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## Back to Nature: A Reading of Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo* in the Guava Orchard

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Ecocriticism, a holistic approach to literature that seeks to examine the relationship between man and his environment, maintains that literature cannot be approached in a way that sets man and nature in opposition to each other. Instead, it must be approached in a way that examines man as a part of an ecosystem, he is neither master nor slave to it, but simply one part of an intricate system.

In *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, Kiran Desai argues that if man is to be complete and content, he cannot continue to view himself as existing apart from the natural world. He must instead begin to view himself as being part of the entire ecological system. Desai demonstrates that if the natural world is to survive, man cannot continue to empower his surroundings, he must learn to live in harmony with them.

### Introduction

The last few decades, and especially the last several years have witnessed the emergence of eco criticism, a holistic approach to texts that examines the perceived relationship between man and nature, as well as the role that nature and environment play in the humanities. This approach to literature has shown itself to be relevant given the growing environmental crises. Following in the path of feminist and post colonial criticism, both which examine the relationship between the majority and the minority, eco criticism seeks to study the relationship between man and his environment. In many ways the environment can be equated with women/the colonized population as appeased and ignored things. Eco criticism maintains that literature may be approached in a way, which examines man as a part of an ecosystem he is neither master nor slave to it, but simply one part of an intricate system.

The story begins with a terrible famine and drought that raises the temperature so high and people are shrivelled without any water anywhere. The reason cited is the volcanic eruption in Tia Del Fuego.

‘Problems have been located in the cumulus that have become overly heated; read Mr Chawla from the newspaper. ‘It is all a result of volcanic ash thrown up in the latest spurt of activity in Tierra del Fuego.’ And a little later he reported to whomever might be listening: ‘The problem lies in the currents off the West African coastline and the unexplained molecular movement observed in the polar ice-caps.’ (1)

In this first part the readers see a condition where nature which nurtures life on Earth as reacting to the over exploitation and subjugation of the natural sources. “Nature is portrayed as a

‘woman’ which nourishes man but due to man’s actions has shown her wrath in the form of ‘famine’ and ‘drought’ leaving Shahkotians to realize and change their ways.

The Hullabaloo is essentially a search by the protagonist for his selfhood and realizes it amongst nature, not by subjugating her but by living in harmony with ‘her.’ Thus the search for selfhood is by extension, a symbolic search by Sampath Chawla (protaganist) and Kulfi (mother) to find and draw the colours of their own selfhood. For this, the individual self has to go through a continual process of reaching beyond itself, of expanding itself ‘through varied experiences, through their multiple identities and relationships. The forms and faces of life and the mold are paradoxical and mysterious, enchanting and horrifying. To respond to them through pleasure, sorrow, desire, despair, love, hate, protest, acceptance and to absorb the contradictions both within the self and the world outside (nature) is to awaken oneself to the wholeness of life and being. From a literary history of mute” inglorious miltons” who suffer all their waking hours struggling to exist, Desai tries to elevate her characters Sampath and Kulfi into a world of their own. For the new mode of emancipation the ‘old’ law of the society has to be set aside.

Sampath is the marginalized as his voice is heard by no one. He is the deviant one with different tastes, likes and dislikes.

‘He is not taking any route, I tell you. He has missed the route all together. He is just sitting by the side playing with flies’. Mr Chawla turned back to Sampath, who had closed his eyes, imagining a long and peaceful sleep in a cool dark place.  
(26)

While the Shahkotians who is “the centre” represents the colonial rulers who exert power on the marginalized to the other side according to their fantasy. Shahkotians decide the ‘order’ of the land and even enters the personal space of Sampath. On the next level, one can take the natural landscape and habitat of Shahkot to be the ‘marginalised other’ and the ‘Shahkotians’ as the colonizers. The landscape is considered as feminine, to be subjugated and the Shahkotians as the masculine who has the right to exploit her resources. They exploit the landscape and even destroy many of its resources as a result, But Kiran Desai shows us that the idea is false, and that “civilization” is synonymous with the shakotians and nature shows her wrath in the form of famine and drought in the begining. Later when the protagonist Sampath flees away to the hills far away from the city, to find his home, it is symbolic of man’s harmony with nature. He lives in natures’ bounty without causing the least form of disturbance and enjoying it to the full.

