



Socio-cultural ethos in *hullabaloo in the guava orchard*: A critical analysis

Bipin Bihari Dash

Assistant Professor in English, Odisha University of Technology and Research, OUTR, (Formerly CET, Bhubaneswar), Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

Abstract

Kiran Desai has emerged as the new representative of the art of fiction in the twenty-first century. Her life, art and cultural milieu encompass creative ideals of a complex intellectual background. This new novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* shows underlying realities of life in Indian fiction. It seeks to explore the backgrounds of social, psychological, religious, and spiritual events that steadily moulded Kiran Desai's fictional art. From her humble beginnings of fiction writing she has come a long way in the twenty-first century to emerge as a serious contender to some of the most coveted literary prize winners in the world. In terms of popularity and market presence, she has experienced phenomenal success in recent years. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is the story of Sampath Chawla who escapes from the boredom of middle class living in the sleepy North Indian town of Shahkot into the comical freedom of life on a guava tree and who mysteriously disappears when the army and the government agencies invade the guava orchard to drive away the monkeys. This paper analyses the socio-cultural ethos in the novel of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*.

Keywords: social, spiritual, cultural, fantasy, sermon, monkey baba

Introduction

Kiran Desai analyses the framework of social class, Indian traditions, education, and urbanization to present the mundane world of the people in rural India. This satirical novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is based on the lifestyle in a small North Indian town of Shahkot. It narrates the simplicity and freedom of life in a guava orchard.

Sampath is conceived at a time when the small town of Shahkot is severely afflicted by the summer heat which burned Malhotra's daughter far too dark for a decent marriage. With no sign of monsoon's arrival, there were dozens of monsoon inducing proposals such as the army's proposal for "scattering and driving of clouds by jet planes flying in a special geometric formation" and the proposal of the police for "a frog wedding to be performed by temple priests" (HGO 2). Sampath is born on the day of great relief for the town when there comes a thunderous shower of rain after the scorching summer heat and there is the dropping of food supplies from a Swedish relief plane. The neighbours assure Kulfi, Sampath's mother, that "her son is destined for greatness" because "the world, large and mysterious beyond Shahkot, had taken notice of him... Even people in Sweden have remembered to send a birthday present"(HGO 12). Step by step, Kiran Desai builds up the story with intricate threads of meaning and expression.

After years of failure at school, failure at work, of spending his days dreaming in the tea stalls and singing to himself in the public gardens, Sampath Chawla was becoming a headache for his family. Mr. R. K. Chawla felt his son was progressing steadily in the wrong direction. Instead of trying to work his way upwards, he started on a downward climb and now he is almost as close to the bottom as he could ever be but Sampath's grandmother believes, "'But the world is round', 'Wait and see! Even if it appears he is going to downhill, he will come up out on the other side. Yes, on the top of the world. He is just taking the longer route (HGO 26)."

No one believed him, until one day the prediction actually came true. The metamorphosis took place when Sampath Chawla lost his menial job at the post office after performing an impromptu cross-dressing strip-tease at his boss's daughter's wedding. Confined to his house in disgrace, he ran away during his family's absence. He settled in a guava orchard and behaved like sage.

One day, Sampath boards a bus aimlessly and impulsively and as the bus stops for a moment before it moves up the slope of a hill, passengers see Sampath leaping from a window, "racing into the wilderness towards an orchard visible far up the slope...with a feeling of great urgency," and climb up "an ancient tree, silence held between its branches like a prayer" (HGO 49). It is a guava tree, larger and more magnificent than he had ever seen before. As Sampath conceals in the branches of this tree, he is overtaken by a wave of peace and contentment. He thinks that he is in the right place at last and now lodged in a fork in the guava tree, he falls into a deep slumber. Despite several attempts by the family members, neighbours, doctors and holy men, Sampath obstinately clings to his space on the guava tree and thus escapes from work and his oppressive family.

Away from tremendous familial pressures to perform well and from societal expectations, he finds tranquillity in the lap of Mother Nature in communication with the creatures of the earth. He had decided to remain there

forever, whatever may come. Overnight he was defiled, became what some called a 'Monkey Baba', others 'Tree Baba' because his dwelling place was the guava orchard. He started giving what was called 'The Sermon in the Guava Tree'. The unfathomable wisdom came in an inspired moment of self-preservation. Therefore, he knew people's secrets which devotees mistook for his clairvoyance or his super human power and showered all kinds of respect and veneration on him.

