

Review

- Sai and her grandfather are united in this vestige of British colonial rule
- Judge has rejected all things Indian as inferior, including himself
- Sai has no parents and no connection to father's family; her connection to her mother's family is limited to that of the judge
- She, also, has learned to devalue everything Indian
- has no one to provide her with love, familial ties, or instruct her in the rites, culture

- House, as emblematic of past, is suitably disintegrating
- Sai and her grandfather are left with the detritus – decolonized, but how to construct an identity? A culture? A nation?
- Think back to the character of Aziz, in *A Passage to India*, and his last remarks in the novel: "Down with the English anyhow. That's certain. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don't make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it's fifty or five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then'--- he rode against him furiously – 'and then, 'he concluded, half kissing him, 'you and I shall be friends'".
- In between the birth of the judge and Sai, the English have departed, but what now?

- Third member of the household is the cook
- Desai takes up not only the issues of colonization and decolonization, but also of economic oppression
- Cook has no name – defined by his occupation and service to the Judge

- Cook's son is in New York, the coveted destination: USA
- Desai provides a glimpse of the torturous ride
- The advertisement for work on a cruise ship and the promise of "legal employment in the USA" (179)
- Biju goes to Kathmandu for the training, only to discover that his father's 8000 rupees are lost in the swindle
- He observes the foreigners in Kathmandu, who can travel relatively easily to countries of the developing world, while he can't make the similar journey in reverse

- Biju's next try is at the American embassy, looking for a tourist visa

"Outside, a crowd of shabby people had been camping, it appeared, for days on end. Whole families that had traveled from distant villages, eating food packed and brought with them; some individuals with no shoes, some with cracked plastic ones; all smelling already of the ancient sweat of a never-ending journey. Once you got inside, it was air-conditioned and you could wait in rows of orange bucket chairs that shook if anyone along the length began to bob their knees up and down" (182).

- Imagine that a better life awaits them; a life of ease that begins as soon as you enter U.S. territory in the embassy
- We see how he must figure out the system; determine what is required and how to produce it

An announcement from the loud speaker creates complete havoc, a stampede: "Stink and spit and scream and charge; they jumped toward the window, tried to splat themselves against it hard enough that they would just stick and not scrape off; young men mowing through, tossing aside toothless grannies, trampling babies underfoot. This was no place for manners and this is how the line was formed: wolf-faced single men first, men with families second, women on their own and Biju, and last, the decrepit. Biggest pusher, first place; how self-contented and smiling he was; he dusted himself off, presenting himself with the exquisite manners of a cat. I'm civilized, sir, ready for the U.S. I'm civilized, mam. Biju noticed that his eyes, so alive to the foreigners, looked back at his own countrymen and women, immediately glazed over and went dead.

Some would be chosen, others refused, and there was no question of fair or not. What would make the decision? It was a whim; it was not liking your face, forty-five degrees centigrade outside and impatience with all Indians, therefore; or perhaps merely the fact that you were in line after a yes, so you were likely to be the no" (183).

- Acceptance appears arbitrary
- Embassy staff trying to determine who is at risk to try to stay in the U.S.
- The people in line conversing, giving each other hints and advice
- The affluent with “spacious homes, ease-filled lives, jeans, English, driver-driven cars waiting outside to convey them back to shady streets, and cooks missing their maps to wait late with lunch (something light – cheese macaroni...)” (186).
- try to convey their suitability to travel to the U.S. by demonstrating their existing facility with Western dress, language, diet, toilets and other forms of privilege

- See everyone in line conversing, trying to decipher the ‘code’
- team-based approach, which is antagonistic to American individualism and probably works against them – after all, if you help someone get ‘in’, you may be ‘out’
- When he is surprisingly accepted – after numerous lies - he is declared by one prospective individual as “the luckiest boy in the whole world” (187)

- When he arrives, he quickly finds work as an illegal immigrant
- Without a Green card, he is relegated to the “shadow class”
- Instead of the West moving into Asia and Africa to exploit the resources, the people of Asia and Africa are moving to the West
- But in Biju's case, and as we see, for many of the other illegal immigrants, exploitation is the ‘norm’
- The ‘resources’ of Asia and Africa are now the people, who are being consumed in a different way

