

## **Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*: A Binding Imaginative Comic Tale of a World Gone Slightly Mad**

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**Abstract:** Kiran Desai's first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) is undoubtedly a conquest in comic storytelling. The novel presents Desai as a fresh and highly self-confident voice. It is her first book and won the top prize for the Betty Trask Awards in 1998. Desai is at her very best in translating the very word 'hullabaloo' into madness. Her imaginative tale is so fantastic that the readers are kept engrossed throughout. No doubt this is a magical tale of a world slightly gone mad. The imaginative satire dominates the entire novel.

**Keywords:** Hullabaloo, orchard, madness, monkey..

The new generation of Indian writers in English have penned extremely absorbing literary pieces and kept the heads of their predecessors high. Kiran Desai, the daughter of renowned Indo-English writer mother Anita Desai continued the rich legacy of her mother and other writers of Indian writing in English in a brilliant way. She touched the glorious heights of fame when her just second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) bagged the coveted Booker Prize of 2006. She inherited the skills of writing from quite an early age and made a name for herself with her debut novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) as a writer with exceptional talent. It is her first book and won the top prize for the Betty Trask Awards in 1998. In her debut novel Kiran Desai is at her best in the art of storytelling. In a way she has fused "myth with history and politics" ([www.themanbookerprize.com/perspective/qanda](http://www.themanbookerprize.com/perspective/qanda)) The story opens in the sleeping town of Shahkot where Sampath, a male child is born to Kulfi, a twenty one years old newly married to Mr. R.K. Chawla, Head Clerk in Shahkot Reserve Bank and during the time of trouble the birth of the male child brought happiness in the family. After a period of 20 years the Chawla family are now 5 members in the family Mr. Chawla, his wife Kulfi and their two children Sampath and Pinky and the oldest of them all the old mother of Mr. Chawla who is called Ammaji by the members of the family. Sampath has now grown into 20 year old young boy who has a past full of failures as a student. Despite Sampath's failures Mr. Chawla somehow managed to use his links and earned him a job in the post office of Shahkot. Mr. Chawla thought that a job in hand would make Sampath serious towards his work but his belief was turned wrong by Sampath absolutely. All advice of Mr. Chawla fell into deaf ears of Sampath and he enjoyed the pampering of his grandmother and mother. Kiran Desai presents humorous picture of the post-office where Sampath worked. He

was surrounded by interesting colleagues in the post office. Desai weaves quite interesting characters in Ms Jyotsana and Mr. Gupta who were given the responsibility to look after the arrangements of the wedding of the daughter of the post office but they were busy in their own discussions;

When it comes to a wedding, all official work should stop and the staff of any office whose boss's family is having a wedding must assist in making the appropriate arrangements. This is customary office protocol. They had all been given their own appointed tasks to carry out. (*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, p. 32)

A typical humorous boss-subordinate relationship tickles the readers. On the wedding day Sampath created a great chaos by his sheer mad behaviour. When the guests gathered in the house of Mr. Gupta, "... slowly, deliciously, feeling it was the right thing to do, Sampath began to disrobe. Horrified shrieks rose from his audience. However, in this flushed moment, he mistook them for cries of admiration." All shouts to stop him were in vain and "... Sampath climbed deftly on to the highest tier of the fountain and, in one swift movement, lowered both his trousers and his underpants." (p. 41) This act made Sampath "jobless, sober and soaked to the skin" (p. 41) and was asked by his boss not to report to work which was not a shock to Sampath as "he hated his job anyway. He didn't want his job. He didn't want it, he couldn't do it and he didn't want another job. He decided not to think of it again." (p. 46) Unaware of what was going on in the head of Sampath his mother Kulfi asked him whether he would like to eat guava. Initially Sampath was reluctant but then looking at the fruit he felt "Guavas are tasty and refreshing and should be eaten whenever possible." (p. 46) This incident lays the foundation of what is going to lie ahead in the novel. Ultimately he said, "I want my freedom" (p. 47) As the members of the family left to attend a wedding ceremony Sampath let himself out of the house and boarded a bus towards unknown destination. When the bus stopped Sampath took no time in "racing into the wilderness towards an old orchard" (p. 48) "The tree Sampath had climbed was guava tree." (p. 50) This orchard matched something he had imagined all his life; ... This was the way of riches and this was a king's life, he thought. . ." (p. 51) He told himself "Yes, he was in the right place at last." (p. 51) Thus, the story of Sampath's association with the guava orchard begins and his desire "I want freedom" got fulfilled. Panic broke in the Chawla family. Everyone felt that Sampath is mentally ill and he needs proper treatment, but all medical and other efforts to make Sampath come down the tree failed. Everyone came up with new advice. Someone advised to "arrange a marriage for him" (p. 57). The whole scene of calling a girl to see and marry Sampath was really full of fun and humour, but in vain and the guava tree finally became his abode. Sampath gradually ascended to a position of foreseer as his predictions about the personal lives of the people turned out to be correct. People made their offerings to Sampath making Mr. Chawla realize the importance of his position and money associated with his position. He felt;