As the popularity of Sampath and his hermit-like reputation grows, the Atheist Society and the Branch to Uncover Fraudulent Holy Men spring into action and send a spy to investigate the secret of all the fuss about Sampath. This spy asks a strange question: "I do not know what path I should take. I do not know what questions to ask. In fact, I do not even know what I want." Despite his attempt to respond to this question, "Sampath's head began to buzz" and he "gazed moodily into the distance" (HGO 95). Embarrassed by Sampath's silence, his grandmother, Ammaji, defensively says, "Sometimes his mind leaves the earthly plane" while the spy notes down: "Avoids questioning by pretending otherworldliness" (HGO 96). In course of his investigations, the spy is "convinced that the secret of Sampath's presence, his odd words and antics, would be found in Kulfi's cooking pot" (HGO 104). His curiosity lands him up on a tree just above the large cooking pot of Kulfi, and on the day of monkey-catching operations, he falls into the boiling cooking pot.

Another theme that has fascinated Indian women novelists is the place of faith in the socio-cultural life of India. Adherence to faith in the superior wisdom of a *Guru* shapes the action and conduct of many people, especially of the Indian middle class. The ascetic has always been held in reverence in India, what really matters is not the real or imaginary powers of the *Guru*, but the phenomenon of people's faith and attitude of mind implied in such situations. While the blind faith of the people represents a kind of moral weakness as well as a very elemental strength, the people who make a business of spiritualism certainly present an aspect of sin or evil. The novelist feels that reason and rational thinking in Indian societies are put to death, while fanaticism is prevalent. Consequently, the novel satirizes the Indian sense of religiosity.

In an interview to *Bold Type's* (a monthly book review by e-mail) question: "What was your process for writing this book--did you start with the characters or with the plot?" Kiran Desai responded:

I started with a very small idea, really. 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, lived in a tree for many, many years, until he died. He died last year, I believe. 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. When I started writing it I had no idea what the story would be; I had no idea of the plot. It was sort of gathered momentum that drew me along. It was an incredibly messy process and I don't know if it was the smartest way to go about it because this was my first book, so I had to teach myself how to write as I was writing it, and I don't know if I went about it the right way but I certainly had a lot of fun. It was very messy though--I had to throw out many pages--about half the book I think I ended up editing. Once I was aware of all the different ways to go, all the plot turns to take. (Vol. 3.2, May 1999) ^[3]

The novel can be read at several levels – as a fast moving comic tale full of rich descriptions and cartoon like characters, but also a deeper study of the pathos of familial misunderstandings, the ridiculousness of hero-worship, the unpredictability of commercialism and the inefficiency of officials. Desai gives us much cause to ponder the loss of communication between what people actually hear and what they want to hear.

Kiran Desai analyses the framework of social class, Indian traditions, education, and urbanization to present the mundane world of the people in rural India. This satirical novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is based on the lifestyle in a small North Indian town of Shahkot. It narrates the simplicity and freedom of life in a guava orchard.

Kiran Desai's first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, is uproarious and whimsical. It has several dimensions of story and plot which contribute to comic storytelling. In addition to this, it encompasses a clever, haunting parable that expresses the joys of simplicity while conveying the absurdities of everyday events in contemporary India. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is the story of Sampath Chawla who escapes from the boredom of middle class living in the sleepy, North India town of Shahkot into the comical freedom of life on a guava tree. He mysteriously disappears when the army and the government agencies invade the guava orchard to drive away the monkeys.

Desai pleasantly surprises all by offering her readers with something different, unique and strange happening in the form of a dull-witted young man-turned *Baba* of unfathomable wisdom perched on a guava tree dishing out one-liners pregnant with sagely advice for the benefit of his devotees.

Mr. Chawla, swift as lightning spotting an excellent opportunity to turn his son's whimsical act into one of gain, is quick to capitalize on his popularity. Soon, Mr. Chawla has made arrangements for his family's accommodation in the watchman's shed in the orchard; a cot is raised up for Sampath to recline on comfortably, a garden umbrella spruced up to block out the sun above Sampath's cot, a pulley system installed to carry up his food, and the services of a potter requisitioned for a regular supply of pots to enable him to answer nature's call. It wasn't long before Mr. Chawla saw the commercial possibilities of having a holy man in the family: "Sampath might make his family fortune. They could be rich!... How many men of unfathomable wisdom possessed unfathomable bank accounts? What an opportunity had arisen out of nowhere! (HGO 68)." And pretty soon the guava orchard became the latest stop along the spiritual tourism trail.