In Hullabaloo, Sampath Chawla is born into a family and society that views man has the right, to overpower nature – with the culmination of the natural disasters seen in the beginning “domination”. While trying to overpower the hills, there is a constant tension between the cultured, civilized life that they (Shahkotians) have established and the more primitive natural state of being that they have experienced in the Guava Orchard at the hills. This tension ceases once Sampath is able to abandon the society with which he is familiar and incorporate himself into the nature in the Guava Orchard. Desai thus demonstrates that if the natural world is to survive man cannot continue to overpower his surroundings; he must learn to live in harmony with them. Thus the guava orchard becomes the setting where the story of Sampath emerges and submerges and Desai’s concern and ecological commitment is spelt clearly in an age where natural things fall apart.

While creating this new civilization the Shahkotians exist in isolation from their surroundings. They distance from nature by bringing technology into it. But the chief protagonist Sampath Chawla all this while was in perfect harmony with nature unlike his initial life in the city of Shahkot.

“Supreme morality makes it its principle, of living to renounce one’s self and obey the laws of nature or god”. (Matsuura, 370)

He lives in the treetop house away from all the modern facilities which his family and the Shahkotians offered to give. He did not step down the tree because his new found freedom and ‘epiphanic spirituality’ would be tampered by civilization. He feeds on the guava from the tree just like the birds and the monkeys. But due to his family’s consistent compulsion he eats the food prepared by his mother Kulfi from all the wild plants and seeds. Thus he grew plump and looked like a ‘fat sadhu’ perched on a guava tree.

By staying perched on the tree, Sampath exists in spatial isolation from his surroundings of the city (Shahkot). He is now airborne and distances from Shahkot. As a result, his views of his intimacy with the tree is that of a home and on the other hand Shahkot seems to be meaningless something which reminds him that he is out of place and averse to. For Sampath his ascend on the tree is synonymous with freedom. The tree represents a complete break from the civilization that he is holding onto. In order to maintain his freedom Sampath establishes his tree house which is offered by his father because he would never get down the tree. But now the people of Shahkot are not ready to leave him alone. They follow him to the forest and even named him as ‘monkey baba’ and disturbs the stillness of the forest with their continuous arrival, for the Shahkotians needed solutions to their problems. They even settle down there and thus create a tension between the forest hill and themselves. Man encroach nature and the monkeys come back claiming their space. Thus there is a tough battle between nature represented by the monkeys and the Shahkotians (man) as they invade their geographical territory leaving them no space. The monkeys become a huge nuisance to the pilgrims (Shahkotians) and rob them off their offerings and also attack them, leaving a chaos in the serene forest. But now the Shahkotians try to capture the monkeys using the large nets, but ultimately the readers find that they escape into the higher hills along with their Baba who also found civilization intolerable. Thus Sampath gets united with nature and attained his real identity with nature.

It may be that the white –hot rash of our technology will in the end prove destructive and painful for our own species, but the evidence for accepting that industrial activities either at their present level or in the immediate future may endanger the life Gaia as a whole, is weak indeed. (Lovelock, 107-108)

Sampath’s revelation regarding ‘nature’ (hill) is delayed by the arrival of the monkey catchers. With this new found revelation, Sampath reverts to the nature he once knew. ‘The dualism of spirit and matter (mind or body) ‘that had ‘ provided a rationale for ranking humane above “Nature”, humans above brute . . . and white above colored’ (Craig 9, 10) is evident in Shahkotians encroachment of the monkey’s habitat. Instead of viewing the forest hill (nature) and monkeys as an equal, Shahkotians sees them as less than themselves to be enjoyed and they the master of them all. Shahkotians inability to understand their close relationship with nature can be traced directly to the Judeo Christians say of creation which establishes man’s right to

rule over the other creatures of the earth. According to this ideology, ‘not only is man separate from nature, he is superior to it.’ (L.White, 9)