Sampath might make his family fortune. They could be rich! How

many hermits were secretly wealthy? How many holy men were not at all the beggars they appeared to be? How many men of unfathomable wisdom possessed unfathomable bank accounts? What an opportunity had arisen out of nowhere!" (p. 68)

Mr. Chawala canceled the plan of returning to Shahkot and started focusing on his efforts to convert the guava orchard into the mine of money. Sampath was now known the 'tree baba' and his popularity grew in Shahkot and nearby places drawing all and sundry to the guava orchard. As Sampath was growing into a respectable baba his sister Pinky was developing a love relationship with the ice-cream boy.

Kiran Desai has wonderfully depicted a unique combination of commerce growing with religion. Sampath's seat at the guava orchard converted the place into a commercial setting; "He obtained cuts from the scooter rickshaw men and the bus drivers to enter and park in the compound . . . Even buses thundering up the highways en route to farther destinations began making regular tours for their passengers to view the famous Baba in his treetop hermitage, the sweetness of his smile, the vacant peace of his gaze." (p. 92)

The story took an interesting turn when monkeys started habitating the guava orchard. "The behaviour of the monkeys was just another proclamation of Sampath's authenticity... He was an endless source of wonder. He had even cast his spell upon the wild beats of the market." (p. 109) As the popularity of Sampath was growing so was Pinky's relationship with the ice-cream boy growing and keeps the interest of the readers going. Desai shows another mad act into making in the form of growing relationship between Pinky and the Hungry Hop boy or the ice-cream boy. Meeting the boy was a frequent practice of Pinky whenever she went to the market. She enjoyed looking at the boy and buy the ice-cream from him. One day Pinky goes to the market early in the day. The day was has something mad in store for the young hungry hop boy when looking at her he speaks: "What, you want to eat ice cream this early in the morning? Clearly living in the mountains getting to you brain,' he said, smiling" (p. 113) Pinky's reaction was crazy;

Seeing him she was filled with a rush of elation and rage. How placid and smiling he was! For a minute she thought she might kiss him, but the vein of aggression pounded powerfully within her and she bit him instead. She bit his ear so hard that the Hungry Hop boy shouted out and his voice boomeranged about the town. (p. 113)

This incident became the talk of the town and Pinky was arrested. But, how can the sister of Sampath, the *baba*, be kept behind the bars? Realizing the identity of Pinky she was set free by the police. Desai weaves humour while showing the sorry state of the police superintendent of Shahkot who expresses his apologies; "I am sorry," he said. "we did not know your family name. Please come along with us. We will escort you back to your family." (p. 115) Kiran Desai shows the hollowness of so called religious people of the modern age. One such character is the Spy of the Atheist Society, who is restless at seeing the popularity of Sampath and tries his level best to prove him to be a fraud. But all his efforts are in vain. Desai's satirizes the sorry state of such happenings and shows that, how in the name of God, the business of moneymaking is flourishing. The

novel gets its title's justification when the actual hullabaloo begins in the guava orchard and the causes of hullabaloo were monkeys. These monkeys found the bottles of wine and got the first taste of the wine making them the greatest menace for the visitors in particular and the entire orchard in general. Desai's excellent imaginative skills are very obvious by the way she invented this incident in the novel which startles the readers at first and then keeps them alert to know what is going to happen next. Such incident can take place only in the mad and crazy world. Desai is excellent in inventing such event; "One afternoon, about a month after their first appearance in the orchard, the monkeys found five bottles of rum while rifling through the bag of a man who had stopped to see Sampath on his way to a wedding. They drank it all up and that afternoon. . (p. 122) These monkeys became a huge cause of concern for the devotees who came to visit *baba* at the guava orchard.