- Biju mounts a daily negotiation with Western culture to find stable employment
- Whenever the INS get close, Biju moves on to another establishment :
 “Biju at Le Colonial for the authentic colonial experience.
 On top, rich colonial, and down below, poor native. Colombian, Tunisian, Ecuadorian, Gambian” (21).
- Diners, people on the street see only the constructed ambience of “Le Colonial” restaurant
- The restaurant sells a particular image to its diners – but the reality of Colombia, Tunis, Ecuador, Gambia is not something that diners are interested in or would pay to experience
- rich colonial life built literally on the foundation of work down by colonized; colonizers still standing on the shoulders of the ‘natives’
- Globalization, immigration hasn't really changed anything – just shifted the location of the oppression

- 'down below', the kitchen staff tell a different story
- U.S. seen as functioning on the cheap labour of unacknowledged and illegal immigrants
- Sense that such practice is considered 'necessary' for commerce and that it is condoned
- Who profits?

- Neutral territory of the U.S. also functions as an arena to work out old stereotypes and animosities between the immigrants
- Biju is forced to work with a Pakistani. Initially, they spar verbally, hurling insults, then "[t]hey drew the lines at crucial junctures. They threw cannonball cabbages at each other" (23).
- Both of them are fired for causing a disturbance

- Over the course of the novel, we see Biju fired from Pinocchio's Italian Restaurant because he smells, Freddy's Wok because he can't deliver food fast enough on a bicycle in the dead of winter, flee the Queen of Tarts bakery ahead of the INS, quit Brigitte's because as a vegetarian, he can't stomach cooking steaks, and end up at the Gandhi Café, run by Harish-Harry
- Irony at work here; as Kasim pointed out, the narrative of decolonization of India is a triumphant one, with the Gandhi's salt march, the peaceful rejection of British rule, the move to democracy
- The name, Gandhi Café, suggests this legacy
- But the reality is not very triumphant for Biju

- The owner, Harish, is known by his combinant name of Harish-Harry, attesting to his dual Indian-American identify
- Harish-Harry gives his staff free housing in the basement of the restaurant, along with the ubiquitous rats: "[t]he men washed their faces and rinsed their mouths over the kitchen sink, combed their hair in the postage stamp mirror tacked above, hung their trousers on a rope strung across the room, along with the dishtowels. At night they unrolled their bedding wherever there was room" (147).
- And this is somewhat better accommodation than Biju has enjoyed elsewhere in New York
- Might be hard to imagine that this description is one of the developed world

- We are told that “a little after three years from the day he’d received his visa, the luckiest boy in the whole world skidded on some rotten spinach in Harish-Harry’s kitchen, streaked forward in a slime green track and fell with a loud popping sound. It was his knee. He couldn’t get up” (187).
- Harish-Harry has no sympathy
- He finally gives Biju fifty dollars and tells him “Why not take some rest? You can help cutting the vegetables while lying down and if you are not better, go home. Doctors are very cheap and good in India” (189).
- Biju knows if he goes home, he can’t come back - there are the financial implications and his illegal status will be revealed

- Ponders the irony that he has to go to the U.S. to be able to afford Basmati rice, yet at home in India, where it was grown, he couldn’t afford to eat it.
- The Cook and Biju have imagined that life in America will offer Biju opportunities denied the Cook because of his caste
- Reality is that life is worse
- Questioning of the fascination with the “developed” world
- Big price to pay for improved plumbing

- Once Biju hears about the GNLFF rebellion, he returns home, worried about his father
- all of his money, American electronics, and even his clothes are stolen by the GNLFF and he arrives home dressed in a woman's nightgown, with nothing but experience to show for his years in the U.S.

- Yet some people fare better
- For example, Lola's daughter, Piyali Bannerji gets a job with the BBC
- Lola had advised Pixie years earlier, "India is a sinking ship. Don't want to be pushy, darling, sweetie, thinking of your happiness only, but *the doors won't stay open forever....*" (47 ellipses in text)
- Lola partakes of Pixie's status, bringing home suitcases "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" (46-7).

