

HULLABALOO IN THE GUAVA ORCHARD

Kiran Desai

HULLABALOO IN THE GUAVA ORCHARD (1998)

Story

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard is the debut novel by Kiran Desai, daughter of the well-known novelist Anita Desai. It is a whimsical story, told in the magical realism mode made famous by Borges and, more recently, the Indian writer Salman Rushdie. A greater influence on the novel, however, is R K Narayan and his slow but powerful depiction of human frailties in his fictional south Indian town of Malgudi. Desai has set her story in a similarly sleepy and insignificant town, which she calls Shakhot. It, too, is imaginary, though we know it is somewhere in the foothills of the Himalayas (and presumably in Himachal Pradesh, where the author has spent some time). The main character is Sampath (another link to Narayan, whose novel *The Printer of Malgudi* features a central character of the same name). First, however, we are introduced to Kulfi who is very pregnant and very hungry. On the night when a ferocious monsoon sweeps away a long drought, Kulfi gives birth to Sampath. Because of his auspicious arrival and because of the birthmark on his face, he is given a name that means 'good fortune,' although his mother is somewhat doubtful that he will amount to much. Twenty years pass without comment, and then Sampath's father gives him a stern lecture on 'improving himself' and getting a better job than the one he has in the Post Office. The hapless Sampath, however, gets himself fired for indecent exposure at the wedding of his boss's daughter. Feeling sorry for her son, Kulfi gives him a guava, which appears to transform him into a new man, full of initiative and energy. He defies his father and runs away to a guava orchard, where he makes a tree his home. His parents try to persuade him to climb down and come home, but the local people are convinced that he is a great ascetic and holy man. Their impression of his omniscience is skilfully manipulated by Sampath, who is able to comment on details of their lives only because he has opened and read private letters while working at the Post Office. (This element of the story—a charlatan but likeable guru—is adapted from Narayan's *The Guide*). At first his father disowns him, but then realises the financial advantage of having a clairvoyant in the family and is pleased when money-carrying tourists flock to 'the famous Baba [sage] in his treetop hermitage.' Things come to a head when the monkeys who live in the guava orchard with Sampath begin to attack people and the town's officials decide to eradicate them. The army is called in and a raid on the orchard is planned. Sampath intervenes on behalf of his simian friends, in a magical and inventive way. When his father comes looking for him, he finds only a large guava with a brown spot on its skin to represent his departed son, who is being transported to the Himalayas by the monkeys.

Themes

Self-realisation On its surface, the story of Sampath, the idle dreamer who becomes one with the monkeys, appears to be a slight, humorous satire on conventional life. At a deeper level, however, it traces the struggle of a young man to find his true identity in the face of a demanding father. From the beginning, we sense that Sampath is not an ordinary person, but we are not sure which way his life will take him. Nor is Sampath. This is because his father is constantly nagging him to improve himself, get a better job, make new friends, get married to a 'nice girl.' Even after Sampath becomes famous as a holy man and brings new money into the family through the tourist trade, his father seeks to control him. His father builds a proper hermitage for his ascetic son, one that will reflect well on the rest of the family, but Sampath refuses to climb down out of the tree. That refusal defines his new identity.

Conformity Most of the characters in the novel are worn down by conformity. Nothing can be more conventional than working in the Post Office, and this is precisely what Sampath does (and hates). Mr Chawla, Sampath's father, is the paragon of conventionality, a bank manager who does exercises every morning and reads the newspaper at breakfast. Several other minor characters—a local

politician, a military man and even a 'spy' for the Atheist Society—are also stiff with conformity. The most unconventional characters are Sampath (when he leaves the Post Office and takes up residence in the guava orchard as a hold man) and the monkey who live there with him. Sampath has a lively imagination, while the monkeys get drunk and play wildly in the trees, things that are either beyond the conformist characters or are considered uncouth by them. The novel ends with a symbolic scene: As Mr Chawla scrutinises his bank balance, Sampath and the monkeys ascend higher and higher into the sky, away from petty concerns of the town below.

Characters

Sampath Sampath is the feckless and accidental hero of this whimsical tale. Born under auspicious stars and with auspicious physical marks, he is still no where on the road to greatness twenty years later. He is clearly not a normal young man, however, and will not listen to his father's lectures about how 'to get on in life.' Liberated from the constraints of his father's petty mentality and the rules of the Post Office, where he worked, he finds a new identity and freedom in a guava tree.

Kulfi Kulfi is Sampath's mother, who entertained high hopes for her son when he was born on the night a rain ended a drought. As her name implies (*kulfi* is a favourite Indian sweet), she has a large appetite, but also a big heart.