Monkeys were becoming havoc for people but more so for Mr. Chawla. He has no clue whatsoever to solve the problem. Mr. Chawla had sleepless nights as all his dreams were on the verge of being shattered; "...the family bank account in the State Bank of India was growing by leaps and bounds and he was eager to buy shares in the VIP Hosiery Products company..." But, monkeys didn't seem to understand the concern of neither Mr. Chawla nor Sampath and they continued to rule the region by their hullabaloo after drinking the liquor. Kiran Desai shows the madness of how a small problem takes the shape of great social menace. When the monkey trouble was getting out of hand of Mr. Chawla had no other way but to inform the administrative authorities. In order to find the solution to the problem Mr. Chawla made attempts to seek the help of authorities. The process of meeting the administrative authorities of Shahkot is full of humour. The first of its kind is the character of the CMO of Shahkot who is confident to solve this problem without any great fuss. He is in all praise about himself and his administrative skills for handling such problems that he boasts to his wife; "You know... he went on jubilantly, perhaps I will have a chance to try out my new hypothesis. If the leader of the group is killed and hung in full view of the other monkeys, they might disband and disappear into the forest... Of course, they might also just elect another head monkey." (p. 135-136) He never solved any problem but he thought he has solution to every problem. On one hand the dream castle of the Chawla family was about to collapse and on the other Pinky was in mad pursuits for Hungry Hop. Non accessibility to the ice-cream boy made Pinky irritable but the poor boy after being smitten was under house-arrest and completely under vigilance of the women of the family. Seeing no way to meet the boy Pinky decided to write a letter to him expressing her love in her unique style; "I am so sorry to have bitten your ear. But it was done only out of affection. Please understand, the sight of you filled my heart with so much emotion, but it unfortunately came out in the wrong way. Here's wishing you a speedy recovery (p. 145) The desire to meet the boy got ignited in her with Sampath's words of saintly wisdom, "Once the rain has filled up all the holes in the earth, a worm has no option but to emerge." ( p. 142) Motivated by her brother's advice Pinky rushed straightway to the house of Hungry Hop whose fate was

sealed under the house arrest and severe vigilance; "... the Kwaliti Boy was being kept closely guarded by the women of the family. They were seated outside the entrance to their home. But, Pinky was not a girl to be bowed down and was ready to catch the bull by horns. So, she threw the letter wrapped in the stone at the window pan to make sure it reaches the boy. After reading the "note" the boy thought; "An hour late, he sat still dazed upon the bucket, pondering the strange possibilities of affection. Was this love? he wondered. Was it not love? How could it be? Was this a perversion, a malformation of the real thing? A trick? (p. 146) Pinky's madness to see the boy prompted her to visit him the very next day too and this time "She threw him a rose. . . This incident marked an important change in their relationship." (p. 147-148) Their madness for each other grew with each day. They did all crazy and humorous things, which tickle the readers when they read the novel. The family of the boy sent a message to Mr Chawla: "Please keep your daughter from bothering our son." (p.149) Hearing this very interesting situation arises before Mr. Chawla who immediately confronts Pinky. His advice to his daughter is very interesting "You should set your sights higher than yourself, not lower." (p. 149) Following this incident Hungry Hop boy was now more heavily guarded by the women of the family. Pinky didn't surrender and found the traditional ways of sending her letters;

She hit upon the ancient idea of bribing the milkman to carry notes back and forth. In his wonderfully practical way, Hungry Hop and Pinky cultivated their romance and amazed their families by their good humour in the face of a situation that seemed, to others, to be not at all amusing." (p. 150)

Prof. Verma of the university is yet another character of his kind in Desai's list of characters with germs of madness. He drafts a proposal to provide the solution to the monkey problem of Shahkot; "a proposal that involved a complicated procedure of killing of the Cinema Monkey and a display of his carcass that would, Verma postulated, result in the disbanding of the entire troupe of monkeys." (p. 161) He did not enjoy a good position in the eyes of his own wife who nursed a desire to divorce him then how could his plan convince the administration of Shahkot was a big question. The Brigadier, sitting in his bathroom, developed plan thinking, "he would organize an operation that would bring him honour and teach his men the true meaning of being in the army." (p. 162) "We could," he suggested in a written report, "organize a firing squad whereby fifty or a hundred men will be dispersed throughout the brush, discharging their rifles every twenty to forty minutes to scare the monkeys. If we persist, the monkeys will surely get the jitters and disappear from here, never to return." (p.162) The Chief Medical Officer had his own plan, he thought by "revoking the liquor licenses of all shops and restaurants and banning alcohol in Shahkot" (p.163) could bring three victories one it "could be better for public health" secondly this step would "put a stop to the monkey problem" and third "this move would also put a damper on the problem of wife-beating, which had been getting rather out of hand of late." (p. 163) thus "he could claim three...yes, three...victories!" (p.163) It seems that all the key positions

of administration in Shahkot were occupied by unique characters of distinctive characteristics and another in the list was the Superintendent of Police, who "...had offered up no plan at all, for he didn't think of furthering his career. No. He did not want to be promoted for precisely the reason that the Chief Medical Officer did: It would mean a transfer out of Shahkot and he liked Shahkot." (p.163)