- Or Mrs. Sen's daughter, who works for the CNN and "they keep begging her and *begging her* to take a green card. She says, 'No, no.' I told her, 'Don't be silly, take it, what harm is there? If they're offering it, pushing it on you.... How many people would kill for one....Silly goose, isn't it so?" (131).
- The Green card is valuable not only to the person who possesses it, but also becomes a means of leverage in the verbal jousting for social position between the parents who remain in India

Gyan

- His ancestors left Nepal in 1800 to work on tea plantations in Darjeeling
- His great grandfather and great uncles fought for the English
- His father is a teacher
- Gyan is a student of math and physics and is hired to tutor Sai; 4 hours, round trip on foot

- As the result of a storm, Gyan is forced to stay over at Cho Oyu
- During dinner of chops, mashed potatoes and peas, the judge begins to examine Gyan: “He [the judge] detected an obvious lack of familiarity, a hesitance with the cutlery and the food, yet he sensed Gyan was someone with plans. He carried an unmistakable whiff of journey, of ambition – and an old emotion came back to the judge, a recognition of weakness that was not merely a feeling, but also a taste, like fever. He could tell Gyan had never eaten such food in such a manner” (109)

- Gyan’s dinner with Sai and the judge is like a replay of the judge’s oral exam at Cambridge, the judge demanding that Gyan recite a poem
- Gyan chooses a poem by Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali poet who won the Nobel Prize in 1913 and who was also opposed to the British occupation
- At first glance, this would seem to be an appropriate choice: the poet is Indian, even local; he is well known; internationally acknowledged; and pro-Indian
- But Gyan misjudges the situation – doesn’t realize that the Judge is locked in the colonial past and British identified
- The judge laughs at Gyan “in a cheerless and horrible manner” (109), just as his Oxford examining committee laughed at him

- Judge was forced to learn English and study British history and culture in order to get a job within the judiciary in his own country because the British ran India
- During his examination, he quoted a poem by Sir Walter Scott, a Scottish poet of international repute, with whom most British students would have familiarity
- Gyan's choice of Tagore shows his familiarity with Indian culture
- but rather like the judge, Gyan has lived his entire life in a country where his own language, Nepalese, is not taught
- His ethnic group is a majority, but retain only the most menial jobs in terms of employment and are routinely discriminated against: Think of Lola's remarks that "I tell you, these Neps can't be trusted"(45).

- We now come to see Gyan as colonized by India
- Like the judge and Bose, Gyan's great grandfather and great uncles who fought for the British were never given the same salary or pension as the English
- Gyan takes out his frustrations on Sai, not unlike the judge taking out his frustrations on Nimi
- His experiences parallel those of the judge
- But where the judge remained silent, Gyan explodes

- “Christmas!”, said Gyan. ‘You little fool!’” (174). As Gyan points out to Sai, she is very selective in her choice of holiday celebrations: “ Why do you celebrate Christmas? You’re Hindus and you don’t celebrate Id [Muslim] or Guru Nanak’s birthday [Punjabi] or even Durga Puja [Hindu, especially Bengali] or Dussehra [Hindu] or Tibetan New Year” (163).
- Sai has so little cultural awareness that she doesn’t know why she celebrates Christmas – “Nothing wrong with a bit of fun....”(163), she replies.

- Gyan attacks Sai verbally, “You are like slaves, that’s what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself. It’s because of people like you we never get anywhere” (163).
- Gyan’s interactions with Sai provide an opportunity for him to articulate his new awareness of himself and his politics
- Perhaps we hear a bit of Kip’s venting at the Villa

- We discover over the course of the novel that it is Gyan who has tipped off the GNLFF to the availability of guns at Cho Oyu
- Sets in motion a series of further tragedies
- The police, anxious to provide an arrest, pick up and torture the local drunk; everyone in the village can hear his screams
- “But the police were just practising their torture techniques, getting ready for what was coming. When the man crawled out on his knees, his eyes had been extinguished. They would heal into horizonless, flat blanks that would forever cause others to recoil in fear and disgust” (226-7).

- GNLFF increases pressure on the community
- Long time occupants are pushed off their land by squatters
- Homes are invaded as the GNLFF hide from the police and military
- Power is shut off, there is no water, no fuel, the roads are closed, food supplies dwindle
- People are attacked on their way home from the market for their food

- Chaos and fear reign: “On the road to the market, the trees were hung with the limbs of enemies – which side and whose enemy? This was the time to make anyone you didn’t like disappear, to avenge ancient family vendettas. Screams continued from the police station though a bottle of Black Label could save your life” (295).
- Meanwhile, the GNLFF boys are “having a fantastic time. Money and guns in their pockets. They were living the movies” (294).

- The family of the blinded man petitions the judge to go to the police station and tell them of the drunk’s innocence; he refuses, maintaining his “immaculate” silence
- The man’s wife and son are unemployed because the GNLFF has closed the roads and the family worked in road construction
- They return again to beg: “It was the impoverished who walked the line so thin it was questionable if it existed, an imaginary line between the insurgents and the law, between being robbed (who would listen to them if they went to the police?) and being hunted by the police as scapegoats for the crimes of others.
They were the hungriest” (282).
- In desperation, they steal Mutt with the plan of raising puppies to sell, not realizing the Mutt is neutered.