Shahkotians relationship with the forest hill and the monkey’s area is the hallmark of this creation story. The forest hill does fulfill many roles for the Shahkotians but they do not ever consider ‘it’ as an equal. It is Shahkotians’ feeling that they are superior that leads to the tension. This increases and reaches its culmination with the monkeys taking their wrath on the pilgrims and creating havoc to the whole of Shahkot city. This is the turning point in the novel because they employ monkey catchers to stop the malice. The Shahkotians are not so easy to give up. The final fleeing of the monkeys and Sampath amidst this chaos, to the higher hills where Sampath is ‘fine’ and exists happily with nature while the Shahkotians move back to their city and the tension is finally resolved. Now the relationship between nature (forest hill) and the Shahkotians (man) is reverted to its original and the full cycle comes to an end. The Shahkotians exist as a part of the ecosystem. Their former existence was that of Promethean and that of Sampath was Dionysian – a love of nature. Through the life lead by Sampath the Shahkotians comes to see that man is a part of the whole ecosystem and is an annexure to it.

The myth resolved in ‘Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard is that of solitude. The ‘other’ assumed in Hullabaloo is the hilly forest guava orchard which is exotic to the Shahkotians and Sampath. Sampath who is born into the city of Shahkot feels repulsed and lonely in such a crowded city. He cannot relate himself to the humdrums of Shahkot. He feels out of place and always longs to run away into the solitude of nature. After his oddity is exposed at the wedding party of the Head of the Post office clerk’s daughter, he could not understand if he was wrong at all. The cross dressing, and his naked dance, was mere fun and natural to him while the Shahkotians labeled him ‘out of his mind’. He was accused by all and sundry while he did not regret the least. He felt a kind of hibernation and joy but afterwards it turned to haunt him. He has often felt out of place but now it thwarted him more. He wanted to run away from civilization to the solitude of nature like his cherished dreams. Taking some inner resolve, he runs away to the hills (forest) where he perches on the guava tree and feels at home at last, engulfed in the panoramic vision of the whole place where nature unfolds before him its silence and cool greenness.

“This scene filled his whole mind and he wondered if he could ever get enough of it. This was the way of the riches and this was the king’s life . . . . he thought . . . . and he ached to swallow it whole, in one glorious mouthful that would become part of him forever. Oh if he could exchange his life for this luxury of stillness, to be able to stay with his face held towards the afternoon like a sunflower and to learn all these was to know in this orchard each insect crawling by; the smell of the Earth thick breath the grass the bustling of leaves his way was easy through the foliage, his tongue around every name . . . . . yes he was at the right place at last.” (51)

The Shahkotians and his family on finding that Sampath is missing finally end up at the forest and persuades him to accompany while he rejects off hand. The family is forced to stay in the forest and even put up a tree house for him. The shahkotians however find it hard to incorporate themselves into nature. There is always a separation between Shahkotians and their surroundings. Their civilization makes them very cruel to animals – especially the monkeys who are even ordered to be captured and banished.

The animal is here used to police rather than confuse the human nature divide; by associating all our “lowlier characteristics” and bodily functions with animalism, we assert the importance of sustaining those higher or more spiritual attributes that grant us human sovereignty over beast. (Soper, 86)

Kate Soper argues that the abuse of animals sustains what is called “negative anthropomorphism” or in Baker’s terminology, ‘theriomorphism’. Civilized man here becomes synonymous with cruel beasts.

But for Sampath on the other hand the land assumes the roles of mother and protector. His attitude towards the hill (nature) was full of love which protected him safe like a woman’s womb while the Shahkotians can be equated to the colonizers who encroach and subdues the green hills, invading the natural niche of the monkeys and wild flora. They try to slowly civilize the hill. They bring up settlements and roads to reach Sampath’s abode in the guava tree to hear the sermon.

The hills’ resemblance to the Biblical Eden is evolved in the passage. The solitude is captured in its full.

