

# Heritage and Ruptures in Indian Literature, Culture and Cinema



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Edited by

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and Michel Naumann

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## INTRODUCTION

In the postcolonial theoretical framework, the study of heritage and ruptures is a rather familiar paradigm. But it is not a depleted one. Given the millennial history of the Indian subcontinent and the plurality of its culture, the way its languages, literatures and arts appropriate the past, grasp the present and envisage the future remains a relevant object of inquiry.

While a patrimonial and conservative perspective, with its backward-looking cult of heritage, views heritage as pertaining to affiliation, preservation, enrichment, claiming and transmission, the logic of capitalism requires the commoditized availability of the vestiges of a heritage. Such a yearning, at the heart of conservative nostalgia, has given rise to a “sentimental” form of capitalism in which dispossession is masked as urban revitalization.<sup>1</sup> The alternative logic of “creative-destruction” is involved in the process of liquidating it.

As early as 1921 T.S. Eliot warned that tradition did not boil down to “following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes” and that it was, in fact, a “matter of much wider significance” because it “involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence.” He wanted us to accept the idea that “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.”<sup>2</sup>

Jacques Derrida taught us in 1993 that inheritance might also be taken to include not only what it means in an unequivocal way but also what it “enjoins, in a way that is *contradictory and contradictorily* binding.” He contended that heritage is an active and selective affirmation that can sometimes be revived and reasserted much more by illegitimate heirs than by legitimate ones. If Derrida’s conceptualization bears the imprint of Marxism, the question he raised “How to respond to, how to feel

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<sup>1</sup> Dia Da Costa, “Sentimental Capitalism in Contemporary India: Art, Heritage and Development in Ahmedabad, Gujarat,” *Antipode* 47-1 (2015): 74-97.

<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 1920 essay reproduced in <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237868>, Consulted January 29, 2016.

responsible for a heritage that hands you down contradictory orders?"<sup>3</sup> can nevertheless be transposed to the postcolonial situation and studied in the light of new vistas thus opened.

From the crossroads of diachronicity and synchronicity, tradition and modernity, singularity and solidarity, here and elsewhere, repetition and reinvention, the fourteen articles presented in the volume show how multiple heritages are and were negotiated in the Indian subcontinent. Modernism is a key concept that runs through many of them. With regard to the Indian novel in English, the locus, at least initially, of the tension between modernism, perceived as a Eurocentric enterprise, and tradition, preserved as a repository of immutable cultural heritage, was not the city, but rather the small town, emblemized by Malgudi, the cultural space imagined by R.K. Narayan. Ludmila Volná's study of four novels of R.K. Narayan (Chapter 7) brings this out in very clear terms. Rada Iveković's theoretical considerations (Chapter 14) stem from a broader scope, as she retraces the quarrel between the ancient and the modern from a historical and international perspective to show how gender becomes an incontrovertible operator in the negotiation between heritage and rupture. The interconnection and interdependence between the two concepts are such that it is difficult to obtain a fine balance between them. In other words, finding the centre, to borrow an image from V.S. Naipaul, is one of the existential preoccupations of the postcolonial.

R. Azhagarasan's reading of the Tamil Buddhist epic *Manimekalai* (Chapter 8) confirms Rada Iveković's findings about gender, in the sense that it argues that the author Cattamar used the courtesan's female voice to develop a polemic within Buddhism. Writing from the cross-roads of literature and culture, R. Azhagarasan recalls the debate between Buddhist heterodoxy and Brahmin orthodoxy in Tamil Nadu (from 3d to 19th Centuries AD) and throws light on the contemporary debate on the situation of the Dalits through this return to the classical but neglected epic. The appropriation of Indian heritage by the Hastings circle in the form of Orientalism is studied by Madhu Jain Benoit (Chapter 9). She argues that while enabling India to lay claims to her ancient past by breaking down Western neo-classical paradigms, the Hastings circle put India in a time warp, owing to the colonial constructs which were emerging at that time. Belkacem Belmekki highlights Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's endeavours to promote peaceful relations between Hindus and Christians after the Sepoy

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Marx and Sons," in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's "Specters of Marx,"* ed. Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), 219.