Mr Chawla Mr Chawla is Sampath's demanding and self-centered father. He is a 'go-getter' who is bewildered by his son's lacksidical approach to life. He has an important position at a bank and expects his whole family to accede to his wishes and meet his expectations. He also has a greedy side and smiles when Sampath's surprising change of identity brings in money.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

SAMPATH (Trapped)

Character Sampath is the main character of this whimsical novel. The son of a bank manager, he just doesn't fit into the world he is born in. We know he is special because he is born on the night of a powerful monsoon that ends a long drought. In the morning, his mother held the new-born in her arms, 'a creature that looked like he'd come from another planet altogether, or had been discovered in the woods, something alien and strange.' Feckless and bored, he seems unable to connect with anyone, with the exception of his mother. His ambition extends only as far as a menial job in the Post Office, which irritates his father.

Activities

Sampath works, or at least give the impression of working, at the Post Office. He hates the routine of filing and copying documents, and actually spends a lot of the time steaming open and reading letters written to and from his neighbours. He also likes to wander in the town's only park, singing obscure songs that he's heard on the radio. He fantasises a lot, too, talks to animals and dreams about living in another world.

Illustrative moments

Self-centred Although likeable, Sampath, like most dreamers, is self-centred. A good example of this quality occurs in the opening scene of the second chapter, when he wakes up in the early morning. 'All around him, his lay and snored...What a racket! Sampath listened to each hostile inhalation. Even in sleep, he thought, disgusted, his family showed themselves incapable of pleasant displays of consideration. Self-indulgent as even, they worked their way noisily through the dreams, keeping Sampath, meanwhile, awake and tossing. Even his mother, whom he loved most of all, had forgotten his in sleep.' Sampath clearly lacks empathy, which only underlines his singularity, his incompatibility with the world around him.

Idle Sampath lacks energy to do anything, except sing exotic songs and dream about flying in airplanes. His lethargy, and its sharp contrast with his 'can-do' father, is humorously described in a scene at the breakfast table. 'Mr Chawla looked over to where his [twenty-year-old] son was slouched at the table, his breakfast a spreading untidiness of crumbs.' Mr Chawla sees a fly buzzing around his untouched food and 'taking notice of his distressing lack of initiative, brought down his rolled-up newspaper--boom!' Mr Chawla ask his son about his job at the Post Office, and Sampath can only say it is all right. 'All right!' Mr Chawla exclaimed. 'If things were all right, you wouldn't be

earning the same salary as last year and the year before that.' Sampath's idleness is cured only when he eats guava in the mysterious orchard at the end of this magical story.

Trapped Sampath's problem is that he feels trapped in the world he was born into, his family and his town, and especially the soulless Post Office, where he works. He doesn't belong. He talks more to cows and crows than to people. And he wants to escape. These feelings are described in a scene when he is morose at home and taken refuge on the roof balcony. 'He didn't want another job. He wanted open spaces. And he wanted them in large swathes. Here [in this town] a person's experiences of silence and space were squeezed and warped into underground forms that were forced to hide: between the eye and the page of a newspaper that someone never turned; in a woman staring into the distance; behind muttered prayers....But Sampath was allowed no peace whatsoever.' When his mother, aware that he is unhappy, brings him a guava to eat, he snarls, 'I don't want a guava. I want freedom.'

KULFI (Mysterious)

Character Kulfi, the mother of the protagonist, Sampath, is a beguiling character. From the beginning she is, like son, somewhat magical and exaggerated. She expresses a vague sense of longing, and the author tells us that her house 'was too small for her desire.' During her pregnancy, she draws pictures on the walls of the house 'in desperation for another landscape.' During the drought, he has an immense appetite and bribes vegetable and meat sellers in the market to get her extra portions. Again, like her son, she does not integrate with the townspeople, but keeps to herself, her mind clearly focused on 'a point invisible to everybody but herself.' She is, however, a good wife and a devoted mother, the only one with whom Sampath communicates. As the novel develops, she becomes discontent and further alienated from life, until she finds, or rediscovers, a role in feeding Sampath, when he takes up residence in the guava orchard. Now she delights in cooking every meal, in hunting down herbs and berries and leaves in the orchard. When everyone else is upset by Sampath's new life, she is the only member of the family to say 'let him be.' More than that, it is she who feeds her son the wise guru, just as she feeds him in her womb. It is she who defines him.

Activities Kulfi spends most of her in activities connected with food. Buying things in the market, preparing them, cooking them and eating them. When her son becomes a holy man sitting in a guava tree, she takes pleasure in looking for new kinds of plants that she can mix into the meals she cooks for him. Even she is not actively involved with food, she thinks about it.

Illustrative moments

Appetite Kulfi is obsessed with food. When she is pregnant with Sampath, her stomach grows to an enormous size and the neighbours comment that she acts strangely. One person says, 'Well, what do you expect from a woman with a baby in her belly the size of a fish?' Then the author comments, 'But Kulfi was not thinking of the baby in her belly. She was thinking of fish themselves...Of fish big enough and good enough to feed the hunger that had overtaken her. .She thought of fish curries and fish kebabs. Of pomfret...of shoals of whiskered shrimp., of chewy mussels. She thought of food in all its many forms. Of fenugreek and camel milk, yam and corn. Mangoes and coconuts and custard apples....' One cannot say that she is a glutton, rather that the world is too small for her exaggerated desires.

