

Kulfi (in K. Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*) 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, she 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.