



## An Inheritance Divided

**The Nation spoke to Booker Prize Winning author of Inheritance Of Loss, Kiran Desai who graced the Galle Literary Festival held last week, to discover her muse, motivation and how she enjoyed her visit to Sri Lanka**

**By Fiona Wright**

Kiran Desai is delighted to be in Sri Lanka, and the reactions of the crowds at The Galle Literary Festival seemed to show that the feeling was mutual. As the major drawcard of the festival, Desai's spotlight session was highly anticipated, and even more highly attended, and she was met with adoring questions from the audience, and a mass of people pressing for autographs afterwards. She was also delayed on her way to our interview by admirers, when all she wanted to do was finish her egg hoppers in peace.

"I just love Sri Lankan food!" she explains, "I was trying to get as much in as possible before I fly out tomorrow."

Desai is now a regular feature at literary festivals around the globe, after her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, was awarded the Man Booker Prize for 2006.

The prize, she claims, has changed her life. Not only does it bring her to places like Sri Lanka, but it will provide her with support, and a guarantee to publish her next novel- especially important considering *The Inheritance of Loss* took seven years to write. "It is scary to think of the difference it makes. It's almost unfair."

*The Inheritance of Loss* is a vast and sprawling story of belonging, and searching for identity in a globalised and conflict-ridden world. It deals with the legacy of colonialism on individual lives, and on regions like India's Kalimpong Mountains, stricken with civil war. It is a love story, and a story of loss, at times wickedly funny, at others devastating, and in many ways a reflection of Desai's own experience as an immigrant and as a South Asian woman.

Countries like the USA, she claims, have fostered "heroic myths of immigration, but there is something hollow and wrong at the heart of the idea that so many people can just simplify under one flag... I wanted to capture as many mixtures of identity as I could." Indeed, the novel is populated by characters who are torn between their "split identities-" the people they were when they left home, the people they are becoming as they adapt to their new worlds and the people they pretend to be when writing home.

Desai herself feels this split keenly. Her community now, she claims, is the Indian

diaspora community. "I know I don't have a place in Modern India now," she says, "but the idea of being Indian is still a part of my identity." Similarly, she says she grew up like so many others of her environment, reading children's books by Enid Blyton and James Harriett, which had so little bearing on her surroundings. "They destroyed so much!" she laughs.

A major concern of the novel is the struggles of much of the Indian diaspora community to survive in America. "I'm interested in what it means to be a minority, and to be the cheap labour," the author says. Desai believes there is a popular conception that globalisation is making the economic playing field level for everyone, but instead is allowing class divides to transcend national borders. "The whole world is now on the same system," she says "with the markets seeking the cheapest labour, and the most desperate people."

Nonetheless, Desai believes that current publishing landscape is a promising one for South Asian writers. Partly this is driven by what she calls "prize culture," where publishers look for their next big hit "from the same landscape" as those that came before. She also believes a shift has taken place in South Asian literature, embracing a wide range of styles and subject matters. Nonetheless, she feels it is still "overly concerned about its perception in the West," perhaps just another lingering anxiety in the legacy of colonialism.

Kiran Desai's identity as a writer, however, is one thing that seems fixed and firm. "I grew up with a knowledge and understanding of what it means to live the writing life," she says, "although my mother did warn me against it." Desai is a disciplined and steady writer, precisely because she feels happy sitting down at her desk each day. Indeed, the biggest regret of her life post-Booker is that the demands of festivals, marketers and media have taken her away from her work. "I'm not reading, and I'm not writing," she sighs "and it's very frustrating... I don't feel my writing is separate from my existence."

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