Mysterious Kulfi is an other-worldly character, a female or maternal version of her son. Her eccentric behaviour is illustrated in a scene toward the end of the novel. Sampath is reigning over the guava orchard as a holy man dispensing wisdom to the credulous townspeople. Kulfi comes to the orchard to gather ingredients to cook his next meal. A man appears and tries to dissuade her, saying that mushrooms might be poisonous or the animals dangerous. Kulfi ignores his words and begins to hunt for a special kind of leaf. It doesn't exist, but she believes it must and spends hours looking for it. When she finds it, we are unsure if it is her imagination or reality.

Maternal Despite her magical other-worldliness, Kulfi is rooted to reality in her role as Sampath's mother. This is poignantly illustrated when her son returns home one day from another uninspiring stint at the Post Office and goes straight to the roof balcony to seek a hint of freedom. Kulfi knows he is upset and unhappy and she asks herself if she could be the cause. After all, she thinks, I bore him,

I raised him, I fed him. Although he is two storeys above her, on the roof, she can feel his restlessness in her own body. Then she does what she always does. Silently, she brings him a plate of food.

Mr. CHAWLA (Finicky)

Character Mr. Chawla is the father of Sampath, the protagonist of this whimsical novel. In sharp contrast with his imaginative and flighty son, Mr Chawla is a rule-governed head clerk of a bank in a provincial city. He is a model of success and discipline, at least to himself, and attempts to order his family around like a petty bureaucrat, but we see that he is actually a weak, uncertain person underneath who compensates for his inner lack of confidence by attempting to control the external world. Having lost control of his somewhat zany wife, he turns his attention to his idle son, Sampath, who defeats him as well. Once Sampath accidentally becomes a sought-after spiritual advisor, Mr Chawla changes his opposition to him and starts to exploit the financial advantages of a son who lives in a tree as a holy man and dispenses advice to large numbers of people. Mr Chawla's moral façade crumbles further when we learn that he is embezzling the account he had set up for his son's devotees to contribute to, and in the final scene we watch him attempting, yet again, to exert some control over a frenzied scene in which a troop of monkeys whisk his son away from him.

Activities As a forty-year-old bank employee, Mr Chawla is a man of habit. He goes through his morning routine, including physical exercise, with military precision. When Sampath, his son, ends up in a tree and begins to attract a crowd of worshippers, he gets busy and makes sure that his son has a proper hermitage and that the visitors are able to buy flowers and fruits to give to Sampath, the guru. He puts up posters advertising his son's spiritual powers and sets up a bank account so that well-wishers can donate money to the 'holy man.'

Illustrative moments

Finicky Mr Chawla is a stickler for rules and regulations. Chaos and disorder are painful to the mind of the bank clerk. His finicky need for an orderly life is illustrated in the first chapter, when his son is about to be born and he thinks about the changes a baby will bring. His initial thought is, predictably, money-related: 'If the baby takes after her [his wife, who eats too much], we are really in for trouble.' He then shudders at the prospect of 'fits of tears and messy puddles of life, the sticky humanness of things.' But he is a man of action. He goes to the Mission School and enrolls the two-day-old infant, collects tonics from the pharmacy and then takes out books on baby care from the library. Back home, he issues commands to his heavily pregnant wife. 'You must stand up and exercise. You must sit down after exercise. Don't eat raw fruit. No tea on an empty stomach. No singing. And keep yourself extra clean.' Needless to say, the little Napoleon's commands are ignored and his wife does whatever she pleases (mostly praying, singing and consulting astrologers). This is our first indication that the world of Mr R. K Chawla will crack apart and result in a hullabaloo.

Opportunist Mr Chawla is not always so ludicrous, however. His uncanny instinct for sizing up a situation and devising plans for money-making is also evident throughout the novel. A good example of his opportunistic tendencies is given toward the end of the story, when his son has become well-established as a holy man in the guava orchard. Mr Chawla stands underneath the tree and considers the situation. The monkeys are getting out of hand, but the bank account set up to collect donations to the holy man is growing by leaps and bounds. He smiles because he is eager to buy shares in the VIP Hosiery company. Looking around, he sees the advertisements—Dr Sood's Dental Center, Gentlemen's Tailors and so forth—and smiles again. 'All this was paid for by lavish donations' that went into the bank account. 'If were not for Mr Chawla none of this would exist. None of it.' The scene ends as Mr Chawla approaches his son and suggests that they build a 'proper hermitage with cement and a painted door.' This is the petty bank clerk in his element, seizing an opportunity to make money even if it means sanctioning his rebellious son's idiotic decision to live in a tree.