The *Baba* loved the monkeys, who jumped up on the tree top. He liked their company, their pranks and felt absolutely at home (pun intended) when they played around him. Being incarnation of the Hindu God Hanuman,

they commanded immunity as well as respect; being our ancestors, they were seen as primeval creatures-an important link between the past and the present. Sampath called them by various names such as ‘*you badmashes*’. The monkeys, however, added a touch of ribaldry to the holy situation in the guava orchard. When the devotees offered bottles of liquor to the *Baba*, though he did not drink at all, the monkeys turned alcoholic and posed a threat to the devotees.

Sampath’s father, who had been exploiting his son’s new role of a messiah to his financial and social advantage, felt threatened by the monkey business and approached the District Collector and the other top officials to make it clear that it was their responsibility to do something about this disruption to sanctity and peace in Shahkot. Apart from the Superintendent of Police, the District Collector and other top officials, a Chief Medical Officer, a lady from a Monkey Protection Society, a bird watching Brigadier from a local army outpost, a member of the Branch to Uncover Fraudulent Holy Men (BUFHM), a never-die saying spy from the Atheist Society (AS), a scientist from the biology department at the Lady Chatterjee University - an expert in human - langur interaction, several outraged devotees from the Hanuman Temple, interested townsfolk and Sampath’s family members got embroiled in this fantastic imbroglio. They worked comically at cross purposes to confound the scene completely. However; things took a bizarre turn when Sampath *Baba* magically disappeared right in front of everyone’s eyes. At this stage Kiran Desai portrays *Baba*’s disappearance precisely in short sentences to evoke the reader’s response to this wonderful event:

They looked here. They looked there. Up and down the guava tree. In the neighbouring trees. In the bushes. Behind the rocks. They stared up into the branches again and again, into the undisturbed composition of leaves and fruit bobbing up and down. Its painfully empty cot. But wait! Upon the cot lay a guava, a single guava that was much, much bigger than the others: rounder star-based, weathered...It was surrounded by the silver langurs, who stared at it with their intent charcoal faces. On one side was a brown mark, rather like a birthmark.... (HGO 207)

The mystic *Baba* perhaps attained *Nirvana*. The Cinema Monkey who had a penchant for young women, picked up the fruit himself before anybody had time to move and, calm-eyed and wise, holding it close to his chest, with the other monkeys following in a brand, he leapt from the guava tree’s branches and moved away. Kiran Desai’s magic realism raises question about the *Baba*’s real identity. The way the monkeys carried away the fruit, ‘holding it close to his chest’ (HGO 208) suggests ‘the fruit’ to be a dead monkey. Who did *Baba* belong to? The monkeys or to us humans? Or, is it irrelevant to raise such an issue? (Sharma 124).

The story of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* progresses with breath-taking rapidity. It is sustained through Desai’s description of minute details which connect all the threads of the story. The vivid portrayal of incidents and events make the story interesting and amusing. In addition to this, she creates a mystery around the character of the mystic *Baba* with delicate touches of fictional art.

The novel irradiates a fine sense of humour, a strong national flavour and an extraordinary delineation of character from daily life. The ending, though may seem contrived, is appropriate for such a novel, which retains some amount of mysticism about it and also sustains magic realism in style, and technique. Moreover, it has a sprinkle of social realism in it. The novel may seem simple at the outset, but on closer observation is a microcosm of humanity. It depicts man’s eternal struggle for personal space, the human tendency to make profit out of any situation. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni aptly remarks that, the novel is a delicious blend of humour and magic, hilarity and wisdom. It is an unusual story. Kiran Desai’s language continues to delight the reader long after complete reading of the last page. It is Kiran Desai, who has been the main stay of the new age Indian women authors. Not to be biased with the gender, her easy and close-knit style of story-telling, connotation of words and phrases that touch the mindset of the reader instantly.

The various events narrated in Desai’s novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* extend far beyond topics characteristics of postcolonial literature. It is no less ingenious in its treatment of identity and subjectivity, and the myth-making or mythical systems on which they operate. Her first sprightly novel ends in a raucous bang of comic eccentricity that adds to the creativity of the novelist.

It is pertinent that *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* manages to capture perfectly the nuances of elusive Indian humour in a pleasant manner. There is truly one episode of violence in the novel but it is deftly transmuted into humour. Pinky’s emotional outbursts produce some incredibly wild results. She passionately bit Hungry Hop boy’s ear so hard that he shouted out and his voice echoed in the town. Desai does a clever job of orchestrating these events, and thereby introduces bright folk-art colours.

