

Unravelling Chaos in Order: An Absurdist Reading of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*

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Abstract

Life in an absurd sense is perceived as an orderly disorder. Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is an allegorical representation of life as a 'Hullabaloo' or uproar. Desai has examined the multiple layers of absurdly chaotic nature of life in this novel. The ecological importance of nature and the absurdity of culture have been represented by the characters and situations throughout the novel. The novel begins throwing some light on the helplessness of culturally advanced human beings against the wild nature. At the very beginning with the detailed portrayal of calamities of drought and flood upon human life, it's made clear that nature is enormous which can't be controlled or manipulated. The representation of absurdity goes hand in hand with chaos. The catchy titular term 'hullabaloo' is self-explanatory to the intrinsic chaos that the novel deals with.

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Life in an absurd sense is perceived as an orderly disorder. Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is an allegorical representation of life as a 'Hullabaloo' or an uproar. Desai has examined the multiple layers of absurdly chaotic nature of life in this novel.

Sampath Chawla, the protagonist is a representation of nature who is born exactly at the point of historical transition between nature's two extremities of drought and flood. At the time of his birth, drought ends and monsoon begins. The novel traces his life from his celebrated birth to the dull upbringing to the fan faring climax. The novel presents the 'Nature

vs. Culture' dialectics with vivid imagination. Rushdie rightly puts forth that the novel is 'lush and intensely imagined'. The novel opens describing the disastrous drought in Shakhkot. The culturally made up minds of town people try to interpret the natural phenomenon in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* as many ways as possible:

"It is all a result of volcanic ash thrown up in the latest spurt of activity in Tierra del...The problem lies in the currents off the West African coastline and the unexplained molecular movement observed in the polar ice-caps... Iraq attempts to steal monsoon by deliberately creating low pressure over desert provinces and deflecting winds from India..... Hungarian musician offers to draw rain clouds from Europe to India via the music of his flute" (1).

The novel begins throwing some light on the helplessness of culturally advanced human beings against the wild nature. At the very beginning with the detailed portrayal of calamities of drought and flood upon human life, it's made clear that nature is enormous which can't be controlled or manipulated. Subsequently, the ecological importance of nature and the absurdity of culture have been represented by the characters and situations throughout the novel. Sampath is born as a symbol of untamable nature. His birth sparks a hope because as soon as he is born, the monsoon begins and the long drought ends. As he grows up, he never fits into any cultural or societal fold. He always has been a craver of absolute freedom. After the wedding ceremony in which he abnormally sings naked and gets fired from his job, he desperately says, "I want my freedom" (47). Humans either try to subvert nature by controlling it or exaggerate by perceiving it as supernatural. They fail to recognise nature as it is. This idea is represented by the ascetic phase of Sampath's life.

From the beginning, he wants to be what he likes but is imposed with many artificial roles by his father. After losing his job, one day his mother gives him a guava fruit, he gets immersed into the sweetness of the fruit and feels the utmost sense of freedom ever since. The fruit symbolises freedom. When he lets loose himself from all the clutches of culture and starts to live in isolation in the guava orchard, he feels his natural self. But the cultured society which relegates him to be a good for nothing fellow earlier elevates him to be a guru now. They perceive his natural self as supernatural. Though he grows uneasy to such unsought attention, he enjoys his isolated place on the tree and the company of monkeys around the grove. The introductory perception of the unpredictability of nature in the novel has been extended till the end where Sampath disappears mysteriously beyond human speculations. The glorification of nature reiterates on the ecological consciousness of the novel.

Omnipotence of nature is juxtaposed with the helpless absurd lives of human beings. The collective life of the society and the lives of Sampath and his mother Kulfi in particular have been represented as absurd. The novel seems to hold the view that life is meaningless and absurdity is the only truth as Camus observes, "The absurd is the essential concept and the first truth." None of the characters seems to have control over her/his life as the collective life of Shakhkot has been dull and the inhabitants are indecisive. They are shallow and seek solace from their own insecurities of human folly as they rally to the grove absurdly and seek prophecy from a random guru. In specific, the lives of Sampath and his mother Kulfi are explicit manifestations of absurdity. Sampath is interested in none of the worldly activities. He suffers from the boredom of mundane life and he unintentionally reads others' letters to

pass away his time. Later during his hermit life, he jabbars with his devotees when they question him on certain issues. When a woman asks him how to keep her son away from bad company, he babbles:

“Add lemons to milk and it will grow sour... But add some sugar, madam, and watch! How good the milk will taste... You yourself know you behaved just like your son when boy were young” (74).

Whatever gibberish he utters, the people try to make meaning out of his meaningless words. Sometimes his actions misinterpreted as well. For instance, he refuses to marry a girl arranged by his parents because he thinks that she is nit beautiful. But people interpret mistakenly that he leads a holy life and so he doesn't marry the girl. He made her fall from the tree,

“she gingerly poked at Sampath's toe. Her finger was as cold as ice and moist. Sampath leapt up in horror..... she tumbled indecorously towards the ground, accompanied by the more robust cries of the pilgrims and her family” (61).

Sampath doesn't want to live an ascetic life because of any high purpose. He just wants to live a still life free of ambition and action. He craves to be free from the intervention of the outer world. Desai comments on his absurd mind, "He thought of how he was leaving the world, a world that made its endless revolutions towards nothing" (48).

His mother Kulfi has been living all her life without any goal. She is inexplicably an insane character. Her family marries her off when she was young to get rid of her eccentricity. She is indifferent to her family affairs. Indeed, she is gluttony personified. She eats a lot abnormally during her pregnancy which is also a drought period. Later in her life, she tries out cooking exotic dishes to her hermit son. She is exhausted in cooking repeatedly and finally she is thinking of cooking a monkey.