This scene filled his whole mind and he wondered if he could ever get enough of it. This was the way of riches and this was a king’s life, he thought . . . and he ached to swallow it whole, in one glorious mouthful that could become part of him forever. Oh, if he could exchange his life for this luxury of stillness, to be able to stay with his face held towards the afternoon like a sunflower and to learn all there was to know in this orchard: each small insect crawling by; the smell of the earth thick beneath the grass; the bristling of leaves; his way easy through the foliage; his tongue around every name. And then, as the afternoons grew quick and smoky and the fruit green-gold and ripe, he’d pick a guava . . . He’d hold it against his cheek and roll it in his palms so as to feel its knobby surface with a star at its base, its scars that were rough and brown from wind and rain and sharp beak of some careless bird. And when he finally tasted it, the fruit would not let him down; it would be the most wonderful, the most tasty guava he could ever have eaten . . . (50)

Kiran Desai is not only evoking the qualities of Eden but also creating a parallel between Adam and Sampath. Just like Adam, Sampath has the whole authority of the hills. Adam’s right to reign over the earth is a mutually accepted interpretation of the Judeo - Christian creation story. These interpretations hold the first man’s dominion over the Earth as a power from God. This creation story of the Judeo - Christian tradition is taken as the basis of Western religious superiority over the Earth.

By gradual stages a loving and all powerful God had created [ . . . ] the earth and all its plants, animals, birds and fishes. Finally God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely. Man named all animal, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes. And, although man’s body is made of clay, he is simply not part



of nature: he is made in God's image. Especially in its Western form, Christianity is most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. (L.White, 9).

Thus given the power by God, the Western religion creates a two tier relationship between man and nature. Man as the master and nature as his servant who is to be ravished and utilized by man for himself.

Christianity made humanity's views on nature and God anthropocentric; man was the sole subject, speaker and rational sovereign of the natural order. (Manes, 21)

And by removing godly power from nature it becomes open to exploitation and experimentation.

Western scientists beginning around the 13<sup>th</sup> century took a step for them. They began making discoveries and formulating experiments under the pretext of discovering how God's creatures operate. The danger suspected by naturalists proved true and men of science began to feel that nature belong to them and that if God had allowed them to get so close to nature and its functions that they obviously allowed to play with it as they pleased.

“As technologies enabling dramatic transformation of natural order increasingly appeared in the modern period, and as a new and much more powerful knowledge of what was believed to be true order of nature began to emerge in the science of Galileo, Newton and their successors it is so surprising that westerners came to think of themselves as ‘lords of creation’ with a possibility, and a mandate to expand human powers over nature. (Kaufman, 9)

However studying the religious faiths of the ancient Greeks, the relationship between Nature and humans is that of equality rather than hierarchy. Man had to first placate the different God's of nature before encroaching nature's bounty.

In Antiquity, every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genus loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were unlike men; centaurs, fauns and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. (L.White,10)

The green hill serves as a sort of pagan animism in the forms of (i) the ancient guava tree (ii) the monkeys. The guava tree serves as a protector to Sampath and the monkeys as a sort of companion who shares his mind.

Fondly, the lady-monkeys groomed Sampath as he sat secretly pleased but shouting, ‘Ow don't pull my hair like that’, and swatting them. But, with amused, sly faces that looked as if they understood he was playing a little game, they circled back after being chased away to continue their attendance upon his glossy and shining locks, which, to their credit, grew even shinier and glossier with their care. Sampath enjoyed this attention more and more as he became used to the occasional tug or scratch. (108)

It is this guava tree that initially protects him, comforts him and gives the feeling of being in heaven. The guava tree embodies all that is warm and blissful for Sampath who tries to live in the tree till his final flight. The monkeys serve as a “genus loci”. His affection for the monkeys is that of brotherhood. Sampath finds solace in the guava tree and he imagines the hill top as a womb, that protects him from the altrusions of the society and the tree serves as the “genus loci” as he knows once he steps on the ground he can never get peace which he enjoys then.

