welcomes their nationalist fervor as a way of simplifying his postcolonial identity. Protesting the treatment of Gorkhas by Bengalis allows him to feel a sense of belonging and solidity. His awareness of contradictions, though, causes problems for him: “he shouted along with the crowd, and the very mingling of his voice with largeness and lustiness seemed to create a relevancy, an affirmation he’d never felt before [. . . .] Then, looking at the hills, he fell out of the experience again” (157). The affirmation Gyan feels offers him only a momentary reprieve from contradictions. Almost immediately, his skepticism returns. He asks himself, “Were these men entirely committed to the importance of the procession or was there a disconnected quality to what they did? Were they taking their cues from old protest stories or from the hope of telling a new story? Did their hearts rise and fall to something true? Once they shouted, marched, was the feeling authentic?” (157) Gyan’s questioning disconnects him from the crowd and the experience that temporarily affirms his selfhood, even though he wants to be part of the group and feel the way they do.
He enjoys participating in the march and the sense of purpose it gives him, but he doubts the authenticity of the movement. He demonstrates his ambivalence by going along with the movement without suppressing his doubts.

Though Gyan offers us many examples of ambivalence toward contradictions, he uses suppression on occasion as well. Participating in the movement conflicts not just with his skepticism but also with his relationship to Sai. The men involved affect a masculine, Gorkha warrior identity. Someone like Gyan, who finds himself wanting contradictory things, can assume this identity with the other men to feel masculine, affirmed, and quite unambivalent. As the narrator tells us, “Gyan, who had been gathered up accidentally in the procession, who had shouted half facetiously, half in earnest, who had half played, half lived a part, found the fervor had affected him. His sarcasm and his embarrassment were gone” (160). His embarrassment returns in short order, however, when he remembers “his tea parties with Sai on the veranda, the cheese toast, queen cakes from the baker, and even worse, the small warm space they inhabited together, the nursery talk” (161). Trying to suppress the contradiction, “[h]e voiced an adamant opinion that the Gorkha movement take the harshest route possible” (161). Gyan feels shame about the things he does that make this warrior identity a poor fit for him. He recognizes the contradiction in which he finds himself, wanting at once to be a masculine Gorkha warrior and a tea party participant with Sai, and responds by embracing extreme aggression in an attempt to move himself out of this middle position and to align himself clearly with the men around him. In this instance, we see Gyan trying to suppress his fondness for Sai. He continues, however, to have feelings for her and to feel guilty for having those feelings.

Suppression never really works for Gyan. He participates in the movement, but “if truth be told, as the weeks went by, he, Gyan, was scared [ . . . . ] When Chhang and Bhang, Gyan, Owl and Donkey had leaped into jeeps, filled up at the petrol station and driven off without paying, Gyan had been shaking just as much as the pump manager” (260). His participation is an attempt to escape contradictions, which make solid knowledge so difficult to obtain. He wonders to himself, “[H]ow could you have any self-respect knowing that you didn’t believe in anything exactly?” (260) What Gyan really wants is not to be a warrior, but simply to believe in something, to have solid knowledge and thereby to understand himself. He does not see embracing contradictions as a positive thing and is only frustrated by his ambivalence.

The fights between Sai and Gyan illustrate ambivalence particularly well. They have their first big fight after Gyan experiences the “masculine atmosphere” of the GNLF movement and starts trying to perform his new Gorkha warrior identity. Sai tells Gyan about the upcoming Christmas party, and Gyan shouts at her, “Why do you celebrate Christmas? You’re Hindus and you don’t celebrate Id or Guru Nanak’s birthday or even Durga Puja or Dussehra or Tibetan New Year” (163). She responds, “If I want to celebrate Christmas, I will, and if I don’t want
to celebrate Diwali then I won’t. Nothing wrong in a bit of fun and Christmas is an Indian holiday as much as any other” (163). For Gyan, Indians celebrate certain holidays and not Christmas, which to him is necessarily western. For Sai, Indians may celebrate Christmas, which she says is as Indian as other holidays, and Gyan should feel “antisecular and anti-Gandhian” for his rigidity (163). Gyan responds by calling Sai a copycat, a mimic of the West. “It’s clear,” he says, “all you want to do is copy. Can’t think for yourself. Copycat, copycat” (164). His search for solid knowledge breeds loathing for the copycat, which he fears himself to be. After all, Gyan had marched along with others at a rally in which he did not feel he entirely belonged. His desire for authenticity encourages him to distance himself from Sai, who appears unnervingly comfortable with her own contradictions. His acts of distancing differ significantly from the judge’s, however, in that he wants to be with Sai even as he tries to avoid her.

