

## ***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 Shakhnot. 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.

### **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.

### **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.