But, oh no, Sampath would take no risks. He was not a fool. He would not climb down to be caught and – who knows? – put into a cage and driven off to the insane asylum on Alipure Road, like the mad man who had interrupted the ladies’ home economics class of the university and been lured and trapped by a single sweet. So, at the families pleading, Dr Banerjee, who prided himself on being good sport, hoisted himself into the tree, stethoscope and blood pressure pump about his neck. He climbed all the way up to Sampath so he could look into his eyes and ears, check his tongue, listen to his heart, take his blood pressure and hit his knee with an expertly aimed karate-like move of his hand. Then he climbed down and got back to the scooter rickshaw he had arrived in. ‘He is a crazy person’, he said, beaming, the mirth of the entire situation too much for him. ‘Nobody except God can do anything about that’ and he disappeared back into town. (56)

Unlike the other people of Shahkot, Sampath’s relationship with the tree and the surroundings is that of harmony and peace. Therefore Sampath finds that in no way he is alone in the hill top even before the invasion of his family and the people of Shahkot. He is not thwarted by the lack of human companionship rather he finds eternal bliss that fills his heart with joy and energy. His thought for survival is quenched by the guava fruit which tastes so good and lives the life of a hunter-gatherer.

Sampath settles down, merging into a natural order of the natural habitat – the environment around him grants him the solace and the asylum. The relationship is at the best equal. But the Shahkotians on arrival at the hill first exploits nature and subdues her like dominant and perceives the land and the ecosystem to that of the Judeo Christian creation relationship. Their encroachment of the natural habitat of animals often creates a tension between man and animals. Shahkotian encroach these areas of the forest and play the role of the dominant, the animals (subordinate) has to flee to the deeper forest when the monkey catchers are set to tame them and also to capture them for the zoo.

The final escape of the Sampath into the forest marks a turning point in the story. While the Shahkotians tries to civilize Sampath into their ways and nature, Sampath’s total rejection of civilization seeking solace in nature, he emerges with nature with the ‘explosion of a guava’ like some nature spirit enraptured him he flees into the hill seeking higher peace, tranquility and meaning in life. The full cycle of the attempts by man to dominate nature, Sampath reverts back as the Shahkotians are left alone while the ‘monkey baba’ and the monkeys return to their higher place of abode. The attempts of the monkeys to create havoc to the Shahkotians can be best taken as natures’ wrath on man. Respect for the land on which we live is a responsibility that every human should have. Desai seems to advocate the call ‘Back to nature’ to internalize the immense



problems and destruction to nature and to return to our ancient practices where man and nature lived in harmony.

#### Conclusion:

Moving towards a stage of change towards a stage of change towards the close of the story Sampath Chawala, the 'monkey baba' is almost fully merges in the ecosystem when he see himself as a part of nature. Even though he is given opportunity to return to Shahkot he simply rejects that life and escapes from the ancient guava tree into the hills. He understands his metamorphosis, like Kulfi his mother who takes to culinary expertise as her vocation and meaning in life. He finally understands the true meaning of his existence.

He finds it is home at last and relishes the experience like a hungry child asking for more. He completely gives up his civilized way and steps into the 'hunter-gatherer' stage and thus destroys the traditional nature/culture dichotomy. He feeds only on the guava like the birds of the air and the monkeys. Now Sampath is fully in tune with nature and is more 'civilised' than the Shahkotians who brutally tries to capture the 'monkeys' for pleasure and space. Desai brings the message that it is not by domination but being a partner in living with nature that true happiness and identity is achieved. Sampath's ecological sensitivity is brilliantly captured by Desai and is interwoven into the book to provide insights into environmentalists and city dwellers. Even though the Shahkotians had intruded the forest hills for a short time they seem to have caused extinction of various species. Here Desai hints that the forest depletion and denudation can lead to several environmental crises like global warming, ozone depletion and its affects. This would in turn lead to extinction of life on earth. It focuses on the socio-environmental issues with questions of competing claims of human and non human species for existence. The conflict of pitting man against nature and man against man addresses the context of the contemporary India in the story by opening up issues [pertaining to ecological conservation, species extinction, ecotourism and environmental economics. Her message comes loud and clear through this parable with its brilliant touch of irony and satire as the story.

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