The latest to join the monkey solution furore was the new District Collector of Shahkot, in his first posting as a collector. His meeting with various administrative, religious and social bodies was full of mad proposals and comedy site; "The DC looked at them amazed...he had come to a very unusual place." (p. 173) Shopkeepers protested against the liquor licenses to be revoked as "the monkeys will simply shift their focus" to other towns in the vicinity "...these monkeys might even teach their tricks to the local monkey populations in other towns if they are thrown out of this one." (p. 173) The District Collector "could not think of anything that would raise his spirit." (p. 177) and while he was dining after the day's hectic activities he was visited by Mr. Chawla with his own plan which said "Let us train the army and police as monkey catchers." (p. 178) While DC thought there was no harm in Mr. Chawla's "proposal involved no guns, no religious matters, no business interests that he could see" a new case of monkeys' hullabaloo was reported; "On Monday evening the monkeys returned from the English Wine and Beer shop tipsy. On Wednesday they attempted to break into the Club for Retired Members of the Court. And on Thursday they held to ransom top-secret documents in the army's headquarters that outlined safety precautions taken by the Indian army against invasion. They would not give them up until they were bribed with bottles from the bar in the mess." (p.180) This incident gave way to Mr. Chawla's plan and the orders were given to the army and police, and a date set for Monday, the last day of April, for Sampath's temporary descent from the tree and the capture and transport of the Shahkot monkeys to a destination far away from Shahkot." (p. 180) But Sampath was not ready to descend from the tree and he turned down all requests of his father in this regard. In no time the training to the monkey catchers was started in the guidance of the Brigadier (whose own plan to solve monkey problem was rejected by the authorities). The entire city of Sakhkot started complaining about the disturbance created by the trainers was more than the disturbance created by the monkeys.

While entire Shahkot was busy in the preparations to drive monkeys out of the city, Hungry Hop was imprisoned in his own house and the family was planning to marry him. Seeing no alternative the boy sent the letter to Pinky telling her that if more delay is done then there is no chance of their wedlock to which Pinky replied; "On Monday, 30 April, they are going to catch the monkeys. Everybody will be busy and paying no attention. Meet me under the big tamarind tree on the street leading to the orchard-bazaar road at 5.00 a.m. in the Kwaliti van and from then on we will see." (p. 188) Pinky even tried to compel her brother Sampath to come along with them when she disclosed the news of her elopement with the Hungry Hop but Sampath denied her proposal. Meanwhile

Hungry Hop's family left no stone unturned to keep him away from Pinky. A girl was shown to Hungry Hop and he was promised a car and all comforts if he marries the girl. Hungry Hop was loyal to Pinky and the plan of elopement was in his mind but at the same time he could not keep out the picture of the girl shown to him. He constantly was saying: "Pinky or Miss Pudding and Cake" (p. 93) Administration along with army and police was all ready to completely solve the monkey problem of Shahkot. "It was Monday, the last day of April, and all was quiet in the orchard. The family slept and monkeys were silent in the guava tree" (p. 203) Kiran Desai in the last chapter of the novel shows human madness at its sublime best and weaves various parallel events that are full of humour. On the one hand Pinky is waiting for the Hungry Hop but he does not reach Pinky as planned because he is tied by the army men and put at the back of the vehicle tossing and rolling in the nets. He is held and tied because he was hindering the administration's plan by driving the van and blocking the movement of the army men. Superintendent Police of Shahkot is sleeping and he doesn't want to disturb his sleep in this useless exercise even if he is demoted, to absent himself from this sensitive operation. So, he Happily, with his blanket pulled over his head, he dreamt and snored" (p. 205) The spy was also seeking an opportunity to find as to what is cooked in the big cauldron for Sampath by his mother. To get the clear sight he sat exactly above the cauldron on the branch of the guava tree. With the command of the Brigadier "Get set. . . Ready. . . Go!" (p. 206) the army men ran toward the monkeys to catch them but in the rush of madness they all forgot the nets for catching them and when they turned to take the nets they found Hungry Hop was entangled in them. Meanwhile monkeys have got enough time to escape. In this hullabaloo Mr. Chawla ran to see Sampath and bring him down but he got shocked when he did not find Sampath on the tree. Ammaji, Pinky, Mr. Chawla, Miss Jyotsana everyone around in the orchard were running yelling and screaming. Amidst this hullabaloo there was heard "A crack! A howl! A watery splash!" (p. 209) and when all reached tracing the noise they saw that "Above Kulfi's enormous cooking pot hung a broken branch. In the pot were spices and seasonings, herbs and fruit, delicious gravy" (p. 209) Thus with the falling of the spy in the huge cooking pot the mad pursuits and hullabaloo comes to an end and with that comes to an end the story that set the readers into the world of madness right from the word go till the last page. Kiran Desai shows her skills in handling the madness with an undercurrent of satire. Her novel is a perfect tale of how imagination can weave a world of madness and still captivate the readers' attention and imagination.

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