Their second fight takes place when Sai confronts Gyan about ignoring her. They had not been speaking ever since Gyan decided to distance himself from her because she was “a reflection of all the contradictions around her, a mirror that showed him himself far too clearly for comfort” (262). He comes outside, sees her looking at his family’s house with distaste, and becomes very angry. The anger, again, seems to reconcile a contradiction for him: “He had been feeling guilty about his extended silence, was considering returning to see her, but now he knew he was quite right” (257). Sai grows angry, too, when she sees “his thoughts recast his eyes and mouth [: : : : ] Dirty hypocrite. Pretending one thing, living another. Nothing but lies through and through” (257). Sai notices how Gyan changes his expression to suit the anger he thinks he should feel toward her, despite his desire to be around her. Sai detects the contradiction in which Gyan finds himself, his bouncing back and forth between positions, and calls him a hypocrite.

Sai responds to contradictions, though, much the same way that Gyan does. She visits him in the first place because she misses him; but, once she becomes angry at him, she decides she will not “satisfy him by admitting any vulnerability now. Instead she said she had come about Father Booty” (257), her friend who had recently been deported. She draws on her anger about his deportation to match Gyan’s and appear as unambivalent as possible. “‘Look at what you people are doing,’ she accused Gyan” (258), as though he were responsible for the deportation. In truth, she does not really care, at this moment, about why Booty was deported. She says whatever comes to mind to punish Gyan for mistreating her. As the narrator tells us, “[s]he was shocked at herself as she spoke, but in this moment she was willing to believe anything that lay on the other side of Gyan” (258).

At the end of this fight, the narrator describes at length the nature of Gyan and Sai’s ambivalence. They lose the anger that had fueled their fight, and the reasons for their ambivalence become apparent: “Gyan began to giggle, his eyes to soften, and she could see his expression shift. They were falling back
into familiarity, into common ground, into the dirty gray” (259). Without the emotional impetus to oppose each other, they abandon their polarized positions. The narrator characterizes them as “[j]ust ordinary humans [. . . ] 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” (259). Far from clinging to solid knowledge, these characters have half-beliefs; they strategically voice opinions that they do not believe in strongly or at all.

This abandonment of rigid principles and solid knowledge allows Sai and Gyan to desire contradictory things. As the narrator describes the situation, “[c]heese and chocolate they wanted, but also to kick all these bloody foreign things out [. . . ] Every single contradiction history or opportunity might make available to them, every contradiction they were heir to, they desired. But only as much, of course, as they desired purity and a lack of contradiction” (259). They want English and Indian things, authentic and inauthentic identity performance, family and total independence. They even want solid knowledge and contradictions. They bounce back and forth between desires, one taking a dominant position momentarily over another. Rather than relying on suppression to resolve the contradictions, they maintain the contradictions, which make solid knowledge temporary at best. Their worldviews change in relation to whichever desire or position holds dominance at any given time. Gyan and Sai differ primarily in their attitudes towards solid knowledge. Sai sees her flexibility as a positive thing, and she criticizes Gyan for his rigidity. Gyan simultaneously rejects and desires contradictions. He enjoys spending time with Sai but also avoids her when he wants to feel masculine. He desires foreign things but also denounces them. Mostly he just frustrates himself.

To what outcomes do their differing approaches lead them? We have seen that Gyan upsets himself by pursuing solid knowledge despite apparent contradictions. He is most relaxed and happy when he abandons his rigidity and embraces his contradictory desires. When solid knowledge gives him comfort, a reprieve from contradictions, the effect is temporary at best. He rejects Sai to feel properly masculine and adult, but doing so just makes him feel sick with guilt and regret. At the end of the novel, he heads to the judge’s house hoping to redeem himself by making up with Sai. When he arrives, he finds the cook and asks about her. The cook tells him that she cries constantly for the judge’s lost dog (her pretense to mask crying over Gyan). Gyan replies, “Tell her that I will look for Mutt [. . . ] Tell her that I promise. I will find the dog. Don’t worry at all. Be sure and tell her. I will find Mutt and bring her to the house” (314). The narrator comments, “He uttered this sentence with a conviction that had nothing to do with Mutt or his ability to find her” (314). He just wants to please Sai. He hopes that by making her happy, she will forgive him. Like the judge, Gyan has wronged people close to him in his pursuit of solid knowledge, for what the
judge called “false ideals.” Similarly, he seeks redemption by opening himself up to contradictions.

Sai experiences fewer problems than Gyan does. Having spent most of the novel obsessing over him, she experiences a revelation: “Her crying, enough for all the sadness in the world, was only for herself. Life wasn’t single in its purpose . . . or even in its direction. . . . The simplicity of what she’d been taught wouldn’t hold” (322–3). Earlier in the novel, when Gyan apologized for rejecting her the first time, Sai had come to the upsetting realization that she was not the center of Gyan’s universe, just a part of it (175). She suppressed that thought in the midst of their reconciliation. Now, however, she makes a fundamental change in her worldview: “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” (323). Sai goes far beyond simply eschewing solid knowledge. She begins to think of herself in relation to other people, rather than as a center around which they revolve. She recognizes that she is part of a larger story, not the subject of it. In the end, she feels “a glimmer of strength. Of resolve” (323). She thinks about her father’s, the judge’s, and Biju’s travels abroad and suddenly desires to leave Kali[mpong on her own journey (323). Unlike Gyan, who ends the novel anxious, seeking redemption, and riddled with guilt, Sai experiences a breakthrough, feels empowered, and decides to set off on an adventure.