Mutiny in 1858 by invoking their common theological roots. Because he was intimately convinced that such a rapprochement was indeed a political necessity for the survival of the Muslims, Khan strove to make the common heritage a shared one (Chapter 10). Shruti Das also refers to colonial history in order to explain linguistic regionalism in contemporary Myanmar. Hers is a short introduction to Myanmar literature in English and Myanmar literature translated into English (Chapter 11).

A number of articles in the volume focus on Bengal. Evelyne Hanquart Turner's reading of the Forsterian intertext of *Howards End* in Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (Chapter 4) transposes Wilfred Stone's question to the Bengali context: "Who shall inherit Bengal?" The fact that a homeless orphan with tribal roots ends up as the beneficiary of two estates in two opposite parts of Bengal at the conclusion of the novel illustrates how the miracle of love makes justice prevail in a world of capitalist greed. Geetha Ganapathy-Doré's exploration of family, geography and ideology in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Low Land* (Chapter 6) straddles the Bengal of the 1970s when the Naxalbari revolt was challenging the postcolonial government and the postideological America of the 1990s. She identifies the moment of the transmission of property, whole or divided, to be a crucial one which tests the endurance of family bonds. Her article emphasizes the necessity of transgenerational solidarity for transnational families to stand. Jitka de Préal takes up a classic of Indian cinema based on Sarath Chandra Chatterjee's Bengali novel, i.e., *Devdas* and interprets the metamorphosis of the visual depiction of his character by different directors as a reflection of the reshaping of the Indian man through the pressures of colonization, independence, and globalization. *Devdas* thus becomes a sign recording the progressive transformation of the Bengali into the globalized Indian, in her view (Chapter 12).

The question of heritage and rupture is more acutely felt in diasporic contexts. While the migrants try to retrieve the heritage through the revival of certain cultural practices or the reconstruction of ethnoscaples and by returning to their origins, their children are lost between the culture inherited from their parents and the culture of the host country in which they are born and raised. Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru sees a parallel between the Kureishian hero's trajectory of healing and the liminal multicultural space that London has become (Chapter 2). Celia Wallhead adopts an object-oriented analysis of Kiran *Desai's An Inheritance of Loss*, taking her clue from Henry James's idea of the solidity of specification, Baudrillard's object systems and Bill Brown's thing theory (Chapter 1). Ahmed Mulla examines the problematic of dual heritage in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* and her short story "Hema and Kaushik"

(Chapter 5). Lahiri's female protagonists are not passive receivers of an inherited culture or puzzled onlookers of a foreign culture. They are, he claims, better regarded as discerning and critical negotiators. He sees a sense of mutuality at work in their cultural choices. Caroline Trech analyzes the politics and aesthetics of British Asian heritage in two films written by Ayub-Khan-Din *East is East* and *West is West*, directed respectively by Damien O'Donnell and Andy De Emmony (Chapter 13).

Heritages are not always glorious. Is it possible to escape a shameful and deadly legacy such as rape and incest? Does rupture in the form of parricide mean definitive escape? Tina Harpin's comparative study (Chapter 3) of *Bitter Fruit*, the novel of the South African writer Achmat Dangor, and *Cereus Blooms at Night* by the Caribbean writer Shani Mootoo shows how "transmission is complicated in a world of willing or unwilling encounters and migrations."<sup>4</sup> The plant metaphors employed by the authors in the titles leaves room to place one's hopes for a possible future in creolization, she concludes.

As Eugène Ionesco put it,

... in the history of art and of thought there has always been at every living moment of culture a 'will to renewal.' This is not the prerogative of the last decade only. All history is nothing but a succession of 'crises', of rupture, repudiation and resistance. When there is no crisis, there is stagnation, petrification and death.<sup>5</sup>

Cornelius Crowley, Geetha Ganapathy-Doré and Michel Naumann  
Paris, 2016.

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<sup>4</sup> Tina Harpin, *supra*, 71.

<sup>5</sup> Carol A. Dingle ed., *Memorable Quotations: Jewish Writers of the Past* (New York: iUniverse Ink, 2003), unpaginated.



