

The inheritance of loss: a struggle with cultural identity



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Throughout Karen Desai's novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, the Judge's westernization and Indian resentment amplify during his studies in England despite confronting both internal and external facets of racism. In postcolonial India, the English were perceived to be highly educated and wealthy which appealed to young adults struggling with their placement in the caste system. This was the case for the Judge, who excelled at school and was able to study abroad in England. While fueling his ego, his travels further perpetuates his longing to be superior, to be English. This double consciousness drives him away from his family and alienates him from the English – creating friction with his sense belonging.

The Judge's animosity toward his own cultural identity stems long before his life in England. The Judge's bitterness toward his father, "...a barely educated man," (42) left him feeling defeated by the caste system. There was no possibility for mobility but a Western education could inflate his importance and reputation. The Judge realizes that the more Western he appears the better he would be treated; thusly, cheating the effects of the caste system. The Judge's newly romanticized thoughts on England gives him hope and allows him to set goals that would allow him to live in England in the future. However, the longer the Judge stays in India the more his resentment grows because he is not where he wants to be. This strains his home life and separates him from his father, whom he is embarrassed about because he has no interest in the West. The Judge's preconceived notion of England will have an impact on his life and how he views Indian and English culture once he has experienced it first hand.

While living in England, the Judge's character and thoughts shift when he witnesses poverty and experiences discrimination. Nonetheless, his resentment toward India runs deeper. Once the Judge arrives in England he is, "...amazed by the sights that greeted him..." (44) but he "...hadn't realized that here, too, people could be poor and live unaesthetic lives," (44). This is an important aspect of this character's thought progression because he is saying that although he was not impressed, it was still better than India. The Judge would rather experience slight racism in England than be at ease in his native country. After a little time in England, this begins to weigh on the Judge and he becomes unhomed, the "...feeling of being caught between cultures...to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself..." (Tyson 5). He realizes that he does not belong in England, not because he does not wish to be there, but because he is Indian. Not being accepted as an Indian in England or a Westernized, educated man in India, the Judge faces inner conflict about his cultural identity because in both places he does not fit in. This unhomeliness causes further self hatred by the Judge, "...he grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar," (45). He became self-conscious in his own body and was aware of how other people saw him. In India, people looked up to him because he was intelligent but in England he was only seen as a foreigner. Although the Judge yearns to be in England, his glorification leads to disappointment and a negative outlook on life in India.

Upon returning to India, the Judge's newfound unhomeliness and previous embarrassment toward his ethnic background and family, intensifies greatly.

A parallel can be drawn between the changes in the Judge's attitude toward India and when Desai only refers to the Judge as Jemu when talking about his time during and prior to his visit to England. This further instills the Westernization of the Judge as a person and as a character in the novel. As Jemu assimilates to Western culture he becomes the Judge, in the same way that his assimilation causes him to hate his native country. At first, Indian sentiment only irritated the Judge but after his trip to England he felt much more hostility, " He envied the English. He loathed the Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred..." (131). He could never shake the unhomely feeling and it began to affect his behavior. He loses the ability to make human connections; with virtually no family or friends, his social skills deplete. Devoid of joy and personal fulfillment, the Judge struggles with his marriage and the ability to love any human being. Although the Judge enjoyed his time in England, it left him to be a bitter curmudgeon in the end. Despite remaining resentful and disappointed in his poor, uneducated family, the Judge's attitude toward himself and his cultural identity shift throughout the novel. Although becoming Westernized was very important to the Judge, once in England, a sense of unhomeliness took over. In reality, the Judge did not belong in England and he did not want to belong in India. Culturally, he was homeless and alone whereas before he was just ashamed of his Indian heritage. From the Judge's journey to England and back, his hatred toward India escalates until he becomes a disgruntled, old man incapable of human compassion.

Works Cited

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