

Cultural  
transcendence in the  
inheritance of loss  
and clear light of day



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Both *The Inheritance of Loss* and *Clear Light of Day* feature characters who either identify with cultures other than their own, or attempt to cope with cultural differences while living abroad. Using themes such as education and migration, Kiran and Anita Desai demonstrate how an individual can feel displaced as a migrant or within one's own country. However, both authors also explain how culture and the concept of home can transcend geographic boundaries.

The loss of culture is depicted early in *The Inheritance of Loss*. It's revealed in the opening chapter that Sai has "no idea how to properly make tea... the Indian way," since she only knows "the English way" (Desai 6). Sai inherits this loss from her grandfather, Jemubahi who becomes isolated from his own cultural heritage through education. As a young man, he leaves India to attend Cambridge University, where he attempts to fit in with the British students. Although Jemubahi grew up in the 1930's when Gandhi held his salt marches, these protests against imperialism had no lasting impact on him during his formative years. At Cambridge, he feels humiliated that his English "still had the rhythm and the form of Gujerati" (112) when asked to recite poetry.

To compensate for this perceived shortcoming, Jemubahi continues to mimic Englishness, even as a judge. Upon returning to India, he considers himself a foreigner with "only his digestion" to remind him otherwise in the outhouse. Even in this moment of humility, he yells "bloody hell," while musing that his digestive system is as "efficient as western transportation" (167).

Jemubahi uses a powder puff to make his skin appear lighter, thus rejecting his ethnicity as well as his culture.

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Biju also feels displaced while living in New York City, but he reaches a radically different conclusion than Jemubahi. In “Displacement of Desire in Kiran Desai’s *Inheritance of Loss*,” Umme Salma explains how Biju appreciates Indian culture more after living in the United States, and “comes back enticed by a romantic vision of a homely Kalimpong, only to be robbed of all possessions except the last scrap of cloth on his body” (Salma 123). She argues that this shatters the “fantasy of a homely homeland as illusory,” suggesting that colonialism leaves people feeling homeless wherever they go. Salma argues that the “concept of home” is fluid throughout the novel, and Elizabeth Jackson echoes this concept in “Globalization, Diaspora, and Cosmopolitanism in Kiran Desai’s *Inheritance of Loss*.”

Jackson discusses how Biju is surprised to learn from his co-workers “that there are Indians all over the world.” Rather than focusing on the idea of Biju’s displacement, Jackson argues that “he belongs to a global South Asian diaspora with a long history,” which “unsettles [Biju’s] ideas about his own identity” (Jackson 32). She quotes the Guyanese man who “assures him that there are Indians everywhere,” in places such as Guam, Kenya, New Zealand, and Surinam. Furthermore, she discusses how Biju encounters migrants from Pakistan in New York, where he still considers him a “traditional enemy.” This demonstrates the idea that cultural allegiances and prejudices are defined by more than borders in a globalized society.

This challenge’s Salma’s idea that colonialism has left Biju without a home, suggesting that Biju’s tragedy isn’t his cultural homelessness. Instead, it’s his romanticized idea of Kalimpong that keeps him from coping with post-  
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colonial India. Biju and Jemubahi represent two polar extremes of cultural identity. While Biju feels nostalgia for an iteration of Kalimpong he's never experienced, Jemubahi becomes an Uncle Tom figure who identifies with his former colonizer more than his homeland. Both choose to live in the past, rather than embracing a modern Indian identity which includes colonialism and migration as part of its history.

These themes reappear in *Clear Light of Day* through Raja's fascination with the Urdu language. The same language that created barriers in Jemubahi's courtroom creates a parallel between these characters. Like Jemubahi, Raja values education, is interested in British poetry, and identifies more strongly with an outside culture. Prior to the Partition, Raja decides to study Urdu over Hindi because of his interest in poetry. He considers Urdu a "language of great pedigree," and romanticizes its role as the "court language in the days of the Muslim and Moghul rulers" (Desai 47). Raja's father won't allow him to attend school in Pakistan, explaining that "Hindus and Muslims alike would be out for [his] blood," (52) since the Muslims wouldn't trust him and the Hindus would feel they were deserted in favor of the enemy.

Leila Essa compares the partition of India and Pakistan to that of East and West Germany in "Partition in the Private Sphere: Family Narratives as Vehicles for the Trauma of National History in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and Irina Liebmann's *Die freien Frauen*." In this article, she argues that "the microcosm of familial relationships" is being used "as a vessel for the narration of national history" (Essa 489) in Desai's novel. With this in mind, Raja's fascination with the Urdu language may be less of a commentary on cultural displacement and more of a metaphor for the fracturing of India.

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Essa notes the “ failure of communication” in the Das family, which “ represents the partition of families” (491) as an allegory for the partition of states. Either way, this still acknowledges the legacy of imperialism in India that began before the British arrived, allowing Desai to depict British colonialism as yet another empire that displaces the people of India.

Still, *Clear Light of Day* offers a more optimistic view of identity than *The Inheritance of Loss*. Even though Raja leaves his family for Hyderabad, Tara eventually forgives him. This suggests that the family unit is the foundation of identity, which can transcend political turmoil. Between these two novels, it's clear that colonialism and other sociopolitical conflicts can lead an individual to feel isolated from their heritage. But diaspora communities and the family unit are ways to cope with the results of colonialism.

## **Works Cited**

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