# LITERATURE



## CHAPTER ONE

### THREE GENERATIONS OF MIGRANCY IN KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*: THE FOCUS ON MATERIAL THINGS

CELIA WALLHEAD

#### On inheritance

*The Inheritance of Loss* (2006),<sup>1</sup> Kiran Desai's second novel, won the Man Booker Prize for that year, as well as the National Book Critics Circle Award. Set in 1986 in Kalimpong, "high in the northeastern Himalayas" (9), its central character is a seventeen-year-old Indian girl, Sai, who has been orphaned and has gone to live with her maternal grandfather, a retired judge. Taking her out of her mission school, the judge struggles to complete her education in English, and her family and social life turns around the locals - middle-class Anglo-Indians like her grandfather. But she spends much of her time with, or thinking about, Gyan, her young tutor in maths and science, and talks most familiarly with the cook, whose name we never learn - his son Biju addresses him as Pitaji. The cook got his position working for the judge through false papers his father bought for him (63), and his greatest interest in life is to receive letters from his son, who has emigrated to the United States and has to move from job to job as he has no papers at all (3). Yet there is a rupture between Sai and the cook, and it is not only a question of class:

He was ill at ease and so was she, something about their closeness being exposed in the end as fake, their friendship composed of shallow things conducted in a broken language, for she was an English-speaker and he

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<sup>1</sup> All the quotations of Kiran Desai's novel are from the Penguin edition published in 2006.

was a Hindu-speaker. The brokenness made it easier never to go deep [...]" (19)

We see the importance of having identification papers and personal and professional references both in India and the United States; they are so important that they can make the difference between abject poverty, survival, and "getting on in the world". Such papers can even be inherited, as we learn that the cook "even had a rival for the position, a man who appeared with tattered recommendations inherited from his father and grandfather to indicate a lineage of honesty and good service" (63). That these papers were by now tattered, had served three generations, and may even have been falsified or bought, as with the cook himself, does not say much for the true honesty and reliability of he who has inherited them.

But then the concept of inheritance is questionable and ironic anyway. The irony is evident from the beginning of the story in the title. Normally, we inherit something of worth, not a loss of something. But as the generations go by, that desirable commodity or set of values or piece of wisdom (as it need not be material) may have got lost, and that loss may be perpetuated and still felt. The desirable thing is remembered. Thus the importance of memory cannot be undervalued. That is what museums are for: to conserve material things reminiscent of worthy (or deemed interesting, if unworthy) aspects of the past. An important example in the novel is the conquest of Mt. Everest in 1953. In the Darjeeling Museum, which Sai and Gyan visit, they see the material possessions of Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, they constitute his legacy: "his hat, ice pick, rucksack, samples of dehydrated foods that he might have taken along, Horlicks, torches [...]" (154). The material things (note the English Horlicks drink, brought to India by the British Army after the First World War) are part of his identity, his memory; these real, material things "authenticate" the fictional ones. The underside of his legacy is the unjust part, in that he was "merely" the Sherpa who carried the bags of Sir Edmund Hillary, the world-acclaimed conqueror of Everest. Without Tenzing, the New-Zealander would never have made it to the top, so he is the unsung hero. He was not knighted, made a "Sir" as the others were. The added irony and injustice is that of the "colonial enterprise of sticking your flag on what was not yours." (155)

### **First, Second, and Third Spaces**

The omniscient narrator takes us into the mind of Sai at the beginning of the story as she contemplates the negativity of her own solitude as an

orphan, taken out of the school, the only "home" she knew: "Could fulfilment ever be felt as deeply as loss?" (2) This may appear to be a rhetorical question, but it is really a very serious philosophical hypothesis that Desai would like us to contemplate, though in the end it may be impossible to make generalisations, and the answer may lie in the individual and his or her experience. In the novel, she offers the reader some examples that can be compared and contrasted.

The polyphonic multicultural diversity of Desai's story is built upon binary opposites: West and East, the local resident and the migrant, wealth and poverty, fulfilment and loss (and the power play is usually weighted in this order), but the binaries are not stable. Sai is neither fully Indian nor British, and both the school and her grandfather's house are ambivalent sites. There is poverty too in the West; the migrant does not usually find an El Dorado. When "Jemu," the young law student, went to Cambridge, as he looks for cheap lodgings offered by someone who will take on an Indian: "It took him by surprise because he'd expected only grandness, hadn't realized that here, too, people could be poor and live unaesthetic lives" (38).

