EXPLORING MAGIC REALISM IN KIRAN DESAI'S *HULLABALOO IN THE GUAVA ORCHARD*

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Abstract: *Kiran Desai's novel, Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard (1998), which has won the Betty Trask Award, is set in a small town named Shahkot in the foothills of the Indian Himalayas. It tells the story of a black sheep son, Sampath Chawla who, after losing his job at the post-office following a scandal, climbs into a guava tree in search of a life of freedom, peace and contemplation and refuses to come down. Unexpectedly he becomes a sort of petty guru, Monkey Baba, telling people's secrets and uttering philosophical profundities. The news of the holy man perched on a guava tree and surrounded by a band of langurs spreads far and wide; inquisitive visitors including businessmen and pilgrims begin to arrive. Sampath's father starts scheming about the ways to charge pilgrims for the chance to ask a question to him. The bank account of the Chawla family begins to swell until the monkeys, who have developed an unquenchable thirst for liquor, raise an unprecedented hullabaloo in the hermitage and destroy the peace of the orchard and the town. Written with rich humour and an eye for the fantastic, Hullabaloo extends all preconceived notions of sane and insane, holy and profane with its quirky characters and amusing location. The regaling tale, with its rich themes and motifs, grips the readers' undivided attention until they, too, begin to laugh and learn alternately with its strange but all-too-human characters.*

It is observed the Kiran Desai's debut novel Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard (1988) artistically presents human foibles and eccentricities in a satirical tone. Desai keenly observes the existing social values, political issues and ideologies and depicts them through the people of her fictional world with exceptional creative imagination and deep analytical insight. She attempts to unravel the hidden as well as the complex inner urges of man and portrays with evocative power and sublimity the various losses which result out of the feelings of alienation, frustration, isolation, uprootedness and rootlessness.

Key Words: Alienation, Frustration, Isolation, rootlessness, Shahkot in the foothills of the Indian Himalayas.

Kiran Desai has emerged as one of the most significant young novelist on the contemporary literary scene. She has penned two novels namely *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Kiran Desai first came to literary attention in 1997, in the New Yorker and in The Vintage Book of Indian Writing, an anthology of fifty years of Indian writing edited by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West. Kiran's 'Strange

Happenings in the Guava Orchard' was the closing piece. The story, cast in the form of a fable and told with understanding and tenderness, took off from a real-life incident. As Kiran has admitted in an interview: "I'd read a story in The Times of India and heard about a character from many people, a man who was a very famous hermit in India and who really did climb up a tree, who lived in a tree for many, many years, until he died ..... So I began to wonder what it was about someone like this who would do something as extreme as to spend his life in a tree. So it really started with that character, and then the story built up around it."

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard tells the story of the Chawla family who live in Shahkot, in north India somewhere, in the foothills of the Himalayas, possibly even somewhere near Kasauli, where Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* has set and which is named on page 97. Sampath, a brown birthmark on his cheek, is born to Mr Chawla and his wife, Kulfi, during a severe drought caused by a late monsoon. His birth coincides with the fortuitous arrival from the skies, a crate of Swedish Red Cross relief supplies which lands in a jamun tree outside. However, Sampath's early good fortune does not amount to anything much, at least until he takes to his guava tree. He fails at school and hardly sets the world on fire at his job as a postal clerk, until he distinguishes himself at his boss's daughter's wedding by emptying rather too many glasses of sherbet and rose water, then dropping his strides and mooning the assembled guests.

After his disgrace at the wedding, Sampath sulks at home, yearning for freedom. His mother Kulfi sympathises. She pulls his ear and offers him a guava, 'the first of the season and still a little hard' (46 *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*). He asks the fruit what he should do, and; he felt it expand in response, rising under his fingertips ... before his amazed eyes, the surface of the guava rose ... and exploded in a vast Boom! Creamy flesh Haying, droplets showering high into the sky, seed scattering and hitting people on the balconies and rooftops, arid down on the street ... Sampath felt his body fill with a cool greenness, his heart swell with a mysterious wild sweetness. He felt an awake clear sap flowing within him, something quite unlike human blood. He could have sworn a strange new force had entered him that something new was circulating within him (47 *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*).

Extra-ordinary fruit, these guavas. Sampath then heads for the hills, metaphorically. He etches the first bus he sees in the bazaar, 'leaving the world, a world that made its endless revolutions towards nothing' (48 *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*). Then he takes up residence in the branches of a guava tree:

Concealed in the branches of the tree he had climbed, Sampath felt his breathing slow and a wave of peace and contentment overtook him. All about him the orchard was spangled with the sunshine of a November afternoon, webbed by the reflections of the shifting foliage and filled with a liquid intricacy of sun and shadow. The warmth nuzzled against his cheek like the muzzle of an animal and, as his heartbeat grew quiet, he could hear the soft popping and rustling of plants being warmed to their different scents about him. How beautiful it was here, how exactly as it should be ... And then, as the afternoons grew quick and smoky and the fruit green-gold and ripe, he'd pick a guava ... He'd hold it against his cheek and roll it in his palms so as to feel its knobbly surface with a star at its base, its scars that were rough and brown from

wind and rain and the sharp beak of some careless bud. And when he finally tasted it, the fruit would not let him down; it would be the most wonderful, the most tasty guava he could ever have eaten...Yes, he was in the right place at last. (50-51 *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*)