Desai has secured a distinctive place among the great contemporary Indian authors exploring life and society in India and elsewhere. Her novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is a charming, lyrical, fable about destiny-a work of comic eccentricity, charisma, and joy in language and life. Kiran’s language is original; she brings something totally fresh and new to the writing scene in an era of diasporic fiction.

In the last three decades there has been tremendous growth in the narrative style, technique and language in English fiction. For instance, Kiran Desai applies the technique of magic realism in her maiden novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. It is a magnificent blending of comedy and fantasy. Her novel portrays a vivid picture of the socio-cultural scenario of the Indian subcontinent and the universal intricacies of human experience.

The opening of Kiran Desai’s first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* presents snippets of newspaper reports about an ongoing drought:

‘It is all a result of volcanic ash thrown up in the latest spurt of activity in Tierra del Fuego.’ ‘The problem lies in the currents off the West African coastline and the unexplained molecular movement observed in the polar ice-

caps'. And: 'Iraq attempts to steal monsoon by deliberately creating low pressure over desert provinces and deflecting winds from India' and even: 'Hungarian musician offers to draw rain clouds from Europe to India via the music of his flute'. (HGO 1)

The transmutation of this report shows Desai's talent for observing minute details of local absurdities.

Her extraordinary contribution to this tradition is matched by her innovations in theme, technique and vision that illuminate her craft of fiction. As a dedicated young and promising writer she has aptly got recognition for her Man Booker Prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. What strikes us most is her precocious maturity as a novelist, her sincerity and devotion to the craft of fiction. This has been also possible because of her erudition, range of experience and illuminating study of fictional characters like Mr.Sampath and Pinky in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and Biju, Sai, Gyan, Jemubhai Patel, in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

In her dazzling, much-heralded debut novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, Kiran Desai tells a wryly hilarious and poignant story of life, love, and family relationships - simultaneously capturing the vivid picture of the Indian subcontinent and the universal intricacies of human experience. Thereby she contributes to the vision of a humane and civilised society. A rich tapestry of contemporary socio-cultural issues illuminate Desai's sensitive approach to post-modern life and values.

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Each character has his/her own particular sense of humour. In *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, Kiran Desai creates characters and situations and allows for the reader to have easy laughs throughout the novel no matter what is their taste for humour. Her novel stands on a meticulously presented technique of magic realism and crafted piece of gently comic satire-a small, finely tuned fable that sustains the author's presentation of characters and theme. The novel has a close-knit structure which illuminates her narrative art. It contains twenty five chapters (at 209 pages), in which the novelist shows the progression of the novel in an absorbing narrative which develops the interrelation of characters and their experiences in the cultural matrix of the Indian society. These unnatural events are woven together with the ordinary, real-life elements in the novel and the reader accepts it without questioning.

Post-1980 Indian English fiction is postmodern and postcolonial fiction with a new exuberance of language resulting in the creation of an Indian English idiom, and its emphasis on history and myths of the land. In fact, post-modern novels are written keeping in mind the elite audience both at home and abroad. To use Edward Said's terminology we can say that postmodern novels are 'in the world and about the world, hence worldly'. To justify this it may be pointed out that Indian English fiction has brought revolution in the whole range of Indian English literature in the choice of subjects and language of expression. Its portrayal of characters is appropriate to the situation. Thus writers of Indian English fiction re-create contemporary society with insight and acumen.

Conclusion

As a careful observer of behaviour, with a fine eye for revealing details, Desai brings her narratives and characters to life. She illustrates her themes, without making moral judgements about her characters. She uses the available resources of close-knit narrative in a very real and compelling manner. The various events narrated in Desai's novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* extend far beyond topics characteristics of postcolonial literature. It is no less ingenious in its treatment of identity and subjectivity, and the myth-making or mythical systems on which they operate. Her first sprightly novel ends in a in a raucous bang of comic eccentricity that adds to the creativity of the novelist. Desai has secured a distinctive place among the great contemporary Indian authors exploring life and society in India and elsewhere. Her novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is a charming, lyrical, fable about destiny-a work of comic eccentricity, charisma, and joy in language and life. Kiran's language is original; she brings something totally fresh and new to the writing scene in an era of socio-cultural ethos in fiction. A close study of the novel shows that Kiran Desai has a remarkable gift for humour that sparkles throughout the narrative of the plot.

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