It is in these interstices that Desai manifests the complications inherent in any identity, not only that of a migrant, and the error of taking a simplistic view. In his article "'Solid Knowledge' and Contradictions in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*,"<sup>2</sup> David Wallace Spielman argues that in the novel the author "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."<sup>3</sup> The judge and Biju, his cook's son, would fall into the first category, where with their "solid knowledge", a term Wallace points to throughout the novel, they suppress contradictions, while Sai and her tutor Gyan have a better future through their flexibility or ambivalence in the face of alternative choices.<sup>4</sup> He concludes that Desai "sees both assimilation and determination to preserve cultural authenticity as attempts to produce solid knowledge, and hence ultimately as exercises in self-delusion."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David Wallace Spielman, "'Solid Knowledge' and Contradictions in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*," *Critique* 51 (2010): 74–89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

In her realization of the complexity of the context we may find ourselves in, the place in which we live in relation to who we are, Desai follows the ideas on space and place set out by Homi Bhabha, among others. It was Benedict Anderson, of course, who first explained how nations are “imagined communities,” because people “imagine” they share general beliefs and attitudes. They cannot know all the people in their nation, but they recognize a collective national populace as sharing opinions and sentiments.

The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.<sup>6</sup>

The word elastic is important, but still, some scholars contend that Anderson’s analyses assume too much homogeneity across certain regions. And India, in all its diversity, would be one such region.

Homi K. Bhabha was born in 1949 into an English and Gujarati speaking Parsi family in the newly independent India:

Parsis, a minority of Persian descent, were instrumental in the emergence of an urban middle class in nineteenth-century Imperial India and, in this capacity, often functioned as mediators between the Indians and the British. Because of their dispersion, Parsis live in small clusters in a number of different host cultures, they derive their cultural cohesion partly from their Zoroastrian faith and partly from a negotiation of their host cultures’ traits. Thus, Parsis offer a striking example of the hybridised, cosmopolitan minorities at the centre of Bhabha’s work; indeed, Bhabha has often linked his intellectual preoccupations to the specificity of his origins.<sup>7</sup>

As Constantina Papoulias explains:

Bhabha’s early essays [...] contained a double challenge to the understanding of colonial identity formations. On the one hand, they involved the claim that Western discourses of Othering inevitably become fractured and split at the point of their application, and that it is precisely these applications that enabled the resistance of the colonised. [...] If the coloniser becomes a split, ambivalent figure, then so does the colonised:

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, revised edition 2006), 7 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>7</sup> Constantina Papoulias, “Homi K. Bhabha” in *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*, ed. Phil Hubbard & Rob Kitchin (London, Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), 69.

the latter possesses no authentic self beneath the mask of mimicry bequeathed by the coloniser. Therefore, any political resistance to colonial rule has to be understood not as the oppressed population's straightforward rejection of the coloniser's legacy, but rather as a much more ambiguous process in which that legacy is both refused and desired.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Bhabha rejected binary thinking, arguing that the dual category paradigm did not accommodate the complex dynamics of negotiation "through which displaced populations make sense of their lives across contesting cultural values and traditions."<sup>9</sup> Bhabha came up with the term "third space," by which he refers to locations where people share practices but a single culture does not dominate. He proposed that "identities are inevitably hybridised, because the spaces of social life are formed through a *rupturing* of boundaries and through flows of illicit border traffic."<sup>10</sup> In her article "Disjuncture and Diaspora in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*," Oana Sabo has this to say about diaspora in the novel:

Recent uses of the term, however, have moved from the notion of diaspora as an alternative paradigm for the nation, and from a preoccupation with the construction of diasporic identities as culturally hybrid, to the idea that diaspora entails lived and embodied experiences of diasporic subjects and communities, which are predicted on factors such as class, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and sexuality. Kiran Desai extends this model of diaspora by exploring the material conditions that have given rise to transnational flows of people, as well as the ways in which diasporic identities are lived and experienced in the context of global capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

An example of this Third Space in Desai's novel that involves illegal flows of diasporic individuals that form both heterogenic and homogenic communities is the literal space beneath the Gandhi Café in New York, where Biju goes to live in order to be with other Hindus and to not have to sell beef burgers. The proprietor, his employer, like so many unassimilated migrants, lives a divided life:

Harish-Harry –the two names, Biju was learning, indicated a deep rift that he hadn't suspected when he first walked in and found him, a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 72, emphasis in the text.