This passage is obviously intended by Desai to explain Sampath's epiphanic perception of his place in the world from the lofty heights of his guava tree. This representation of Sampath's awareness of the minutiae of the orchard life and of his sense that life's mysteries might be contained in a single knobbly guava are not sufficiently persuasive to overwhelm my reaction that this writing is on first impressions rather cute. The central idea of a guava representing the totality of experience is the kind of thing we have come to expect in certain varieties of fictions set in Rural India. Sampath, like his mother, Kulfi, is a strange one, a naive, not quite an idiot servant but a wise simple man, a South Asian Forrest Gump. In an interview, Desai relates where she found the idea for her protagonist:

I'd read a story in the Times of India and heard about a character from many people, a man who was a very famous hermit in India who really did climb up a tree, who lived in a tree for many, many years, until he died ... So I began to wonder what it was about someone like this who would do something as extreme as to spend his life in a tree. So it started really with that character, and then the story built up around it.

From his platform in the guava tree Sampath displays the stereotypical blend of child-like innocence and unfathomable wisdom in retreat from the world: he becomes by accident a wise man, a guru, a transformation familiar enough to readers of Narayan. In deftly comic and novel stroke, Desai suggests that he has one significant advantage over other gurus, literary or otherwise. Sampath had spent his idle moments as a postal clerk reading the mail of his fellow townspeople, so that by the time he climbed his tree he was primed with personal information about those who come to visit him.

Bombalapetty, Pudukkottai, Aurangabad, Tonk, Coimbatore, Koovappally, Piploo, Thimpu, Kampala, Cairo, Albuquerque. He held them [the letters] up against the light, the envelopes filled with promise, with the possibility of different worlds. He steamed them open over mugs of tea, or just pressed them open, the humidity in the air having rendered the gum almost entirely ineffectual, and lazily, through the rest of the day, he perused their contents. Since he had started work in the post office, he had spent much of his time in this fashion. He had read of family feuds and love affairs, of marriages being arranged, of babies being born, of people dying and of ghosts returning, of farewells and home-comings. He had read of natural disasters, floods and earthquakes, of small trivial matters like the lack of shampoo. Of big cities and of villages much smaller than Shahkot. In some countries people took a bath only once a week and the women wore short dresses even when they were old. He picked up all sorts of interesting information. Once in a while, there were postcards sent from foreign countries to addresses in the posh localities of Shahkot, and Sampath sat for hours mulling over, say a picture of a palm tree by a sea as blue as if it had been dyed with paint, or of a village belle from Switzerland in a tight-laced frock and two fat yellow plaits that resembled something good to eat. Switzerland was a cold country where there was not a speck of dirt. There in the

afternoon heat of Shahkot, Sampath would imagine the cold and the clean so vividly, every hair on him would stand on end (34-35 *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*).

For the rest of the novel Sampath remains in his guava tree, a 'skinny, long-legged apparition', a man of unlikely if unfathomable wisdom (73 *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*), He finds first local and then national name, his father cashing in on the supplicants who come for advice and counsel or to hear the Sermon in the Guava Tree. The logistics of guava tree-top living do not prove too daunting for his family. Mr Chawla finds a string cot and a large striped garden umbrella which are hoisted up into the boughs for his son, who then greets his visitors 'propped against numerous cushions; tucked up, during chilly evenings, in a glamorous satin quilt covered with leopard-skin spots ... On his head ... a tea-cosy-like red woollen hat (70 *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*). Sampath's meals are lifted up to him in a wooden crate using a pulley system, as are buckets of hot water for bathing and disposable earthenware pots for the calls of nature. It is satisfying to discover that a local potter delivers batches of new ones at regular intervals.

Kulfi, Sampath's mother, cooks his meals in the orchard, outdoors, in the sunshine, under the gigantic sky She cooked only for Sampath... Almost all day she worked, trying this and that, producing, even in these early days of apprenticeship to her imagination,'meals of such flavour and rarity that others could merely guess at what they were missing by the smells that rose from her pots, so intoxicating them by evening's end that they had barely any recollection of what had passed when they departed from their audience with Sampath. They felt filled, though, with a sense of magic and well-being. By the look of Sampath, he too was permeated with a similar feeling, but to a much greater degree. His cheeks grew slowly plumper day by day; his tense, worried expression melted into one of contentment; the soft movement of the days and nights rising and falling about him were gently reflected in his face, and his eyes mirrored the quiet of the distant hills (78-79 *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*).

The emphasis on food preparation in the novel is very obvious. In the same publicity interview mentioned previously, Desai suggested that it's a great interest of mine; it's so much a pan of my life. I'm always in the kitchen, cooking and experimenting—I love it. And every now and then I think, I should write a cookbook' or, 'I should write For food magazines" And then f get drawn bark to writing fiction again. But yes, food is a big part of my life.