- Is there closure in this novel?
- Ending partly told through from Sai's perspective
- But it is an imagined ending as she anticipates the futures of the various characters: Mutt, Lola, Noni, Mrs. Sen
- But loose ends are never tied up; we're never given any conclusive finale e.g.– we don't know if Lola and Noni get their land back from the squatters or what happens to Sai and Gyan
- Conventional ending would have Gyan show up with Mutt, which is what he promises in order to regain Sai's respect
- Sai and Gyan would reconcile, perhaps leave Kalimpong together and live some place where their differences in class, ethnic origin and upbringing would be less pronounced
- Instead, it is Biju returning, lame, dressed in a woman's ruffled nightgown

- Sai experience an identity crisis: "Who was she... she with her self-importance, her demand for happiness, yelling it at fate, at the deaf heavens, dreaming for her joy to be brought forth...? [...] The simplicity of what she'd been taught wouldn't hold. 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" (322-3).
- In part, Sai is grappling with the knowledge that the world does not revolve around her needs
- But the notion of multiple narratives also speaks to the condition of modern life which recognizes that there are multiple perspectives and that our lives impact those of others
- Where Kim lost his identity by being both the *chela* and a spy, Sai has never developed an identity – she has rejected Catholicism, but knows little of being a Hindu

- Novel ends with the cook and Biju embracing
- In the end, there is only family, relationships, community and a tentative sense of assurance:
 “The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent.
 All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it”
 (324).
 The language here is evocative of legends and fairy tales, a sense of timelessness, which speaks to our need for certainty and fixity
 But the last line undermines any notion of a single truth, suggesting instead that we can each ‘pluck’ our own truth

- Novel begs the question, can the damage be undone?
- The judge’s failure to even acknowledge how colonization effected him is shown as limited
- Gyan and GNLFF cause a great deal of damage and no political change, although awareness increases on many levels
- Can anyone behave authentically, outside these forces, in a postmodern world? As Desai writes, “certain movies made long ago had produced all of them....” (199).
 Several times, characters note that they are falling into a role, which they feel powerless to control
- Can there be a genuine, pre-contact self, apart from colonial impulses?

- Lastly, we need to think about how the West reads the East and the events of the novel
- Do we, can we remain unchanged by these issues?
- U.S., and by implication, North America, remain *the* destination
- Novel's fascination with plumbing really reflects the fascination with goods, lifestyle – but is it really the issue?
- What about water, food?

- Or as Mr. Kakkar, the proprietor of the Shangri-la Travel agency in New York tells Biju, “American is in the process of buying up the world. Go back, you’ll find they own the businesses. One day, you’ll be working for an American company there or here.... Think of your children. If you stay here, your son will earn a hundred thousand dollars for the same company he could be working for in India but making one thousand dollars. How, then, can you send your children to the best international college? You are making a big mistake. Still a world, my friend, where one side travels to be a servant, and the other side travels to be treated like a king. You want your son to be on this side or that side?”
- Biju can only think of “samosas adjoining a spill of chutney coming by on a leaf plate. A place where he could never be the only one in a photograph....He didn’t think of any of the things that had made him leave in the first place” (270).

- Baz and Odessa, the owners of Brigitte's restaurant, are satirized as the young, hip, and pretentious New Yorkers who are aware of political issues, yet still find a way to remain untouched so as not to disturb their profits or their sleep
- They drink "Tailors of Harrowgate darjeeling" because after all, "[c]olonial India, free India – the tea was the same, but the romance was gone, and it was best sold on the word of the past. They drank tea and diligently they read the New York Times together, including the international news. It was overwhelming" (133).

- Confronted with "Zaireans coming at you screaming colonialism, screaming slavery, screaming mining companies screaming banana companies oil companies screaming CIA spy among the missionaries screaming it was Kissinger who killed their father and why don't you forgive third-world debt;...everything run by white people. Every day in the papers another thing....
 Business was business. Your bread might as well be left unbuttered were the butter to be spread so thin. The fittest one wins and gets the butter....
 'Rule of nature,' said Odessa to Baz. 'Imagine if we were sitting around saying, 'So-and-so-score years ago, Neanderthals came out of the woods, attacked my family with a big dinosaur bone, and now you give back'" (134).