<sup>11</sup> Oana, Sabo, "Disjuncture and Diaspora in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*," *The Journal of Commonwealth Studies* 47.3 (2012): 376.

manifestation of that clarity of principle which Biju was seeking. That support for a cow shelter was in case the Hindu version of the afterlife turned out to be true and that, when he died, he was put through the Hindu machinations of the beyond. What, though, if other gods sat upon the throne? He tried to keep on the right side of power, tried to be loyal to so many things that he himself couldn't tell which one of his selves was the authentic one, if any. (147–8)

As she depicts Third Spaces, whether they are in New York or Moscow, or even within parts of India, Desai quite often focuses upon details, material things, that a person cherishes or misses if he or she loses them, for they are part of their sense of being.

In the epigraph from Jorge Luis Borges's poem "Boast of Quietness", at the beginning, there are a few very significant lines:

My humanity is in feeling we are all voices of the same poverty.  
 They speak of homeland.  
 My homeland is the rhythm of a guitar, a few portraits, an old sword [...]  
 Time is living me. [...]  
 My name is someone and anyone.

Borges is speaking for all of us and saying our identity is built up over time, accumulating memories through our senses, sight, touch, and hearing in particular. The identity of the migrant is contained in memories that are centred upon our cultural heritage (here, the guitar), our family, our ancestors, through portraits or photographs, and certain fairly arbitrary material things that happen to have come down us, here, the old sword. In fact, in the novel, there is much emphasis on the other two senses, those of smell and taste, not surprisingly, since Desai has chosen to focus upon members of the underclass who happen to be cooks, the cook and his son in America. There is much contrast of food in the different places. But in this study, I want to concentrate on those material objects that make up the identities of the main characters.

In his critical piece "The Art of Fiction," Henry James spoke of the importance of the "solidity of specification" or the evocation of the concrete:

The air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel—the merit on which all its other merits (including the conscious moral purpose [...]) helplessly and submissively depend. (1884).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *Longman's Magazine* 4 September 1884. Reprinted in *Partial Portraits* (London: MacMillan, 1888). Accessed March 8,



James also remarked upon an occasional excess of information, an over-abundance of things specified, which attracts attention and prompts the reader to wonder why so many items are named and to what purpose. He is referring to the faithfulness to life in realist fiction, and one of the main aspects of this faithfulness to life is its use as a tool in the creation of convincing characters with an identity of their own. In her introduction to *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories* A.S. Byatt also speaks of the excess of information as a tool for attracting the curiosity of the reader<sup>13</sup> and indicates how “solidity of specification” (xix) contributes to the success of a given story: “the drama depends on the thinginess of things.”<sup>14</sup> It is not surprising that she chose Virginia Woolf’s “Solid Objects” to be part of the collection, and indeed, Bill Brown has written on the Modernists’ fixation with material objects and kitsch in his “The Secret Life of Things: Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism” (1999), pointing out that this culture of material things and commodities of the first decades of the twentieth century was “reinvigorated”<sup>15</sup> at the end of the century.

### The first generation: the judge

Born into a poor family in Piphit in Gujarat, Jemubhai Patel won a scholarship to Cambridge, just as Kiran Desai’s grandfather had done. After he retired from the judiciary back in India, in which he had often been itinerant, he settled in Kalimpong, buying a house, Cho Oyu, which had been built by a Scotsman and named after the nearby mountain, meaning “Turkish Goddess” in Tibetan (and apparently based on a mansion owned in Kalimpong by Desai’s aunt). The great variety of languages and cultures in India, as well as his acculturation in England, make him feel out of place in his own country, though it was decades since he had had a place he could call home: “The judge could live here, in this shell, this skull, with the solace of being a foreigner in his own country, for this time he would not learn the language.” (29). Neither did he have a family, since he lost both his wife and his daughter, and his granddaughter

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2015 at: [www.public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/artfiction.html](http://www.public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/artfiction.html). (Library of America ed.)