It may be that Desai is responding to Midnight Children, although her food writing lacks the political pungency and punch of Rushdie's chutney. Writing about Indian cuisine connects her international readers with what for most of us most creatively represents India in our day-to-day lives—Indian food. Kulfi is an inspired and courageous cook; her interest in food and her obsession with collecting strange and unlikely ingredients suggests a great deal about her idiosyncrasies. She is a memorable creation, a very successful character, reminiscent of some of Anita Desais individualistic women; She was producing meals so intricate, they were cooked sometimes with a hundred ingredients, balanced precariously within a complicated and delicate mesh of spices—marvellous triumphs of the complex and delicate art of seasoning. A single grain of one thing, a bud of another, a moist fingertip' dipped tightly into a small vial and then into the bubbling pot; a thimble full, a matchbox full, a coconut shell

full of dark crimson and deep violet, of dusty yellow spice, the entire concoction simmered sometimes for a day or two on coals that emitted only a glimmer of faint heat or that roared like a furnace as she fanned them with a palm leaf. The meats were beaten to silk, so spiced and fragrant they clouded the senses; the sauces were full of strange hints and dark under-currents, leaving you on firm ground one moment, dragging you under the next. There were dishes with an aftertaste that exploded upon you and left you gasping a whole half-hour after you'd eaten them. Some that were delicate, with a haunting flavour that teased like the memory of something you'd once known but could no longer put your finger on (101-102 *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*).

The first Kulfi reveals of this passion for food is when she is pregnant with Sampath, She finds some old crayons and begins to draw on the walls of the house: grotesqueries, a hullabaloo of images of babies, fish, fruit, chooks, a marketplace, grinding spices, dishes she had never eaten, peacocks, boars, onions, creepers and fish (8 *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*). Only when all the spaces on the walls, floor and ceilings are full of her drawings is her son born. The descriptions of the house are energetic, quirky and delightful, reminiscent of the astonishing murals at the end of Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (1991). Like the nineteenth-century realists, Desai is very good with lists, and food provides the inspiration for a number of tasty and well-seasoned passages in the novel This one is typical;

There is a Chief Medical Officer who deals with the stress posed by the menace by putting himself on a herbal diet of fenugreek sprouts and onion juice. He writes elegantly worded memos (with carbon copies) recommending that liquor licenses for all shops and restaurants be revoked and that Shahkot become a prohibition town.

There is the Superintendent of Police who makes no plans at all to deal with the monkeys because he works out that a successful campaign might lead to his promotion, which would mean moving from Shahkot. By doing nothing, he reasons, he might even be demoted, leaving him with more time to wander the bazaar chatting with his cronies or eating golguppas in the Shahkot gardens with his wife while tickling her with flowers picked from the flowerbeds that have signs reading: 'Do not pick the flowers'. Add the head of the biology department at the local Lady Chalterji University, an expert on human-languor interaction. He is the one who advises his wife to leave the dishes in the sun to save time drying and who invents a fan to draw the monsoon clouds over Shahkot. He leaves sleeping-pill-laden food out for the monkeys, only to find that street urchins knock off the food intended for the monkeys and sleep for up to forty-eight hours. Then there is u bird-watching Brigadier whose life will be complete when he manages to spot a green pigeon and who must lead the Indian army into battle against the monkeys.

Then a new District Collector arrives from Delhi, a very shy man, on his first posting, who descends from the train with, thirty-five pickle jars which his mother has packed for him. One of his biggest worries is the cook whom he discovers goes with the position, a custom left over from the days of the Raj, a man who will only prepare cutlets with caramel custard, who sulks when asked to cook vegetable pulao and mutton curry and who seems incapable of cleaning either the crockery or himself. While these Keystone Cops forces of law and order

gather to do something about the threat to civil order posed by the monkeys, Kulfi continues to dream about cooking one. Bake it in a tandoor? Simmer and stew it? Stuff or fry it? Roll it in banana leaves; fill it into chickens or goose eggs? Mix it into a naan? Seal it in an earthen pot? Season it with saffron? Scent it with cloves? Cook it with pomegranate juice?' (181 *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*).

Other citizens of Shahkot are moved to respond in different ways. Some form committees and societies to protect the monkeys in the name of Hanuman. Protest spills into the streets. Families split and offices divide over the issue. There is no longer any peace in Shahkot.

Locations play an important role in Desai, where the local color seasons her texts. Desai goes to great lengths to detail the landscape as well as characters' social lives and eccentricities. Her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), was set in the small town of Shahkot, which becomes a microcosm of Indian society at large, a society caught between the paradoxes of orthodoxy and modernity. Hullabaloo tells a story of family matters, generational conflicts, and the petty ambitions of ordinary people. Desai's satiric tone accentuates dark undercurrents of futility and desperation that are displayed through her characters. The novel's larger themes—social hypocrisy, administrative corruption in India, herd mentality, and rigidly patriarchal institutions—are explored in depth.

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