Eventually, the open ending which leaves Sampath's disappearance unexplained is absurd and emphasizes on the futility of human life. There is a sense of nothingness at the end after a frenetic uproar. Every fuss settles quietly with the image of a pulpy guava with a brown mark like the one on Sampath's cheek. Even though Sampath vanishes into nothingness, there is no end to human stupidity. It's suggested that he has been metamorphosed into a guava and the aftermath of his absurd disappearance is described, “Sampath himself was forgotten in the fray, although his name was bounced back and forth between the warring factions like a Ping-Pong ball” (158).

The aforementioned representation of absurdity in the novel is not without chaos. Chaos goes hand in hand with absurdity. The catchy titular term ‘ hullabaloo ’ is self-explanatory to the intrinsic chaos that the novel deals with. The novel treats life as innately chaotic. L.K. Samuels observes, “Chaos prevails over rules and systems because it has the freedom of infinite complexity over the known, unknown, and the unknowable.” Chaotic nature of physical world is shown in the beginning with the portrayal of drought and flood. The obvious chaos begins in the novel after Sampath switches to a hermit life. The guava orchard where he finds peace suddenly turns to be a helter-skelter pilgrimage spot. His father Mr. Chawla cashes in the opportunity and makes profit out of it and his mother creates

anomaly by cooking exotic dishes. The spy who seeks after the actual truth behind Sampath's holy life creates much confusion. On the other hand, the pack of mischievous monkeys headed by the Cinema monkey disrupt the other leftover organised forms. The core of the hullabaloo unfolds before the day Sampath is found missing. A series of vague, illogical events result in an intense sense of confusion. Sampath's father urges him to come down from the tree so that the drunken monkeys can be chased away. At the same time the biology professor Mr. Verma plans to kill the cinema monkey and hang its carcass to threaten other monkeys to which his wife opposes. The district collector, the brigadier and the CMO of the town too try their hands in driving away the monkeys:

“organise a firing squad whereby fifty or a hundred men would be dispersed throughout, discharging their rifles every twenty to forty minutes to scare the monkeys. ...the monkeys would surely get the jitters and would disappear from there, never to return” (162).

At the same time, Sampath's younger sister Pinky prepares to elope with her lover. Kulfi is trying to cook an extraordinary dish with odd ingredients and the spy is intervening her cooking. All these simultaneous events result in real hullabaloo.

The novel critiques the commercialization of spirituality. The narration deliberately focuses only on the negatives of such business. Only the readers can understand the dramatic irony that the devotees are fooled by the guru because he has no magic powers to read their minds. All his knowledge of them has come from secretly reading their personal letters in the post office. Of course, Sampath's isolation in the guava orchard is his liberation but others' making it as a pilgrimage site and paying visits to him have been portrayed as pseudo pursuits. The text not only criticizes pseudoscience but also the so-called rationality. The spy, a member of Atheist society and 'BUFHM' (Branch to uncover fraudulent Holy Men) relentlessly attempts to unravel the reality behind Sampath's supernatural power. It turns to be an amusement when he is beaten up by Kulfi and Pinky for stalking them. Finally, when he tries to find out the ingredients of Kulfi's dish, he accidentally falls into the cooking cauldron and gets hurt. Indeed, the spy is not interested in rationality for its own sake but he wants to obtain material gains with his job. Also, the novel parodies the double standards of educated lot. The civil servants, district collector and CMO (Chief Medical Officer) are enigmatic and indecisive. The DSP (police officer) in the town prostrates under Sampath's feet, “placed his unpleasantly greasy head under Sampath's toes and felt bathed in pure holiness...” (115). They don't seem to recognise that Sampath's holiness is a humbug. It's an irony that the pilgrimage site of guava orchard originally is a part of the university research reserve.

Struggle between the zoo centric and anthropocentric attitudes of people also has been highlighted in the novel with the portrayal of drunken monkeys. On one hand a faction of townspeople revere monkeys as incarnations of god Hanuman and keeps the animals above humans. On the other hand, another faction shows outright hatred towards the animal and plans to massacre instead of finding a nonviolent solution to the problem. It also offers an undertone that only humans are responsible for the monkeys' invasion of the town. Sampath defends his monkey companions and blames human negligence, “What can they possibly know? When rest of the household is sleeping, the child puffs on his father's hookah.” (123). It's because men keep drugs in the reach of monkeys, the animals exploit it. One of monkey

baba's follower reasons out, "It is not the monkeys' fault. Always men are the degenerate one." (123). The novel also hints at the lack of interpersonal human relationships. Every character is emotionally unattached to the every other. Even Kulfi feels her son as an alien from a different planet when he is born. Therefore, the novel is also a critique on contemporary society while dealing with the main abstract concepts of life.

Certain strange circumstances presented in the novel create a magical realistic atmosphere. Sampath's birth as a sense of hope amid of two unimaginable disasters seems to be unrealistic. Abnormal behaviours of Kulfi and Sampath sound uncanny. Mischevious behaviour of the Cinema monkey and the intrusion of other monkeys into the Orchard and their troubles to humans are fabulous than realistic. Finally, the mysterious disappearance of the monkey baba, a guava with the brown mark and all the monkeys leaving the place all of a sudden trigger a surrealistic mood. Therefore, the novel ends with a monotonous void created by the absence of monkey baba and his monkey companions, Monkey Baba disappears and we are left with only "A crack! A howl! A watery splash!" (209).

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