<sup>13</sup> A.S. Byatt, *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xviii.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Bill Brown, “The Secret Life of Things: Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism,” *Modernism and Modernity* 6 (1999): 13.

was being educated in a Catholic boarding school, where the sisters believed “English was better than Hindi.” (30) He wants to appear whiter: “His face seemed distanced by what looked like white powder over dark skin” (33). He disowns what he is and this is insisted upon, as the young tutor Gyan says:

How glad he would be if he could get a proper job and leave that fussy pair, Sai and her grandfather with the fake English accent and the face powdered pink and white over dark brown. [...] he leaped smoothly to a description of the house, the guns on the wall, and a certificate from Cambridge that they didn’t even know to be ashamed of. (176)

His nearest neighbours are Uncle Potty, “a gentleman farmer” and Father Booty of the Swiss dairy, as well as two sisters, Noni and Lola, whose daughter Pixie is a BBC reporter. None of them identify themselves, their interests, or their desires, with India. Noni and Lola are only satisfied if they have to hand their English products:

But Lola was too dizzy to listen. Her suitcases were stuffed with Marmite, Oxo bouillon cubes, Knorr soup packets, After Eights, daffodil bulbs, and renewed supplies of Boots cucumber lotion and Marks and Spencer underwear –the essence, quintessence, of Englishness as she understood it. Surely the queen donned this superior hosiery [...] (46-47).

Noni and Lola are protected at night by Budhoo, a Nepalese-Indian retired army man, and hearing about the theft of the judge’s guns, Lola fears that if they upset Budhoo, he might run off with “her BBC radio and her silver cake knife” (127), so they could no longer listen to *To the Manor Born* and *Yes, Minister* (45), their favourite English series. Not surprisingly, the people of Kalimpong were rather upset by the negative view of the place given by Desai, especially the Nepalese-Indians.

Desai uses the phrase “superior hosiery” to point to Noni and Lola’s snobbery. While one doubts whether Queen Elizabeth wears Marks and Spencer’s knickers, they consider them not so much as value for money, as most people do, but as worthy of posh ladies, and can imagine the Queen wearing them, and thus, they adore them. This weighted attitude towards material things, this relation of affect between a person and a thing instead of a mere treatment of the thing as endowed with no more than its empirical function, was explained by Jean Baudrillard in the 1960s. His work on the consumer society was set out in his 1966 doctoral thesis “Le Système des objets,” under the direction of Henri Lefebvre, and further developed in his 1972 book *Pour une critique de l’économie*

*politique du signe*.<sup>16</sup> His main thesis is that the new base for the social order is consumption rather than production. Drawing upon the Structuralist ideas on the Theory of the Sign of Saussure and Roland Barthes, Baudrillard showed how the consumer is driven more by the sign than by the object itself, that is, what the object signifies to him or her and how they interpret that object and what relation they have to it. An object may have a collective significance involving one or more of the following endowments or accruals: prestige, economic opulence, being fashionable, belonging to a certain social group, among others. Thus, Noni and Lola feel almost on a par with the Queen when they wear Marks and Spencer's underwear, or at least, superior to the other women in the town.

### **The second generation: the astronaut's wife**

The judge's daughter, a Hindu college student, whom we only know as "Mrs. Mistry," falls in love and elopes with a Zoroastrian orphan (28) who joins the Indian Air Force, and who, in the Cold War entente between India and Russia, is selected to go to Moscow for training as a potential astronaut (27). Although his daughter has every hope of getting on in life, the judge disowns her. She and her astronaut husband, with a great life ahead of them, have that life cut short and are killed in an arbitrary traffic accident. They are literally crushed to death by something as earthly and mundane as dolls:

Just as Mr. Mistry was confessing to his wife his certainty that he would be chosen over his colleagues to become the very first Indian beyond the control of gravity, the fates decided otherwise, and instead of blasting through the stratosphere, in this life, in this skin, to see the world as the gods might, he was delivered to another vision of the beyond when he and his wife were crushed by local bus wheels, weighted by thirty indomitable ladies from the provinces who had speeded two days to barter and sell their wares in the market.

Thus they had died under the wheels of foreigners, amid crates of babushka nesting dolls. If their last thoughts were of their daughter in St. Augustine's, she would never know. (27)

So his daughter literally fails to survive the rupture of leaving home, and she is killed by the host nation, one might say, as the babushka dolls

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<sup>16</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

represent Russia; also, ironically, they should represent the domestic, protective side of matriarchy, as contained in the word “nesting.” A political reading would point at the dangerous attractions of Communism to India.

### **The third generation: the granddaughter, the young Nepalese-Indian freedom fighters, and the cook’s son**

All their daughter Sai has to inherit, then, after her mother’s disinheritance, is loss. Even if she inherits her grandfather’s assets, she will not be rich, as the judge has come down in the world. The austerity of the house, Cho Oyu, and its contents, is literally laid bare when the young Indian-Nepalese freedom fighters come to requisition his hunting rifles. But even his battered furniture is the height of luxury compared to the hut where his cook lives, lacking the basic necessities, let alone any dignity.

