

The Things That We Lost

(Cornerstone, 2023)

Jyoti Patel

Review by Shani Akilah

So,

here you are

too foreign for home

too foreign for here.

never enough for both.

Diaspora Blues, Ijeoma Umebinyou

Poignant and timely, Jyoti Patel's debut novel *The Things That We Lost* engages with pressing questions of identity, belonging and family within the context of post-Brexit Britain. Through the characters of Nik and his mother Avani, Patel delves into the intricacies of the hyphenated identities of being both British and Gujarati – a state

of being familiar to many living in the diaspora and particularly in a time of increased nativist populism. At 18 Avani 'feels like a fraud ... having never visited the place that so much of her identity was attributed to', whilst Nik at the same age, years later, speaks of being 'Indian' but not knowing India, which is 'not his home'. This 'in-betweenness' is further explored through the close but different perspectives of the protagonists along two different timelines, elevating commonalities in the experiences of both mother and son despite the decades that divide them.

In light of the post-pandemic mental health challenges for many Britons and the disproportionate impact on young people, especially young men, the exploration of Nik's deteriorating mental health whilst he is at university feels especially pertinent. Aside from the microaggressions and othering faced at his predominantly white institution, he faces the trauma of losing his grandfather, a strained relationship with his mother, and unanswered questions about his dead father. While bringing to the fore Nik's everyday contemplation of his physical and mental well-being in a subtle but powerful way, Patel also gives a refreshing illustration of male friendship and vulnerability in the midst of his anxiety and depression. There remains for Nik a fear of his romantic interest 'seeing him as he is now, [a] version of him that can't even summon the strength to take a full breath.'

What ties a number of the themes in the novel together is the twisting thread of what Patel refers to as the 'kaleidoscope of grief'. Her tender depiction of raw emotion and the multiple feelings of pain in losing a loved one is especially moving in the aftermath of a global pandemic and much international turbulence. The heartache of what it is to 'simply live with not knowing', mirroring the brutal reality of unanswered questions in death, is what Patel so aptly encapsulates in the title of the book.

<https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/448416/the-things-that-we-lost-by-patel-jyoti/9781529186345>

Shani Akilah

Shani Akilah is a Black British Caribbean writer and screenwriter from South London. She is a book influencer, co-founded the Nyah Network (a book club for Black women) and was a literary judge for the Nota Bene Prize 2023. Shani has a master's degree in African Studies from the University of Oxford. Her debut short story collection *For Such a Time as This* will be published by Oneworld in June 2024.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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