Flexibility and Adaptability as Positives

The implicit comparisons that Desai arranges demonstrate that those who insist upon solid knowledge suffer repeated misery and misfortune, while those unbothered by contradictions do not. Biju worries himself sick, cracks a tooth, seriously injures his leg, lives in terrible poverty, is robbed (twice), and finally returns home with nothing. The judge spends his entire adult life miserable and bitter, pushing away and abusing anyone who might care for him; his companion Mutt is stolen from him; and ultimately he cannot even hold on to the “false ideals” for which he sacrificed so much. Saeed and Sai, the two characters least interested in solid knowledge, pursue what they want without worrying about how doing so might violate their beliefs. Both tend to reinterpret broad defining categories in ways that suit them. Saeed does not consider himself disloyal to Islam because of his marriage of convenience any more than Sai thinks of herself as western for celebrating Christmas. Saeed succeeds in New York precisely because contradictions do not bother him. We have every reason to believe that, should Sai actually venture abroad, she would fare equally well. Gyan sometimes behaves like the judge and Biju—and other times like Sai and Saeed. He feels upset and experiences hardships as a result of trying to establish and maintain solid knowledge. When he embraces contradictions, he fares much
better and feels more at ease. By presenting multiple approaches together, Desai shows us a range of possibilities. The outcomes to which these approaches lead the characters tell us how to evaluate them. Because the method used by Sai and Saeed clearly produces the best results, we can deduce that Desai prefers their lack of desire for solid knowledge. After all, both the judge and Gyan approach redemption by opening themselves up to contradictions.

An important question arises regarding agency. Are the characters products of external forces acting upon them—their communities, the particular historical moment in which they live, etc.—or do they choose the mindsets they adopt? The answer appears to be a combination of both. Saeed certainly thinks people have a choice. He strongly encourages Biju to change the way he thinks and to accept change. Sai seems to do likewise with Gyan, challenging him to recognize the contradictions in which he finds himself and not to see them as problems. She also resists becoming an anglophile who despises Indian culture like the judge, who also demonstrates a degree of agency, actively maintaining his staunch rigidity and suppressing his own potential for change.

That said, the characters’ backgrounds definitely influence how they handle contradictions. The judge was never especially fond of Indian culture, even before emigrating to England. His decision to adopt an English identity stems mostly from a desire to distinguish himself from others in his community. Biju appears to have felt much more comfortable in India than the judge. Despite his interactions with Saeed, who succeeded in Zanzibar and America, Biju rejects assimilation in favor of returning to an idealized homeland. Neither the judge nor Biju achieved social or financial success abroad, and both created exaggerated, rigid identities for themselves—either pure English or Indian—as a way of staving off the unnerving complexity of being a postcolonial person forced into contact with cultures in conflict. We see Gyan engaging in exactly this kind of search for pure identity when he joins the GNLF and also when he shuns Sai. That movement, occurring in the 1980s, greatly exacerbated Gyan’s struggle for solid knowledge by forcing him to recognize the complexity of his heritage and the unnerving extent to which “western” things had become part of who he is. He attempts to eschew those aspects of his identity that he sees as impure but finds doing so not just undesirable but impossible. Sai’s family background helps her avoid the same crises of identity that Gyan faces. She reflects and is mostly at ease with the contradictions surrounding her because she is a westernized Indian who embraces both her Indian and western heritage.

Desai contributes to debates about postcolonial/immigrant agency and identity in *The Inheritance of Loss* by advocating neither the preservation of cultural distinctiveness nor assimilation, but rather ambivalence and flexibility—what we might call a “radical postcolonial sensibility.” She shows that the real issue facing postcolonial and immigrant people is not whether they should assimilate but how clinging to cultural certitude leads to disaster. In the course of the novel, she consistently presents relative success and failure in terms of how the
characters adapt in response to experiences that confound their expectations and prejudices when cultures are brought into conflict. She sees both assimilation and determination to preserve cultural authenticity as attempts to produce solid knowledge and hence ultimately as exercises in self-delusion. As the stories of the judge and Biju show us, neither approach offers the possibility of coming to a positive outcome. For Desai, ambivalence does.2

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NOTES

1. The standard theoretical text on cultural hybridity is Homi K. Bhabha’s The Location of Culture. See Robert J. C. Young for a contextual and historical approach to cultural hybridity. For a useful presentation of Bhabha’s theory of hybridity, see Monika Fludernik.

2. For helpful comments on a previous draft of this essay, I would like to thank Kathryn Hume, Robert D. Hume, Ashley Marshall, and Catherine Merla Watson.

WORKS CITED


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