### **The freedom fighters**

Wealth, dignity and power, all based upon freedom, are what these young men are angry about, in that they have not inherited them when they believe that they should have:

It was the Indian-Nepalese this time, fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority. They wanted their own country, or at least their own state, in which to manage their own affairs. Here, where India blurred into Bhutan and Sikkim, and the army did pull-ups and push-ups, maintaining their tanks with khaki paint in case the Chinese grew hungry for more territory than Tibet, it had always been a messy map [...] making ridiculous the drawing of borders. (9)

What they have inherited is hate:

The men sat unbedding their rage, learning, as everyone does in this country, at one time or another, that old hatreds are endlessly retrievable.

And when they had disinterred it, they found the hate pure, purer than it could ever have been before, because the grief of the past was gone. Just the fury remained, distilled, liberating. It was theirs by birthright; it could take them so high; it was a drug. (161)

### The cook's son

The letters from Biju to his father, the cook, like most letters, are meant to communicate, but they bear no message, like the thwarted telephone conversation (230–2). In any case, had they reached their destination, and had the rain not washed away the message, that message would be a falsehood. Biju is not doing well in New York, but is being pushed from job to clandestine job whenever there is an inspection of papers and enquiries about green cards. He too has inherited a loss, in that his father lost a court case fought with his brother over five mango trees (13). His material possessions come down to “one bag [...] and his mattress –a rectangle of foam with egg crate marking rolled into a bundle and tied with string.” (146)

### Special significance of certain things

Looking more closely at Borges's old sword, we realise that there is a world of difference between a new sword and an old one. Their purposes and functions differ, for whereas a new sword is intended to kill people, normally, an old one is no longer employed in such an enterprise, it has become at most a sentimental reminder of the past, with or without value and honour, and at the least, a mere ornament on the wall. There is also the question of obsolescence, as Bill Brown explains:

While the ‘timeless’ objects [...] have gone limp, this abandoned object attains a new stature precisely because it has no life outside the boundary of art –no life, that is, within our everyday lives.<sup>17</sup>

In his work on objects and things, Bill Brown drew upon Baudrillard, and at the beginning of his article “Thing Theory” in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* of 2001, from which we have just quoted, he refers to A.S. Byatt's novel *The Biographer's Tale* (2000),<sup>18</sup> where the protagonist Phineas demands material things instead of abstract theories in order to feel more sure of himself. But perhaps things (meaning specific things, not things in general) are not as straightforward as we think, says Brown. First of all, we must distinguish between objects and things, and should be

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<sup>17</sup> Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 15.

<sup>18</sup> A.S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), 1.

aware that we tend to take things for granted and only notice them when they let us down:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.<sup>19</sup>

Through this explanation, we can see the extra significance of certain things in *The Inheritance of Loss*. For example, the judge's attitude towards –his reliance upon– his powder puff is heightened when it is stolen by his wife. He can no longer powder his face in order to appear whiter than he really is, thus he is affected in his very identity and the self-image he wishes to project to those around him. The thing in itself is comic on account of its gender relation, in that it is a device usually used by women and it ends up between a woman's breasts. It also has tragic connotations in that his wife would have liked it for herself, and what few material possessions she is allowed in her short life are begrudged. Her sad life of rejection is contrasted with that of the judge's neighbours Noni and Lola, who are not oppressed by the patriarchal society and can indulge themselves.

Brown also references Henry James's novel *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896)<sup>20</sup> in his discussion of the added and heightened connotations certain things can come to acquire:

And, yet, the word *things* holds within it a more audacious ambiguity. It denotes a massive generality, as well as particularities, even your particularly prized possessions: “‘Things’ were of course the sum of the world; only, for Mrs Gereth, the sum of the world was rare French furniture and oriental china.”<sup>21</sup>

Although Baudrillard and Brown worked on elaborating their theories on things relatively recently, Brown recognises that even though such a theory had not been elucidated in the nineteenth century, James and others

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<sup>19</sup> Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” 4.

<sup>20</sup> Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton* (New York: Penguin, reprinted 1987).

<sup>21</sup> Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” 4, emphasis in the text and reference to *The Spoils of Poynton* 1896.